



DEBATES OF THE SENATE

1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT • VOLUME 148 • NUMBER 67

CRIMINAL CODE FIREARMS ACT

Bill to Amend—Allotment of Time
for Debate—Motion Adopted

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, April 3, 2012

THE SENATE

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BILL TO AMEND—ALLOTMENT OF TIME
FOR DEBATE—MOTION ADOPTED

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I rise today to speak in opposition to the motion before the Senate to allocate a maximum of six hours of debate to the third reading of Bill C-19, the bill that seeks to eliminate the federal firearms registry and the data contained within the registry.

When they were in opposition, members of the government in this chamber decried the use of time allocation measures as bully tactics, calling time allocation a guillotine motion, as the Honourable Senator Cowan has stated. They called it the muzzling of Parliament and the use of power to secure more power. Even under circumstances where legislation dealt with urgent, national security matters, honourable senators opposite urged the government of the day to let the Senate be allowed the time needed to do the work it has been mandated to do, that is, to provide sober second thought.

Honourable senators, not only have the members opposite conveniently changed their viewpoint on this procedural tactic, but it appears they have also done a drastic 180-degree turnaround. The motion before the Senate today concerns the third reading of Bill C-19, an act that would repeal a federal registry program. This is not an urgent matter. There is no meaningful matter hanging in the balance that will be affected one way or the other by the Senate taking longer than six hours to deliberate on the question. The government has provided no evidence demonstrating any urgency in the consideration of Bill C-19. Then again, honourable senators know very well that this government does not have a great deal of fondness for evidence.

On the subject of evidence, the bill that this motion concerns is a prime example of legislation that directly contradicts a long-established catalogue of evidence. The registry that this bill seeks to destroy provides valuable information to public safety officials regarding the use of long guns. RCMP data shows that long guns are the most common type of firearm used in spousal homicides. Over the past decade, 71 per cent of spousal homicides involved rifles and shotguns.

Last week I received a letter from a group of concerned women, constituents in Alberta, who urged the Senate to carefully consider this and other evidence. The following is an excerpt from their letter:

Alberta women are devastated that registration for long guns will be dismantled by the Government of Canada and that records of guns already registered will be destroyed.

Alberta women, children and police officers, in particular those in rural communities where gun ownership is high, are most at risk of firearm death and injury.

Honourable senators, the city of Calgary has more spousal abuse incidents than any other city in the country: 15,789 last year, an increase of 10 per cent. In rural communities, like Leduc, Alberta, calls to police for domestic disputes rose 25 per cent in 2010.

Front-line crisis workers, including rural women, shelter workers and emergency physicians, have testified that police depend on being able to consult the long-gun registry when responding to calls in order to remove all firearms from a potentially deadly situation.

Canada's largest shelter provider, the YWCA, stressed to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security that ending the long-gun registry is not in the best interests of women and children who live at risk of domestic violence. The role of legally owned firearms in domestic violence against women and children must be acknowledged.

Honourable senators, it bears mentioning that there has been no gender impact study on this bill. Despite requests from a number of violence against women service providers, the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs did not include a single one amongst 30 witnesses invited to appear in the study of this bill. It is clear to me that a serious and thorough deliberation of this bill is required before the question is put. Senators must have the opportunity to review the extensive evidence accumulated by the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

This is a matter of public safety. The evidence that I have seen so far in my examination of the testimony suggests that lives are potentially at stake. As such, I suggest to honourable senators that if there ever were a time when a bill merited sober, serious second thought, this is the time.

[Translation]

Honourable senators, the Fathers of Confederation established this chamber to provide sober second thought on all bills. As such, it is our duty to carefully and thoroughly examine Bill C-19.

Given the time allocation motion, the Senate will obviously not have time to debate this bill in this chamber, particularly since Bill C-19 continues to generate such great controversy among members of the general public.

As my honourable colleague, Senator Cowan, has said, a disturbing pattern has emerged since this government received its coveted majority. We have seen repeated instances, both here and in the other place, of the government using procedural tactics to suppress debate on their legislation. With this latest motion, the government will have used closure or time allocation on eight separate pieces of legislation. It has been less than a month since a gag order was last imposed by the government.

[English]

Time allocation is a tool afforded to the government that is to be reserved for cases where the utmost urgency is required, not to railroad those who do not agree with them. It may be necessary

when obstruction occurs, when there is a deliberate effort to delay unnecessarily or halt the progress of an item of government business.

I entreat the members of the government opposite to show any evidence of such intent on my part or that of our caucus. There is no obstruction on our part. We have not been dragging out the consideration of Bill C-19. We have not been unnecessarily uncooperative. The members of the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs were, in fact, exceedingly cooperative in expediting the consideration of this legislation.

• (1520)

In the Senate Chamber, debate at third reading of this bill began just yesterday — not even one day, honourable senators. There are senators on this side who want to speak at third reading but they cannot do so because they are away on official business. What is the urgency, honourable senators? Is there a rational reason? No, there is only the arbitrary deadline imposed by the government for some unknown purpose.

I implore honourable senators to reflect on the ramifications of passing yet another time allocation motion in this place. Rules 39 and 40, which address time allocation, were brought in by the parliamentarians who came before us for use in exceptional circumstances when a special urgency needed to take precedence over the rights and responsibilities of Parliament. Today is not one of those cases, honourable senators. In fact, none of the eight times that these rules have been invoked in the Forty-first Parliament would pass that litmus test.

I strongly believe that if this chamber allows the use of time allocation provisions to become the rule rather than the exception — using power to secure more power, as one honourable senator opposite stated at one point — we are turning our backs on the mandate given to this chamber. This institution that we serve is worthy of greater respect than it currently is being given. I ask honourable senators not to support the government's motion for time allocation on Bill C-19.
