

## OPINION GUN CONTROL

# Will the Senate do its job and reject Bill C-42?



The Senate is now studying Bill C-42, the Common Sense Firearms Licensing Act. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright

The bill will make it harder for the RCMP to protect the public.



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On March 15, 2012, Claude Carignan met with a small group of victims of gun violence to talk about the impacts of Bill C-19, the bill that would ultimately abolish the long gun registry but which was, at the time, still before the Senate.

Jean-François Larrivée, who lost his wife in the Polytechnique massacre, and Meaghan Hennegan, who was shot

during the Dawson shooting, were among the group that showed the Senator various models of “non-restricted” semi-automatic guns with military characteristics, meaning that under Bill C-19 any trace of their ownership and whereabouts would disappear along with the records of hunting rifles and shotguns.

Carignan’s reaction was plainly disbelief, but he took our list and promised to make inquiries in order to verify our claims. Eventually, his office sent us the result—our list was generally accurate—and assured us that they would further reflect on the matter and would be following up.

Soon after, the Prime Minister named him leader of the Conservatives in the Senate, and we’ve heard nothing from him since.

However Carignan, like all Senators, will have to take a stand regarding the availability of such weapons.

Recently, the House of Commons

passed (and sent to the Senate) Bill C-42, the ironically named “Common Sense Firearms Licensing Act,” which would not only loosen controls on possession permits and transportation of handguns, but make it more difficult for the RCMP to ensure weapons prohibited by law remain out of the hands of civilians.

Why in the world would the government decide to tie the hands of the RCMP in this respect? The answer is simple: because the gun lobby complained.

In February of last year, the RCMP reclassified thousands of semi-automatic rifles that had entered the country as non-restricted long guns, because they were in fact prohibited given their ability to be converted into a fully automatic firearm. The decision is entirely compliant with the law, which specifically prohibits automatic firearms, and with the 1993 Supreme Court ruling that says that semi-automatic firearms that can be converted to fully automatic mode are equally prohibited—these weapons are being “designed to kill and maim a large number of people rapidly and effectively. They serve no other purpose. They are not designed for hunting any animal but man.”

These included the full range of “Swiss Arms” models and various versions of the “CZ 858” family—one of which was used in the September 2012 shooting at the Parti Québécois election celebration in Montreal. One man was killed and another injured, but the toll could have been much higher had the gun not jammed after the first shot.

Instead of applauding the RCMP for having acted in the interest of public safety, Public Safety Minister Steven Blaney echoed the complaints of the gun lobby by criticizing the RCMP for their “arbitrary” decision and announced a two-year amnesty for their owners, accompanied by a public bulletin specifically addressed to gun owners stating that “our Conservative government is on your side and will always defend the rights of honest gun owners.”

A few months later, new Firearms Classification regulations were passed, prohibiting the re-classification of firearms beyond one year after the day on which the initial classification was made.

Bill C-42 builds on this, by authorizing the minister of Public Safety, a partisan political position, to override any and all classification—even those clearly defined by law. The minister could, literally, reclassify as “non-restricted” any weapon, no matter how powerful, at any time and for any reason, exempting it from controls.

This is very bad news for the public. Discretion regarding the classification of guns should be left in the hands of the RCMP, who are objective, knowledgeable and mandated to protect public safety. The law and its implementation should not be overruled by political interests that can be influenced by the small but powerful gun lobby, as this government clearly has been.

The Harper government evidently expects the Senate to rush C-42 through with minimal scrutiny and debate, just as it did in the House of Commons where the Conservative-dominated Standing Committee on Public Safety failed to hear a single witness representing police organizations nor any other safety, crime prevention, domestic violence or legal expert.

Is it wishful thinking to ask whether, this time, the Senate will do its job and act to protect the public from a partisan, self-serving and dangerous law designed to attract votes from a small minority?

I suppose we will soon find out. Heidi Rathjen is a graduate of l’École Polytechnique and spokesperson of PolySeSouvient (PolyRemembers).  
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