

Bill C-391, an Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Firearms Act (Repeal of the long-gun registry)
Testimony before the Parliamentary Committee of

William Blair
Chief of Police
Toronto Police Service
President
Canadian Association of Chief's of Police

Good Afternoon.

My name is William Blair and I am the Chief of the Toronto Police Service.

Like my fellow Chiefs across Canada, I have served for decades in frontline policing.

I have been a member of the Toronto Police Service since November 1, 1976. Over the past 33 years, I have served in nearly every policing function, I have worked in some of the toughest neighbourhoods in Canada's largest city. I spent years working undercover in the drug squad. I have worked in our Hold Up Squad, set up our Organized Drug Crime Units and our Gun and Gang Task Force. For three years, I served as the Commander of all the detective units in Toronto, including the Homicide Squad, the Sex Crimes Unit, the Toronto Drug Squad and our Intelligence Services.

In 2005, I was appointed as the Chief of the Toronto Police Service. I accepted a statutory responsibility for the safety of Toronto's 2.7 million citizens and the safety of our 5,600 officers. It is a responsibility I take very seriously.

Part of that responsibility is to provide our officers with all the tools, training and resources they need to do their jobs effectively and safely. The National Firearms Registry is one such tool.

Since my appointment, the Toronto Police Service has established one of the first and largest Integrated Guns and Gangs Units in North America. We work in an integrated investigative environment with partners including the RCMP National Weapons Enforcement Teams, the Ontario Provincial Police Provincial Weapons Enforcement Unit, and all the policing services in the Greater Toronto Area.

They are one of the most effective investigative units dealing with gun violence in Canada. They have conducted some of the largest and most successful gang investigations in North America. They are recognized internationally for their expertise. They use the Firearms Registry every day. They tell me they need that information to do their job. They need it to solve crimes and prosecute offenders. They use it to control the supply of illegal firearms and trace the origin of all crime guns.

Domestic violence investigators regularly check the Registry to determine the number and type of weapons registered to a person involved in a potentially violent dispute, so that they might obtain a public safety warrant to remove those firearms. They know such efforts have saved lives and prevented tragedies. The evidence of reduced domestic gun violence confirms their knowledge.

Criminal investigators regularly check the registry to determine the origin and ownership of seized firearms. They use it to obtain evidence for criminal prosecutions. They use it to identify a firearm as stolen and to return such firearms to their rightful owners. They use it to solve serious crimes. They use it every day.

The rank and file officers of my Service tell me they need the information in the registry to do their jobs. Communications dispatchers regularly check addresses to provide first-responders with information that keeps them safe. Frontline cops ask for Registry checks when approaching a potentially dangerous situation. Tactical officers check the Registry to determine the number and type of weapons likely to be encountered, when entering the residence of a barricaded person, or when executing a search warrant.

These checks are not done, as has been suggested, as part of some automatic computer program. They are requested by police officers who value accurate and reliable information when they are doing their job. They know the Firearms Registry is a tool that helps them do their jobs effectively and safely.

They have asked me to advocate to you, on their behalf, to retain access to the information contained in the Registry. The Toronto police union representing their interests has also expressed strong support for the retention of the Registry. They know the information obtained from the Registry helps keep their members safe. We all know its value and we want you to know it as well.

We also know the limitations of every information system that supports police work. Information must be verified. Criminal intelligence is only as good as its source, and it must always be considered in its context. The Firearms Registry database is one such tool. It does not prevent every crime, or solve every crime. It cannot guarantee the safety of every police officer. None of us expects it to. What we do expect is access to the best and most accurate information available. We require access to the information contained in the Firearms Registry.

Like all of the tools we use, the firearms registry is not a perfect, universally effective tool. Not every criminal will register their weapons. Not everyone will obey the law.

It will not deter every criminal nor will it solve every crime. The police never claimed it would.

What we do claim, with the authority that comes from actually using the information contained in the Firearms Registry every day, is that it is a tool that helps us do our job. Criminals may not register their weapons, but because of the gun registry we can determine

the origin of a criminal's weapons. We can hold them, and the persons responsible for providing these guns, accountable. The registry provides us with intelligence. It provides us with evidence. It creates an accountability for gun owners and it encourages responsible gun ownership. It is valuable, but it is not perfect. It is certainly not the only tool we need, and no one claims that it is the answer to every challenge. But it is an important tool, nonetheless.

Similarly, no legislation, no matter how comprehensive and well written, will prevent every crime. No minimum sentence, no matter how certain and severe, will deter every criminal bent on violence. No investment in gathering criminal intelligence will guarantee our safety. Not even the absolute certainty of getting caught and going to jail will deter every criminal. Again, no sensible person would suggest it could.

In 2009, I was elected as the President of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. Our membership includes Chiefs of Police and senior officers of police services of every size and from every region in Canada. It includes the Commissioner and Command of the RCMP, the OPP and the Surete Du Quebec. It includes the Chiefs of the major cities as well as small towns.

Since 1905, police leaders from across Canada have joined together in the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police to advocate for public safety. Our input and support has been sought and valued by successive governments, for over a century.

The legitimacy of the CACP as a national and trusted voice of police leadership in Canada has not previously been questioned. The integrity of our members and their commitment to the safety of their communities and their officers is accepted and trusted in towns and cities across Canada.

As the President of the CACP, it is my responsibility to advance positions that have been determined collectively by the membership. Since 1974, the CACP has advocated for the tools that would enable them to deal effectively with gun violence.

In 1994, the CACP adopted a resolution calling upon the Government of Canada to enact legislation requiring the registration of all firearms, including long guns. This is a position from which the CACP has never wavered.

This is not to suggest we support wasteful spending. We do not. The CACP acknowledges the implementation of the Firearms Act was not done efficiently. Prior to 2005, our members also expressed frustration with the cost and apparent inefficiencies of the firearms program.

Commissioner Fantino expressed his frustration with the system in January 2003. That was more than seven years ago. Today the OPP, which he leads, uses the registry over 1,500 times a day. They use it very effectively. They use to make Ontario safer for all its citizens.

The operation of the long gun registry has improved significantly since responsibility was given to the RCMP in 2006. The first thing they did was create a more efficient and cost-effective system. The long gun registry now costs \$4.1 million dollars a year. They streamlined processes for Canadians to register their weapons. They improved the accessibility and reliability of information available from the Registry. They improved the training available to investigators and frontline officers on using the registry's information.

They developed reporting tools police services use to encourage responsible gun ownership. They have made it possible to enforce prohibition orders and licence revocations by providing accurate and reliable information about the number, type, calibre and serial numbers of weapons in the possession of persons who have been determined to be dangerous. Without the information in the registry, police would have no means to determine what guns a person prohibited from possessing firearms actually has registered to them. The law allows us to seize such firearms, but we would have no way to determine their existence without the registry.

It is no coincidence that the handful of police critics relied upon by the gun lobby come from people who retired at least five years ago, or by those with no current experience using the Firearms registry database. They don't know how it works. They've never used it. But they know they hate it. No one should delude themselves that they speak for the silent majority of serving police officers.

Police officers are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. We can do so individually, and many of us do, notwithstanding blatantly dishonest assertions that Chiefs have muzzled all dissenting opinions. Anyone suggesting our police unions would be complicit in the suppression of the legitimate concerns of police officers doesn't know, or hopes that you don't know, very much about police officers.

More often, we elect representatives to speak on our behalf. Police chiefs have formed associations to represent their national or regional interests. Police officers join associations or unions to speak on their behalf. This is most effective when the overwhelming majority hold a common view on an issue of significant importance to public and police officer safety.

Retention of the Firearms Registry for long guns is one such issue. It is an issue that has brought together, perhaps like no other issue, a coalition of the full spectrum of police leadership in Canada.

It is an issue that has united the leaders of police services, police associations and police boards across Canada. We all believe that the registration of all firearms, including long guns, is important to the safety of Canadians and police officers.

We believe Bill C-391 is ill-conceived and based on a dated misunderstanding of the current system. We believe the destruction of the Firearms Registry will make our communities less safe. It will make our officers less effective in dealing with violent

crime. It will make the already difficult and dangerous job of a police officer more difficult and less safe.

I have brought with me, today, resolutions and letters concerning the Firearms Registry, from the Provincial Chiefs Associations of every province in Canada.

I implore you to read their resolutions. They are remarkably consistent. From British Columbia to Newfoundland/Labrador, the Chiefs and leaders of police services across the country are telling this Parliament that they support retention of the Registry.

Some have even gone further, acknowledging the value of the current registry but calling upon the Government to do more. They want the registry improved and enhanced. They want it made even more efficient and effective. They want to address the legitimate concerns of law abiding firearm owners by removing the threat of criminal sanction and providing for a ticketing mechanism to encourage compliance. The CACP supports this. They want new tools of search and seizure, stricter sentencing of violent firearm offenders, and better control of the guns coming across our borders.

They do not support taking valuable information away from police officers.

In addition to the resolutions of every Provincial Association of Chiefs of Police, I have provided a number of letters written by Chiefs of Police in smaller rural and northern communities. They have expressed their support for the retention of the long gun registry. They have communicated their support to their local Member of Parliament. Like Chiefs across Canada, they will, in the coming weeks, explain their support for the retention of the long gun registry and their opposition to Bill C-391 to the citizens they are sworn to protect.

I believe that, when Canadians hear from their police leaders the importance of the registry to public safety, they will support the retention of the registry.

I am aware that the RCMP has completed an Internal Audit of the Firearms Program and an Evaluation of the Firearms Program effectiveness. I understand that both reports strongly indicate that the Firearms Program is providing good value and is being managed efficiently.

When Canadians have access to that report, I believe it will resolve any outstanding questions.