PRESS RELEASE

Liberal election promise to ban assault weapons
“A significant and positive development for gun control in Canada”
Victims’ group applauds commitment but calls on Trudeau government to use current means at its disposal to ban specific models while still in power

Montreal, June 15th 2019 – Survivors and victims of Canada’s worst shootings are applauding the announcement made by Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction Minister Bill Blair as reported by the Globe and Mail on Friday committing the Liberal Party to not only prohibiting new sales of assault weapons but also to buying back existing ones ... but only if reelected. In addition, Minister Blair mentions strengthening rules on the storage of firearms and implementing measures to deter straw purchases.

“According to this announcement, the Trudeau government has committed itself — contingent on being reelected — to legislate according to the values and the will of the majority of Canadians who want to get assault weapons off our streets and out of our communities, once and for all. This is a significant and positive development for gun control in Canada, as it makes a ban on assault weapons a real possibility in the near future,” says Nathalie Provost, who survived 4 bullets from a Ruger Mini-14 during the 1989 massacre at École Polytechnique.

“We will have to wait for the details in order to assess how solid and comprehensive this ban would eventually be. However, in the meantime we have good reason to believe that the Trudeau government has finally decided to stand up to the gun lobby and side with the majority of Canadians on the thorny but critical issue of the legal availability of particularly lethal weapons, at least after the next election.”

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The Ruger Mini-14 is a "tactical" weapon based on the M-14, a military weapon that uses the same magazines as an M-16 or an AK-47, and which was supposed to be prohibited by the Liberal government following the reforms adopted in the aftermath of the 1989 killings. The weapon remains available as a non-restricted firearm.
Why wait?

“If the Liberal government truly believes that the legal availability of assault weapons puts the public at risk, then why not enact measures that are available to them right now, while they are still in power? Why make an urgent public safety measure totally contingent on being reelected if it’s not necessary?” asks Heidi Rathjen, Polytechnique graduate and coordinator of PolySeSouvient/PolyRemembers.

“The government can immediately prohibit specific models of assault weapons by Orders in Council. This would be a logical first step towards implementing a ban as it would end future sales of existing assault weapons including the current rush by gun enthusiasts to stock up on weapons like the AR-15. It would also confirm the sincerity of the Liberals’ determination to prioritize public safety and to complete the job if re-elected. Given that the current Liberal platform already pledges to ‘take action to get ... assault weapons off our streets’, Canadians need to be convinced that, this time around, the promise to get rid of these weapons is more than just words on paper.”

PolySeSouvient has complained that the recently adopted Bill C-71, while a move in the right direction, barely respects the Liberal Party’s 2015 election platform as it contains many half-measures, numerous concessions to the gun lobby and nothing that changes the legal availability of handguns or assault weapons.

"The mosque community in Quebec would like to thank Minister Blair for recognizing the extreme risks associated with assault weapons and for convincing his party to commit to ban them as part of their upcoming election platform," says Boufeldja Benabdallah, president of Quebec Mosque. “Unfortunately, the chances of actually achieving such a ban now entirely depend on the results of the next federal election.

“We are therefore asking the Trudeau government to do what it can right now, while still in power, through regulations or whatever legal means are presently at its disposal. Mr. Trudeau, show us that you really mean it and that you will take steps to protect Canadians against weapons of war while you still can. And in return, we will tell Canadians about this important promise and salute the political courage that it takes to brave the wrath of the gun lobby.”

Gun control advocates are hoping that the proposed measures will include a limit of five bullets for all magazines, as well as a ban on ‘modified magazines’ (which allow relatively easy manipulations to render them to their full capacity, that is, beyond their legal limit). “It is obvious and scientifically demonstrated that military accessories, including high-capacity magazines, increase the death toll in mass killings, including the one that took place in our place of worship on January 29, 2017,” explains Mr. Benabdallah.

Stricter controls on handguns

While the majority of Canadians, as well as the cities of Toronto and Montreal, supports a total ban on handguns, Minister Blair says that his party has “officially ruled out a countrywide ban on handguns”. “Given the drastic increase in privately-owned handguns as well as the growing number of shootings involving these guns, it would be inconceivable for the Liberals to not propose something bold in this regard,” adds Ms Rathjen. The number of handguns owned by private citizens in Canada has skyrocketed to close to a million in recent years according to RCMP statistics for 2019 obtained by the gun lobby.

“The Liberals have not yet ruled out the idea of storing handguns in gun clubs, a measure that would be entirely consistent with the current platform that brought them to power and which would, without a doubt, reduce the chances that they fall into the wrong hands or be used by their owners for nefarious purposes.”

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CURRENT REGULATORY AUTHORITY TO PROHIBIT WEAPONS & ACCESSORIES

The complete overhaul of the classification system does indeed require legislation and is therefore an appropriate election promise (at least at this late stage in the current government’s mandate). However, regulatory authority introduced in 1995 by the Chrétien government was specifically intended to allow the government to prohibit new models without the need to push legislation through the House of Commons and the Senate every time. Indeed, regulations containing lists of restricted and prohibited weapons as well as accessories were supposed to be updated on a regular basis. Maintaining updated lists of restricted and prohibited weapons is particularly urgent given gun manufacturers’ practice of circumventing the legal framework through minor changes to formerly restricted or prohibited military-style weapons in order for the new models to enter the Canadian market and even earn a less severe classification. Here is an excerpt taken from one of many RCMP memos attempting to draw consecutive Public Safety ministers’ attention to the growing threat of readily available “military and para-military” weapons resulting from the failure to update the regulations:

The regulations list specific models of firearms (e.g., AK-47 rifle, Beretta, M16) known at the time, as restricted or prohibited, and include “variants and modified versions” of those named models (e.g., any version of the Beretta BM59 is prohibited). The term “variant” was employed as a means to capture future firearms that differed slightly (e.g., barrel length, cartridge size) from those specifically listed in the regulations, but were generally the same make and type.

Given the technical knowledge required to determine what particular firearms, weapons, devices and ammunition should be classed as either prohibited or restricted, an exclusively statutory regime is not practicable. Instead, the use of regulations allows for the classification regime to be regularly updated as the technical description of existing firearms and weapons changes as a result of further developments or as new models and devices appear.

The absence of regularly updating the regulations has allowed firearms to enter the Canadian market as non-restricted firearms, but that would have been classified as either restricted or prohibited had they existed in 1995. This poses a risk to public safety by allowing firearms designed for military and para-military purposes to be easily available to the public.

2 RCMP, Classification of Firearms, January 2012.
http://polysesouvient.ca/Documents/DOCU_12_00_00_RCMP_BriefingNote_AssaultWeapons.PDF

3 [Translation] « Firearms and ballistics expert Alan Voth explained that gun manufacturers study the laws of each country and create adapted versions to suit the laws in each market, to increase sales opportunities". La Presse, “Tragédie de Dawson: l’arme du tueur plus accessible qu’il y a dix ans” (The Dawson College Tragedy : killer’s weapon easier to get than a decade ago), 2016.