

Hon. Jean-Louis Roux: Honourable senators, as a newcomer in the Upper House, I must admit that Bill C-68 is a real enigma to me. This bill was carefully drafted by senior officials of the Department of Justice and carefully reviewed by a committee of the other place, which heard from 64 organizations and six aboriginal associations, and whose report included over 11 amendments. This is a bill whose objectives are unquestionably commendable, since it seeks to protect the lives of innocent people and the right of every Canadian to enjoy a free, safe and peaceful life, and also to prevent the use of firearms for criminal purposes. It is a bill which, according to recent polls, enjoys the support of a large majority of Canadians across the country. Indeed, a recent Angus Reid poll shows that 64 per cent of Canadians support that initiative, while only 32 per cent are opposed to it. As for registration, 71 per cent of Canadians are in favour of such a measure, while only 26 per cent are opposed. Another poll conducted by Insight Canada Research shows that 61 per cent of Ontarians feel that firearms legislation should be more strict. This is a bill which has generated a very large number of letters addressed to our respective offices.

It is true that many who wrote, and most of them being from Western Canada, were opposed to Bill C-68. Personally, I made a point of answering each and every one of those letters and I sincerely hope that I helped change the opinion of their authors. However, just as many, if not more, letters came from people who expressed their concern at the large number of suicides, homicides and accidents resulting in death or injuries, which occur in Canada and which are due to firearms being stolen or not properly stored. Many of these testimonies came from young students at the elementary, secondary or college level. These letters had a profound effect on me because they came from those who represent the future of our country. This, then, is a bill which has all the basic elements for success.

• (1600)

Yet, the Senate deemed it advisable to have it studied again by its Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs; something that is perfectly legitimate. During that committee's hearings, a large number of witnesses, including many who already had been heard by the House Committee, appeared to repeat their presentations for or against Bill C-68. Many were heard once again when some of the committee members held rogatory hearings, particularly in the West and in the Yukon, the two areas in which there is a heavy concentration of opponents to the bill. Many honourable senators still have serious reservations about the bill, so much so that the committee's report recommends sizeable amendments. These, in my opinion, diminish the bill to such an extent that, in several areas, it is only an empty shell.

Why is there such persistent opposition? I do not doubt the sincerity of the senators, the individuals or the associations still in opposition to Bill C-68 as it now stands, so the only conclusion I can reach is that this attitude is the result of a misperception and misinformation, as well as the intervention — ill-timed, under the circumstances — of such bodies as the

all-powerful National Firearms Association, which went to considerable expense to make its point of view known. Among other things, it made the far-fetched suggestion that women should be given weapons so that they could protect themselves against potential criminal assaults. This was included in the Montreal Assault Prevention Centre's brief to the Senate committee. One could die laughing at such a suggestion if it were not so sad. An attitude such as this ought to be enough to discredit all groups that associate themselves with it.

In my opinion, this misconception and misinformation is what lies behind nearly all of the proposed amendments, whether they relate to collectors' weapons, museums, regulatory powers, penalties for non-compliance with the legislation, permission for the provinces to adopt the regime established by Bill C-68, or the aboriginal nations. In this address, I shall restrict myself to a brief discussion of the latter, the aboriginal nations, focussing more on the penalties provided for non-compliance with the legislation.

As I said before in my first speech on the subject, when the bill was introduced for second reading, I have the greatest respect, admiration and esteem for aboriginal peoples, and I deplore the fact that I know so little about the way they live, think and work.

However, I hope to remedy that very shortly by visiting a number of aboriginal communities, and I will ask my colleague Senator St. Germain who is unfortunately absent right now, to help me organize this trip. In return, I will set up some trips in Quebec through all the regions and to several urban centres, where we will meet brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers of the victims of the Polytechnique massacre. Maybe then, as a former police officer, he will better understand why Quebecers so wholeheartedly support Bill C-68.

I think aboriginal people, with their concern for protecting the rights they have under the Charter, are acting well within the law. However, although I am not in a position to establish the impact of Bill C-68 on aboriginal rights, I believe that many of the problems that were raised are connected more with the implementation and administration of the bill than the bill itself.

The current constitutional agreement provides that the federal government is responsible for penal justice. The legitimate exercise of this power extends to measures to control the use and possession of firearms. Aboriginal people would probably be the first to admit that their communities are not immune to crime, violence and accidental injuries caused by the use of firearms. Considering the ease with which guns circulate in Canada and the obvious ineffectiveness of the fragmented legislation that exists in the United States, uniform controls are essential to public safety. Bill C-68 will bring about a definite improvement in the well-being of every person in this country, and in my opinion, it provides for satisfactory mechanisms that also guarantee the rights of aboriginal people. Other honourable senators have discussed or will discuss this aspect in greater detail.