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# Rock ignoring gun-control figures, critics say

Difficult to find relation between firearms control and homicide rates, studies show

BY HENRY HESS  
Crime Reporter

When a caller to a radio phone-in show accused Allan Rock this week of misleading Canadians about crime in order to sell them on gun control, the caller injected a touch of reality into an overwhelmingly emotional debate.

Simply put, although the firearms-control bill is on the verge of becoming law, no one has yet produced objective evidence that many of its key components will make Canada a safer place.

Indeed, critics say, the Justice Minister is ignoring indications that universal registration — a cornerstone of Mr. Rock's bill — is costly and unworkable.

The caller was Elliot Leyton, a professor of anthropology at Memorial University in Newfoundland and author of a book on serial killers. Mr. Leyton said Mr. Rock doesn't trust gun owners and was trying "to scare the pants off the public" with phony crime statistics.

Registration, the minister replied, will give police another tool to fight crime and "it's only going to cost a couple of bucks" to register a gun.

The facts, however, suggest otherwise.

Although the association representing Canadian police chiefs endorsed gun registration, elsewhere it is being abandoned.

New Zealand discontinued its registry in 1983 after the national police reported they had not found it useful, and police in two Australian states have recommended dropping their registration programs, at least partly because they can't enforce compliance.

Some law enforcement officials in Canada predict privately that the same thing will happen here.

"With the volume [of guns] that's there and the amount of people we've got, it just doesn't make sense," said a provincial firearms officer in Ontario.

"If everybody in this country decided they were going to have a gun and weren't going to register it, there's not a hope in heaven the police departments in this country could contain it."

As for the "couple of bucks," Mr. Rock's own department calculated in 1992 that it cost \$82 to register each handgun.

Extrapolated to include the estimated six million rifles and shotguns owned by Canadians, that would bring the cost of registration close to \$500-million. Some provincial estimates put it higher.

Gary Mauser, the author of a recent Fraser Institute report that is highly critical of Mr. Rock's gun-control bill, said the issue has more to do with votes than with violence.

"Since it is currently fashionable to equate firearms with violence, and there is an emotional crusade against firearms, the government sees a political opportunity."

There are two things wrong with the bill, Prof. Mauser, who teaches business administration at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., said in an interview yesterday: "It won't work. It's very expensive."

"If you look around the Commonwealth where they've had registration, [it doesn't] work. Less than half the gun owners and no more than 60 per cent of the guns have been registered."

"And Rock knows this. People who are on the inside tell me they've told him. His Justice Department people have told him. And he still wants it."

The Fraser Institute report, titled Gun Control is not Crime Control, depicts the government's proposals as a symbolic campaign aimed at appeasing urban voters who are afraid of guns and ignorant of the laws that already exist to control them.

In the report, Prof. Mauser says the government ignores evidence that violent crime is more closely linked to social breakdown and to economic and demographic factors than to availability of guns.

A study of an earlier gun law, passed in 1977, found that although factors such as unemployment and the percentage of foreign immigrants, status Indians and young males in the population appeared to affect the homicide rate, gun controls did not.

"No government in the world can boast that the introduction of stricter firearms laws has actually reduced criminal violence," Prof. Mauser writes.

"Internationally, there is no correlation between firearms laws and homicides."

He points out that although Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Mexico and Russia have laws making private, legal ownership of firearms very difficult or impossible, all have homicide rates higher than Canada, or even the United States.

In Britain, which enacted extremely restrictive gun controls in 1988, Home Office statistics indicate that although the law succeeded in reducing the number of guns in private hands, the criminal use of firearms in armed robberies has continued to grow.

The findings echo a 1994 U.S. congressional report examining firearms regulations in 20 countries, including Canada, which concluded: "It is difficult to find a correlation between the countries with highly regulated gun-control laws and the incidence of gun-related crime."

