

Trading public safety for political gain

AS POLICE UNION BOSS he sang the praises of the gun registry, but now that he's a Conservative candidate he's changed his tune

Stephen Harper's promise in Wainfleet, Ont., on Monday to abolish the long-gun registry was entirely predictable. Harper's efforts to create a divide between rural and urban Canada, between "hunters, farmers" and "urban elites," is totally expected. The Conservatives have been waging a war against the gun registry for years, and Harper is now using it in an attempt to win his long-sought-after majority. The amount the Conservatives have spent on these election campaigns is undoubtedly higher than the annual cost to maintain the registry.

Since the shooting at my alma mater 21 years ago, I have slowly got used to the intense hatred toward the registry displayed by the Reform party, the Canadian Alliance, and now the Conservative party. The registry seems to have become symbolically something much greater than simply a list of who owns what guns in Canada, accessible only to the police to help them do their job.

The Conservative Party has worked arm in arm with the

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gun lobby to discredit, weaken, undermine and ultimately eliminate the registry. It has waived fees for gun registration and licence renewal (costing taxpayers \$20 million a year), it has helped raise funds for gun clubs, it introduced an amnesty allowing gun owners to escape penalties if they don't respect the law, and it indefinitely delayed the implementation of Canada's obligations to combat illegal gun-trafficking across borders through an international marking and tracing system.

But when I heard Conservative candidate Jean-Guy Dagenais speak in the news last week, it felt like someone had punched me in the stomach.

Dagenais used to be a po-



MIGUEL LEGAULT LA PRESSE
Jean-Guy Dagenais (right) campaigning in St. Hyacinthe-Bagot with Conservative MP Christian Paradis; he once stood in solidarity with other police organizations on gun control.

lice officer. He was an ally. While he was president of the Quebec provincial police union, he forcefully defended the long-gun registry. His position was consistent with that of all other major police organizations, including the Canadian Police Association, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police and the Canadian Association of Police Boards, which recognize the gun registry's effectiveness in protecting public safety.

But as soon as he presented himself as a candidate under the Conservative banner, Dagenais called for the abolition of the gun registry, faithfully falling into line with his new party's dogma. Gone is the concern for police officers and public safety – and in its place is the usual spectacle of disinformation.

Dagenais wasted no time in regurgitating his party's false and misleading claims regarding the gun registry:

that it is too expensive, too complicated and inefficient, and targets "law-abiding" hunters and farmers. Yet registering a firearm is free and takes only a few minutes. And, according to the RCMP, it costs only a few pennies per Canadian per year.

Ninety per cent of all firearms in Canada are long guns, and they are the weapon of choice in murders of police officers (from 1998 to 2008, 14 out of 16 police officers shot were killed by a long gun). Finally, the evidence shows that gun deaths have plummeted since the introduction of stricter gun-control laws. The gun registry is part of this integrated strategy and is supported by all major police organizations.

The Conservatives have worked hard to hide the facts and spread misinformation. They have "kept in translation" an RCMP report confirming the registry's effectiveness and cost efficiency, and attempted to discredit experts who support registration, accusing the chiefs of police of conspiring to confiscate all firearms. The Harper govern-

ment even chose a member of the gun lobby as the representative of Canada to two United Nations conferences to discuss the illegal gun trade. While they accuse firearms victims and their families who support gun control of being "emotional," they themselves make a complete mockery of the need to ensure a rational, fact-based and evidence-supported approach to this critical public-safety issue.

Dagenais seems to have cast aside his primary concerns for public and police-officer safety and is now seeking political gain for his party by defending the interests of the gun lobby. It doesn't matter that everything he did in his former career was devoted to protecting the public. It doesn't matter that his past action in defending gun control contributed to the 400 fewer deaths by gunshot wounds in 2007 compared to 1995 – the lowest in over 40 years. Now it's all about politics.

Voters should remember that one of the first items on Harper's political agenda is the dismantling of a public-safety tool that saves lives.

Ignatieff's the victim as the Liberal brand loses its lustre



L. IAN MACDONALD

The Liberals are running in third place in Quebec, and it's not Michael Ignatieff's fault.

In yesterday's Nanos daily tracking poll for CTV and the Globe and Mail, the Bloc was at 35.8 per cent, the Conservatives at 22 per cent and the Liberals at 18.6 per cent, just ahead of the NDP at 17.9 per cent.

When you break out the linguistic component, the Liberals would have less than 15 per cent of the francophone vote. That's 85 per cent of the population who deliver no fewer than 60 of Quebec's 75 seats in the House of Commons.

If these numbers hold through May 2, the Liberals will be reduced to their redoubt in the Montreal region, mostly on the West Island and the north end of the city.



RICHARD ARLESS JR. GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Despite being the party of favourite sons Laurier, St. Laurent, Trudeau and Chrétien, the Liberal franchise has been on the wane in Quebec since the unilateral patriation of the Constitution. Does this mean still more seat losses in this election?

says voters here see Quebec as their home and Canada as their country. This is a tried and proven theme. *Le Quebec*

eration. The Liberal tradition of alternating French- and English-speaking leaders has made it the country's natural

And the near-death experience of the 1995 referendum can largely be attributed to Lucien Bouchard's narrow-

lowing the near disaster of the referendum.

The federal auditor-general's 2004 report on the econ-

in the Nanos tracking, and if they can put up numbers like that on election day, they will win 15 seats in Quebec. Their vote, centred in the 418 region around Quebec City, is very efficient for them. They hold nine of the 21 seats in the region, the Bloc hold the rest, and the Liberals are not even on the radar. In this region of Quebec, the Conservatives have already become the default choice of federalist voters. And the polls are trending that way in the rest of Quebec outside Montreal. If the Conservatives become the "Block the Bloc" party, a card the Liberals have played in the past, that would marginalize them further in the 50 seats outside Montreal.

And Monday in Victoriaville, Harper announced a commitment to complete a \$2.2 billion harmonized-sales-tax deal with Quebec by September; to be costed in the Conservative platform.

This is a big win for Quebec, and might be enough for Harper to close the deal with those voters who are asking what's in this election for Quebec. It is certainly something for him to run on here. *Macdonald, Ignatieff*