

Government Orders

nature will result in death no matter what controls are in place if the person is determined to take his or her life. No doubt that point has some force. However, too many of those suicides were by young people acting in a moment of anguish, acting impulsively because of a failed relationship, difficulty in the home, or problems at school.

If a firearm is not readily available, lives can be saved. If registration, as the police believe, will encourage owners to store firearms safely so those impulsive acts are less likely, the result may be different.

In the years since 1970, some 470 children have died in Canada as a result of accidents with firearms. If we can achieve safer storage through registration, if registration will provide us with a tool by which we can identify firearms owners, educate them about their obligations for safe storage and encourage them to comply, children's lives could be saved. Against this background what are the objections to registration? It is said that it will be unduly costly, both to the government and to the firearms' owners. Let us examine that contention, first, with respect to the government.

● (1230)

We have provided our estimate of the cost of implementing universal registration over the next five years. We say that it will cost \$85 million. We have also said that we will put before the parliamentary committee, on which all parties sit, details of those calculations showing our assumptions and how we arrived at those figures. We encourage the members opposite to examine our estimates. We are confident we will demonstrate that the figures are realistic and accurate.

In so far as the cost to firearms' owners is concerned, the system of registration that we envisage if this legislation is enacted would commence next year with the registration of owners. Those who own firearms would be asked within five years to pick up a card, conveniently available in their communities, to identify themselves by name and address and to return it. They would then be sent a permit or a licence to own a firearm. In the first year of the five-year implementation period we expect that the cost to the firearms owner would be zero. If it is not zero, it would be a nominal amount in the range of \$10.

The second phase of registration, the registration of the firearms themselves, would commence two years later in January 1998. Again firearms owners would be asked to fill out a card, which they would pick up in their communities, identify their firearms by make, model and serial number, to return it and we will send them a registration certificate for their firearms. Once again, this would be phased in over five years from 1998. Once again, in the first year of implementation, the cost would be zero, or if not zero a nominal amount in the range of \$10 to register up to 10 firearms.

If we contrast the relative convenience of such a system—all we are asking of firearms owners is to fill out two cards and mail them in—with the advantages that responsible people say we will achieve through such a system, it seems that on any cost-benefit analysis registration is justified.

It is said that such a system will be complex and bureaucratic. Surely it is evident from the description which I have given that it will be just the opposite. We can take the opportunity of designing and implementing such a system in collaboration with provincial authorities, with the input of the firearms groups to eliminate irritants, to overcome paperwork burden, to simplify and streamline the system so that all of our objectives can be achieved at the same time.

It is crucially important, in my judgment, that as we debate this question of registration, in respect of which there are strongly held views on both sides, that we do so on the real facts. Let us confine ourselves to the reality of the situation. Let us not hear that the registration system will cost \$100 per firearm. Let us not hear that it is a prelude to the confiscation by the government of hunting rifles and shotguns. Let us not contend that it will cost \$1.5 billion to put in place.

That is the way to distort the discussion. That is the way to frighten people. Surely this debate must be carried out on the real facts. When the real facts are addressed it seems clear that the objectives of which I spoke at the outset can be achieved while respecting the legitimate uses of firearms. This can surely be done without imposing unduly on firearms owners through the introduction of universal registration for the reasons I have described.

So far as crime is concerned, the House will know from statements made earlier that the legislation contemplates a toughening of the penalties of the criminal misuse of firearms. It contemplates a change in the structure of the code to overcome the plea bargaining of charges relating to the use of firearms so that the penalties will be woven directly into the sections which provide for the offences themselves.

● (1235)

I have discussed with my provincial and territorial counterparts their collaboration in an effort to ensure that the laws we write in the Criminal Code will be enforced as such in the courts and that the attorneys general of the provinces will instruct crown attorneys, in any case in which the facts justify them, to seek the penalties that are included in this legislation as deterrents to the criminal misuse of firearms.

In the course of the work that I did in response to the Prime Minister's request that I prepare this legislation, I met with over 150 national and regional organizations of firearms owners and users. I met with hunters, farmers, target shooters, collectors, skeet shooters and athletes who achieved distinction for Canada in the Commonwealth and Olympic Games. I met with the