



This copy is for your personal non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies of Toronto Star content for distribution to colleagues, clients or customers, or inquire about permissions/licensing, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com

Canada set to take another step back on gun control

Bill C-42, the Common Sense Firearms Licensing Act, could hardly have a more ironic name.



Canada has been moving in the wrong direction on gun control for quite some time, writes Heidi Rathjen. (SEAN KILPATRICK / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

By **HEIDI RATHJEN**
Thu., April 30, 2015

Last week the federal standing committee on public safety launched its hearings into [Bill C-42](#), the ironically named Common Sense Firearms Licensing Act. The bill, which would loosen controls on possession permits, assault weapons and the transportation of handguns, could hardly be farther from common sense.

Astoundingly, the committee is not scheduled to hear a single witness representing police organizations, or for that matter any public safety, crime prevention or legal experts — all people in a unique position to comment on the likely consequences of the proposed legislation. Instead, the hearings consist of only four hours of testimony from nine witnesses: two private groups defending gun control versus seven defending pro-gun interests.

Among the many troubling changes C-42 seeks to introduce, one seemingly innocuous measure deserves special scrutiny. The legislation would open the door to regulations that limit the discretionary powers of Chief Firearms Officers, the provincial public servants who decide on whether or not to issue a variety of licences and authorizations and on what conditions. For example, a CFO may require a medical report stating that the former mental illness of an applicant has been successfully treated before a licence is issued. Or she may require that a gun business reconfigure its service counter to make sure the display is at a safe distance from the public. And many other common-sense measures.

How specifically does the government intend to regulate these discretionary powers? It's not saying. However, given that the Conservatives have presented the bill as a way to rein in the "broad and often arbitrary discretionary authority" of "unelected bureaucrats," and that the legislation follows complaints from the gun lobby regarding CFO decisions, Canadians have reason to worry.

Indeed, we've been moving in the wrong direction on gun control in this country for quite some time. The new legislation is only the latest example of the Harper government seeking to tie the hands of CFOs at the behest of the gun lobby.

Records of the commercial sale of guns, for example, were kept in Canada, largely without controversy, starting in 1979. Because the 1995 Firearms Act required that all inventory and transactions be captured in a centralized registry, the obligation for gun businesses to maintain such records was removed from the bill. CFOs nevertheless continued to attach record-keeping requirements as a condition of licensing these stores.

But following the abolition of the long-gun registry, pro-gun groups started complaining about these sales records. Evidently they weren't satisfied with a return to mere 1979 levels of oversight. Sure enough, shortly thereafter the Conservatives passed regulations prohibiting CFOs from requiring any

records concerning long guns. This in spite of being warned by provincial public servants that it could result “in more firearms being sold by businesses to criminals and unlicensed persons.”

Or take gun shows. Up until 2012, all gun sales at these events were recorded on the national registry — a process that involved verification of a buyer’s licence. But with the registry gone, and with it the automatic licence verification, gone too was any way to ensure that the many sales at these massive events were legal. To compensate for this loss of oversight, CFOs called on the government to begin to enforce existing gun-show regulations that, at the very least, would allow them to ensure minimum safety standards.

This eminently reasonable request was met with loud complaints from gun groups, and so the government went ahead and axed the regulations. It didn’t matter to the gun lobby — or, apparently, to Ottawa — that an [RCMP report](#) warned that as a result of erasing these regulations, “gun shows may become a focal point for the purchase and subsequent stockpiling of non-restricted firearms for criminal use,” just as such events fuel the black market in the U.S.

The discretionary power of public servants in doling out licences is a key tool in ensuring the safe sale and use of guns. There cannot be one standard for every individual and every situation. Just like the RCMP’s decisions regarding the classification of weapons (which will also be subject to political oversight under C-42), the discretionary power of CFOs should not be overruled by politicians.

Political parties can be influenced by the small but powerful gun lobby, as this government clearly has been. Subjecting public servants’ decisions to political interference places partisan politics over good governance, ideology over expertise and the interests of the gun lobby over public safety.

This and every other measure in Bill C-42 should be thoroughly examined and publicly debated before the bill proceeds any further.

***Heidi Rathjen** has been an advocate for gun control since witnessing the 1989 massacre of 14 women at l’École Polytechnique, where she was an engineering student. She’s a spokesperson for [PolyRemembers](#).*

Copyright owned or licensed by Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Republication or distribution of this content is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited and/or its licensors. To order copies of Toronto Star articles, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com