The Ghost of the Long-Gun Registry: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Gun Control in Canada, 2015-2019

Le fantôme du registre des armes d'épaule : le premier ministre Justin Trudeau et le contrôle des armes à feu au Canada, 2015-2019

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/eccs/4015>

DOI: 10.4000/eccs.4015

ISSN: 2429-4667

Publisher

Association française des études canadiennes (AFEC)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2020

Number of pages: 125-149

ISSN: 0153-1700

Electronic reference

R. Blake Brown, "The Ghost of the Long-Gun Registry: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Gun Control in Canada, 2015-2019", *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies* [Online], 89 | 2020, Online since 01 June 2021, connection on 22 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/eccs/4015> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eccs.4015>

The Ghost of the Long-Gun Registry: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Gun Control in Canada, 2015-2019

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In its 2015 election platform, the Liberal Party committed to take several steps to reduce criminals' access to handguns and "assault weapons." In 2018, the government introduced Bill C-71 to carry out many of its election promises. Despite only making minor changes to Canadian law, the bill sparked considerable opposition from the firearms community and the Conservative Party. High profile domestic and international shootings placed pressure on the Trudeau government to implement even stronger gun controls. The Liberals, however, proved reluctant to undertake additional measures, choosing instead to include new commitments in its 2019 election platform.

Dans son programme électoral de 2015, le Parti libéral s'est engagé à prendre plusieurs mesures pour réduire l'accès des criminels aux armes de poing et aux « armes d'assaut ». En 2018, le gouvernement a présenté le projet de loi C-71 pour tenir bon nombre de ses promesses électorales. Bien qu'il n'ait apporté que des modifications mineures à la loi canadienne, le projet de loi a suscité une opposition considérable de la communauté des armes à feu et du Parti conservateur. Des fusillades nationales et internationales très médiatisées ont exercé des pressions sur le gouvernement Trudeau pour qu'il mette en œuvre des contrôles des armes à feu encore plus sérieux. Les Libéraux, cependant, se sont montrés réticents à prendre des mesures supplémentaires, choisissant plutôt d'inclure de nouveaux engagements dans leur programme électoral de 2019.

The Liberal Party made gun control a significant part of its platform for the 2015 federal election. In broad terms, the Liberals said they would take "pragmatic action to make it harder for criminals to get, and use, handguns and assault weapons," while also promising not to create a new national long-gun registry. Between 2015 and 2019, the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took several steps to address gun violence. It increased funding to programs designed to prevent firearm use by gangs. Despite fierce opposition from members of the Conservative Party and groups representing some firearm owners, the Liberals also introduced and passed Bill C-71, which modestly strengthened Canada's gun laws. Bill C-71 included provisions to allow for more in-depth background checks, tighten transportation rules regarding restricted weapons, and require retailers to record more gun sales. High profile crimes also led the Trudeau government to consider more dramatic steps during its first mandate. In October 2018, Bill Blair, the Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction (and former police chief of Toronto), undertook a study of whether Canada should ban handguns and 'assault-style' rifles. The Liberal Party then included in its 2019 election platform proposals to ban 'military-style assault rifles' and to empower municipalities to limit access to handguns.

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This article situates the policy choices concerning firearms made by the Trudeau government in the longer history of gun control. The Liberal Party has a record since of the late 1960s of strengthening Canada's firearm laws which provided the party's leadership with knowledge of the potential electoral advantages, and pitfalls, of gun control. This article demonstrates that the Trudeau government employed gun control to appeal to progressive-leaning voters who generally expressed support for gun control, but acted cautiously out of fear of antagonizing the majority of legal firearm owners, as the party had done when it passed legislation establishing a long-gun registry in 1995.

This analysis begins with a brief history of Canadian gun control measures to provide context to the firearm policies of Prime Minister Trudeau. The article then offers a close examination of the Liberal Party's 2015 election platform concerning firearms, and how the government sought to accomplish many of these promises, particularly by passing Bill C-71. The resistance to this bill is considered, as are the Liberal deliberations about additional gun control measures in the lead up to 2019 federal election.

Context: A Short History of Gun Control in Canada

Canada has a long and complicated history of gun control, much too long to discuss here in detail. Several factors have traditionally motivated legislative action since the last third of the nineteenth century. One is a desire to keep firearms away from groups of Canadians deemed to be dangerous, such as alleged Bolsheviks after the Great War. Advances in firearm technology have also played an important role in motivating gun control measures. The mass manufacture of revolvers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, for instance, resulted in legislative efforts beginning in the 1870s to discourage young men from buying and carrying inexpensive pistols. In 1934, Ottawa created the first registration requirement for handguns, eventually centralizing this registry system with the RCMP (BROWN 2009; 2012).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Liberals passed two major reforms to Canada's gun laws. In 1968, the Liberal government of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau created a system of categorizing firearms. Weapons would be named as either a firearm (now referred to as a 'non-restricted firearm'), restricted firearm, or prohibited weapon. This permitted the federal government to establish regulatory controls for each category of firearm. Pierre Trudeau's government then proposed a more controversial set of amendments to Canada's gun laws in 1976, which would have required all gun owners to acquire a license, among other measures. This proposal led many gun owners, for the first time, to organize themselves in opposition. They sent large numbers of letters to members of

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Parliament to express their hostility to the Liberal bill. Hunting, target shooting, and gun collectors' organizations formed a short-lived umbrella group, the Canadian Association for Sensible Arms Legislation, to voice their opposition. The Liberals let this bill die on the order paper, though in 1977 the government passed Bill C-51, which made all gun purchasers acquire a Firearms Acquisition Certificate (FAC), and required businesses to record transactions and inventory. The FAC system established the first screening process for people wanting to acquire 'ordinary' long guns. Ottawa also banned fully automatic weapons unless they were registered as restricted weapons before the beginning of 1978 (BROWN 2012, 172-198).

After the passage of the 1977 legislation Ottawa took little legislative action on firearms until a gunman armed with a Ruger Mini-14 semi-automatic rifle murdered fourteen women at the École Polytechnique in Montreal. The large number of victims and the targeting of women made the tragedy front page news around the world, and, in time, a potent symbol for efforts to reduce violence against women. It also stirred support for stronger gun control. Survivors of what became known as the 'Montreal Massacre' began a petition demanding the prohibition of assault rifles that garnered over 560,000 signatures.¹ Women's groups, representatives of victims, medical professionals, and police organizations called for stronger gun control, with many joining a new organization: the Coalition for Gun Control. The Progressive Conservative government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney responded with proposals to strengthen firearm laws. The government let its first bill die on the order paper, but in 1991 the Progressive Conservatives passed Bill C-17. This legislation strengthened the screening process for people applying for a FAC and imposed a mandatory waiting period for such certificates. The government also established regulations for the safe storage, handling and transportation of firearms. Further, Ottawa placed limits on the allowable size of firearm magazines as a means of reducing the damage that could be caused by mass shooters – usually five rounds for long guns and ten rounds for handguns. The government appointed a Firearm Advisory Council to provide the government advice on the regulation of firearms. Using orders-in-council, the Mulroney government also restricted or prohibited many assault-style rifles. However, other such rifles, notably the Ruger Mini-14 used in the Montreal Massacre, remained non-restricted and thus available to anyone with a basic FAC. (BROWN 2012, 203-226; RATHJEN AND MONTPETIT 1999).

¹The petition called for a ban on "military or paramilitary weapons."

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The Liberal government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien elected in 1993 decided to enact additional gun control measures. In 1995, the Liberals passed Bill C-68, which required owners of non-restricted guns to acquire a license (not just people wishing to acquire guns), as well as expanding the registration system to include all firearms. C-68 also included revisions to the *Criminal Code* that provided for harsher penalties for certain serious crimes involving firearms and created the *Firearms Act* as a way of shifting regulatory and administrative aspects of the licensing and registration systems out of the *Criminal Code*. The *Firearms Act* allowed for the appointment of provincial Chief Firearms Officers who were responsible for granting, renewing, and revoking firearm licences. The new licensing requirements in the *Firearms Act* came into force in 2001, while the deadline for registering non-restricted guns was the beginning of 2003 (BROWN 2012, 214-221).

The Reform Party, Progressive Conservative Party, Canadian Alliance, and then the Conservative Party that resulted from the amalgamation of the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative Party, opposed the gun law reforms introduced by the Liberal Party. Samuel Bottomley notes that until the decimation of the Progressive Conservative Party in the 1993 election, all three major national parties tried to adopt gun control policies that balanced regional and urban versus rural considerations. However, the Reform Party tended to express western opposition to gun control, and the new Conservative Party retained that tendency, even if it risked undermining the party's support in urban Canada or in parts of the country with modest rates of gun ownership (BOTTOMLEY 2004). Many gun owners opposed the new licensing and registration requirements of Bill C-68. Groups representing hunters, gun collectors, and target shooters also stirred fears that the registration of non-restricted firearms was a precursor to government efforts to confiscate such guns. As a result, some firearm owners refused to comply with the new rules or waited until the deadline to complete registration. The cost of the program also skyrocketed. Public opinion polls historically demonstrated strong support for tougher gun laws, but opponents of Bill C-68 hammered away at the rising costs of the new regulatory regime as a means of reframing gun control as a fiscal issue, rather than as a public safety concern. Public support for the long-gun registry weakened as the cost of the licensing and registration programs climbed. In 2002, the federal Auditor General released a scathing report on the Liberals' firearms program, estimating that the program would cost one billion dollars by 2005. (BROWN 2012, 230-233). Although this figure included the entire firearms program initiated by the Liberals, conservative politicians used the one-billion-dollar figure to undermine public support for the registry, often referring to the registry as a 'billion-dollar boondoggle'. Conservative leader Stephen Harper

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promised to eliminate the long-gun registry, and to amend other aspects of the gun control regime, which he characterized as ineffective, expensive, and a hindrance to legal firearm ownership. In his first two mandates, Prime Minister Harper lacked a majority in the House of Commons, and bills to abolish the registry failed to become law (though the Conservative government offered an ‘amnesty’ to people who failed to comply with the registration requirements). After securing a majority of the House of Commons in 2011, legislation to end the requirement that gun owners register non-restricted weapons passed, despite the opposition of victims’ groups and the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, among others (STATUTES OF CANADA, 2012). The government of Quebec filed a court challenge, forcing the federal government to retain non-restricted firearms registration records from Quebec until the Supreme Court of Canada eventually ruled against the challenge, after which Ottawa also destroyed the registry records from that province² (BLANCHFIELD 2015). The Harper government also re-staffed the firearm advisory council, adding members such as Gary Mauser who were openly opposed to stronger gun controls. Prime Minister Harper followed the destruction of the long gun registry by passing another piece of firearm legislation in 2015, the *Common Sense Firearms Licensing Act*, which watered down several parts of the regulatory regime. The act weakened rules regarding the transportation of restricted weapons, providing that a gun owner’s restricted firearms licence was sufficient to allow the routine transportation of such guns. The act eliminated the requirement in place since the late 1970s that retailers record sales of non-restricted firearms. The 2015 act also weakened the transfer rules for firearms, providing that a person could transfer a non-restricted firearm if, at the time of the transfer, the transferee held a firearms license, and the transferor had “no reason to believe that the transferee is not authorized to acquire and possess that kind of firearm” (STATUTES OF CANADA, 2015). That is, the seller just had to believe the person receiving the non-restricted gun had a license – the seller did not have to require proof of a license. In addition, the act allowed the federal cabinet to override the decisions of the RCMP in the classification of firearms. An incident in 2014 motivated that amendment. The RCMP had reclassified CZ-858 rifles and the ‘Swiss Arms’ family of semi-automatic rifles to prohibited on the ground that such firearms could be easily adapted for automatic fire. This angered the owners of these guns, who argued that it was unreasonable for the unelected RCMP to have this discretionary power. Following the passage of the 2015 legislation, the Harper government once again made these firearms non-restricted (QUAN 2015). The Conservatives also

² In 2016, Quebec passed legislation to create its own long-gun registry.

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repeatedly delayed implementation of regulations concerning identifying markings on firearms (BRONSKILL 2015).

The 2015 Liberal Election Platform

The history of gun control, particularly the fights over firearm regulation since the 1970s, is important context to understanding the firearms policy of the Liberal Party under Justin Trudeau, as well as the responses of interest groups and other political parties. The Liberal Party's 2015 election platform included a promise to "get handguns and assault weapons off our streets," while criticizing Prime Minister Harper for steadily weakening gun laws "in ways that make Canadians more vulnerable and communities more dangerous." However, the concrete steps proposed by the Liberals were modest and seemed designed to avoid incurring high costs or providing ammunition to gun lobby groups intent on stirring up opposition among licensed gun owners.

The Liberal Party claimed it would "take pragmatic action" to make it harder for "criminals to get, and use, handguns and assault weapons." The Liberals promised to:

- Repeal the changes made by the Conservatives that allowed restricted weapons "to be freely transported without a permit."
- Put decision-making about the classification of weapons back in the hands of the police.
- Provide 100 million dollars each year to the provinces and territories to support "guns and gangs police task forces to take illegal guns off our streets and reduce gang violence."
- Modify the membership of the Canadian Firearms Advisory Committee to include "knowledgeable law enforcement officers, public health advocates, representatives from women's groups, and members of the legal community".
- Enhance background checks for people seeking to purchase a handgun or other restricted firearm.
- Require purchasers of firearms to show a license when they buy a gun, and require all sellers of firearms to confirm that the license is valid before completing the sale.

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- Require firearm vendors to keep records of all firearms inventory and sales which police could then use to investigate firearms trafficking and other gun crimes.
- “Immediately implement” the imported gun marking regulations delayed by Prime Minister Harper.
- Invest in border infrastructure and technology to help detect and halt illegal guns from the United States entering into Canada.

The platform also made clear that a Liberal government would “not create a new national long-gun registry to replace the one that has been dismantled” (LIBERAL PARTY 2015, 54). Collectively, these proposals were clearly designed to be relatively modest – they would tighten up some of the provisions weakened by the previous government, but would leave most legal gun owners largely unaffected.

The targeting of ‘assault weapons’ was noteworthy and reflected concerns that the growing popularity of semi-automatic rifles posed a threat to public safety. Such guns are distinguishable from manual action firearms that require shooters to use a mechanism to reload guns after each discharge, thus limiting rate of fire, and from fully automatic firearms that continue to fire so long as the trigger is depressed. Most Canadian hunters and target shooters had traditionally used manual action rifles or shotguns. Beginning in the 1970s, however, more semi-automatic rifles, often derived from military designs, entered the Canadian market. For example, some retailers began selling the AR-15 – the civilian version of the standard American military weapon, the Colt M-16, used during much of the Vietnam War. The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police raised concerns about such firearms, and in its 1977 legislation the Liberals had made some modern semi-automatic rifles restricted weapons. The government altered the definition of restricted weapons to include any firearm that was not prohibited that had a barrel of less than 18.5 inches (470 millimeters) and was capable of “discharging centre-fire ammunition in a semi-automatic manner.” The power of the Governor in Council to declare specific firearms as restricted weapons was also expanded with the 1977 legislation, which provided that a restricted firearm could be “a weapon of any kind, not being a prohibited weapon or a shotgun or rifle of a kind that, in the opinion of the Governor in Council, is reasonable for use in Canada for hunting or sporting purposes, that is declared by order of the Governor in Council to be a restricted weapon” (STATUTES OF CANADA, 1977). The federal cabinet subsequently declared the AR-15 a restricted weapon. This angered the owners of these guns, leading the government

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of Prime Minister Joe Clark to reclassify the AR-15 as a non-restricted firearm (BROWN 2019a).

The shooting at the École Polytechnique highlighted to many Canadians for the first time the dangers to public safety posed by modern semi-automatic rifles. As noted earlier, the Progressive Conservatives under Prime Minister Mulroney declared several models of assault-style semi-automatic rifles to be restricted (including the AR-15) or prohibited. The government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien then issued an order in council in 1994 declaring more models of such guns to be prohibited firearms. Minister of Justice Allan Rock asserted that there were “several types of military and paramilitary firearms that are designed to imitate weapons used by the army and the police and are intended not for hunting or farming but for combat” (DEBATES, HOUSE OF COMMONS, 1994, 8484). Minister Rock also promised that the Liberal government would eventually prohibit the Ruger Mini-14 model used in the Montreal Massacre (though this was not done by the government of Prime Minister Chrétien).

The legislative framework used to regulate semi-automatic rifles proved problematic over time. Manufacturers and retailers aggressively marketed these as ‘modern sporting rifles’. The firearms industry introduced new models of semi-automatic rifles, and such guns grew in popularity. If the RCMP determined these guns were not variants of restricted or prohibited firearms (and the weapons had lengths that exceeded statutory minimums) then they were often classified as non-restricted firearms. The classification system for firearms thus became irrational. Semi-automatic rifles were classified as unrestricted, restricted or prohibited, even though many of them had very similar characteristics and capabilities. Gun control advocates raised alarms about this trend and urged the federal government to issue new orders in council to update the lists of restricted and prohibited firearms to account for the introduction of new models of semi-automatic rifles. The 2015 Liberal Party platform, however, did not propose that the government would take this step (BROWN 2019a, 2019b; SOMERSET 2016a).

Despite the modesty of its election platform concerning guns, the Liberal government was slow to introduce firearm legislation after its victory in the October 2015 election, though it did take some smaller steps early in its mandate. For example, the Liberals fulfilled an election promise by appointing new members to the Canadian firearms advisory council, including representatives of women’s groups. This was an easy step, though it annoyed some existing members of the committee, who seemed to assume that it should consist almost exclusively of representatives of the gun community on the ground that only they understood the technical aspects of firearms. One member of the committee, Tony Bernardo, the executive director of the Canadian Shooting Sports Association,

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asked: “Would you put non-medical experts on a medical committee? Would you take people who didn’t know anything about airplanes and put them on an aeronautical committee? It does seem a little bizarre” (MACLEOD 2015). In 2017, Ottawa also announced over 327 million dollars in funding over five years to prevent gun violence and promised 100 million dollars per year thereafter, thus largely fulfilling another provision of the 2015 platform (COLLENETTE 2018). On the other hand, the Liberals soon after taking power delayed implementing the firearm marking regulations despite promising to do so “immediately” in their platform, and, in fact, later delayed it a second time, meaning it was still not in force before the 2019 election (MACPHERSON 2018a).

The Liberal government also seemed reluctant to introduce new gun control legislation, despite commanding a majority in the House of Commons. This created the perception that gun control was an issue that the Liberals liked to invoke during election campaigns to attract urban, progressive voters, but were reluctant to implement once they secured government. Press reports suggested that some Liberal caucus members from rural ridings had concerns that legislation would irk licensed firearm owners (RANA 2017). Gun control advocates responded by pressing the Liberals to follow through on their election commitments. In December 2016, gun control advocate (and Montreal Massacre survivor) Heidi Rathjen expressed frustration at the government’s delay. She told the *Montreal Gazette* that gun control was “a life and death issue, and it should be a priority, but we are still waiting” (MAGDER 2016). Almost a year later, in October 2017, Ottawa said it would introduce new legislation by the end of the year (MACPHERSON 2017). It failed to meet this deadline, however. Gun control advocates kept up the pressure on the Liberal government. They pointed to a rapid increase in the number of restricted firearms (mostly handguns and semi-automatic rifles) in circulation in Canada. Between 2014 and 2018, the number of registered restricted firearms rose by 35 per cent (RCMP 2018). Gun control advocates also pointed to public polling indicating substantial support for strengthening gun laws. Nathalie Provost, another survivor of the Montreal Massacre, called for government action to limit access to semi-automatic rifles often employed in mass shootings. “We are worried,” she said in early March 2018: “We can’t say the Trudeau government has demonstrated a very progressive bent to date” (LEBLANC 2018).

Domestic and international events also placed pressure on the federal government to act. Canadians had long been exposed through the media to mass shootings in the United States, but a series of especially horrific killings received considerable attention in the Canadian press. These included the murder of 15 people in San Bernardino, California in 2015, 49 people at an Orlando nightclub

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in 2016, 58 people attending a concert in Las Vegas in 2017, 25 people at Baptist church in Texas in 2017, and 17 teenagers and teachers in Parkland, Florida in 2018. Even though mass shooting victims represent only a tiny fraction of the number of people who die from firearms, Canadian commentators lamented that these incidents failed to motivate stronger gun controls in the United States (WARNICA 2017).

Shootings in Canada also amped up demands for gun control. In January 2017, a twenty-five-year-old gunman killed six people at a Quebec City mosque. The shooter, armed with a semi-automatic rifle and handgun, had expressed far-right political positions on social media. In August 2018, a gunman in Fredericton, New Brunswick killed four people, including two police officers. The Fredericton shooting shook New Brunswick, particularly since the province had also experienced the murder of three Mounties in Moncton in 2014 by a man armed with a semi-automatic rifle. Such mass shootings tend to increase support for gun control, at least among people already predisposed to support stronger gun laws (NEWMAN and HARTMAN 2019; BARNEY and SCHAFFNER 2019; FLEMING 2012).

Bill C-71

In March 2018, the Trudeau government finally acted. In early March, the federal government convened the Summit on Gun and Gang Violence, a one-day, tightly controlled event that had speakers address topics such as how gangs operate and use technology, firearm smuggling and trafficking, and alternative approaches to addressing gun and gang violence. The event's focus on criminal gangs and firearms seemed designed to highlight that the Liberals' new legislation would target criminals, not licensed firearm owners. The federal government finally unveiled its gun control legislation, Bill C-71, in late March 2018 – almost two and half years into its mandate. Ralph Goodale, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, tried hard to allay fears that Bill C-71 would deleteriously affect legal gun owners, instead portraying the suite of proposed reforms as a cleaning up of the regulatory regime. Goodale told the Commons that the bill was “important legislation that prioritizes public safety and effective police work, while treating law-abiding firearms owners and businesses fairly and reasonably.” He noted that Liberals were “upholding the commitments that we made to Canadians during the last election,” including “our commitment not to reinstate a federal long gun registry.” Nevertheless, he argued that a 30 per cent increase in criminal activities involving guns since 2013 required action. “Hard evidence,” he declared, “shows a gun violence issue that is serious, appears to be worsening, and is not confined to big cities or to particular weapons” (HOUSE OF COMMONS, 2018, 18075).

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Goodale asserted that Bill C-71 would improve public safety in five ways. First, it would enhance background checks for those seeking to acquire firearms by removing the five-year time limit on the review of the applicant's history of violence. Second, the Liberals proposed enhancing the usefulness of the existing licensing system by again requiring that vendors confirm that persons wanting to acquire a non-restricted firearm were authorized to do so. Third, the bill would require retailers to maintain adequate business records of their inventories and sales. However, to avoid suggestions that the federal government was creating a registry, Goodale said the records would be "private and not accessible to governments," though police would "be able to gain access given reasonable grounds and with judicial authorization as appropriate" (HOUSE OF COMMONS, 2018, 18076). These records would help police trace guns discovered at a crime scene, detect 'straw purchasing' schemes (in which licensed gun owners bought firearms and transferred them illegally to others), and identify trafficking networks. Fourth, the Liberals sought to prevent politicians from toying with the classification of firearms by repealing the power the Conservatives gave cabinet to lower the classification assigned to a model of firearm by statute. Finally, Bill C-71 would strengthen the transportation authorization system for restricted weapons, with the key exception of transportation between a residence and an approved shooting range. Gun control advocates were underwhelmed by the contents of Bill C-71, though, ultimately, supported the bill on the ground that it was better than nothing (SOMERSET 2018; BRONSKILL 2018).

The Conservative Party, however, fiercely resisted Bill C-71, despite its modest changes to Canadian gun laws. This stridency reflected the substantial role of the 'gun vote' in Conservative Party politics. In the Conservative Party leadership race that ended in 2017, several candidates, including Andrew Scheer, actively sought out the support of organizations representing gun-owning party members (HUTCHINS 2017; SOMERSET 2017). In expressing strong opposition to Bill C-71, a number of Conservative MPs tried to remind voters of the cost overruns that bedevilled the long-gun registry, and warned that the Liberal Party had a secret agenda to recreate the registry. For instance, Conservative MP Pierre Paul-Hus charged that Bill C-71 would place the onus "on firearms dealers and retailers to keep a registry, and they will also be tasked with maintaining the records afterwards. This is an insidious way of bringing back the registry" (HOUSE OF COMMONS 2018, 18080).

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Caption: Political cartoonist Michael De Adder captured the sense that efforts by Prime Minister Trudeau to strengthen Canada's gun laws might stir up opposition amongst many firearm owners. Source: *The Hill Times*, 29 August 2018. Permission to reproduce granted by artist.

Gun lobby groups responded to Bill C-71 with vitriol, despite the bill's largely innocuous provisions. Unlike in the United States, where a single organization, the National Rifle Association, is the dominant voice of gun owners, Canada has several small to moderately sized groups that claim to speak for the firearms community of approximately 2.2 million licensed gun owners. The National Firearms Association (NFA) originated in the late 1970s. In 2020, it claimed to have 70,000 members. Its leadership generally expressed libertarian values, and argued that all gun control laws passed since the late 1970s had failed to protect Canadians from violence. The leadership of the NFA expressed strong opposition to requiring firearm owners to have a license and wanted the repeal of limitations on the size of rifle magazines. An NFA splinter group, the Canadian Coalition for Firearm Rights (CCFR), tried to situate itself as the rational, public relations experts within the gun lobby, though its rhetoric became more aggressive over time. The CCFR advocated for policies such as allowing for the concealed carriage of firearms, the elimination of limits on the size of magazines,

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and the adoption of a new classification system which would have made many semi-automatic rifles more available. The CCFR claimed to have just over 28,000 members in 2020. The Canadian Shooting Sports Association (CSSA) focused on representing target shooters. Another organization spoke for firearms and ammunition manufacturers and retailers: the Canadian Sporting Arms and Ammunition Association. (SOMERSET 2016b) Since Canada had approximately 2.2 million licensed firearm owners in 2018, only a small percentage of the gun community belonged to these organizations. Nevertheless, the leaders of gun lobby groups tended to have an oversized voice in traditional media and on social media, and expressed opposition to gun control even more stridently than most firearm owners. The splintered nature of the gun lobby in Canada also contributed to a competition to offer the most forceful complaints about Bill C-71. All the major gun organizations alleged that the bill would not prevent crime and would, instead, harass 'Law-Abiding Gun Owners' ('LAGOs'), and damage the lucrative firearms industry. They also claimed that the bill's reinstatement of a duty on gun retailers to record firearm sales would create a 'back-door' registry (LITTLE 2018; MACPHERSON 2018b).

The aggressive response by opponents of Bill C-71 suggested the influence in Canada of a more radical gun culture prevalent in the United States, sometimes referred to as 'Gun Culture 2.0'. Gun Culture 1.0 had focused on the use of guns for hunting and recreational shooting. 'Gun Culture 2.0' emerged in the United States in the last decades of the twentieth century, and revolved around the idea of using firearms for defensive purposes (YAMANE, YAMANE, and IVORY 2020; YAMANE, IVORY, and YAMANE 2019; CARLSON 2015). Some gun owners argued that incidents in which rural Canadians shot at (and sometimes injured or killed) alleged thieves, then faced prosecution, showed that Canadian law needed to provide property owners with a broader ability to use force to defend themselves and their property, particularly if police were slow to respond in rural communities (GUNTER 2018). The desire to use guns to defend property like ATVs and trucks was reflected in the support some firearm owners expressed for Gerald Stanley, who was acquitted in 2018 of the murder of Colten Boushie, an Indigenous trespasser on Stanley's property (ROBERT 2018).

Bill C-71 moved very slowly through Parliament, though this was not entirely due to Liberal foot dragging. The Conservative Party used procedural tools to delay its passage, particularly in the Senate, where Prime Minister Trudeau's decision to remove Liberal senators from his caucus and to appoint 'independent' members to the upper chamber meant that the government could not ensure smooth, quick passage of the legislation. For example, at the Senate's National Security and Defence Committee, Conservative Senator Don Plette

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moved a slew of amendments with the goal of gutting Bill C-71. The full Senate subsequently removed the committee's changes, though the delaying tactics cast doubt on whether the bill would become law before the parliamentary session concluded (EVELYN 2019). However, Bill C-71 received royal assent on the final day of Parliament before its adjournment in June 2019.

New Calls for Strengthening Gun Control Measures

Even before Bill C-71 had passed through Parliament, another prominent shooting intervened in the gun control debate, creating pressure on the government to introduce even stronger measures. In July 2018, a shooting on the bustling Toronto Danforth by a man armed with a stolen handgun left two dead and thirteen wounded. The tragedy contributed to the creation of two new gun control advocacy organizations that received extensive press coverage. One group consisted of families affected by the Danforth shooting: Danforth Families for Safe Communities. This group called for the banning of handguns. Another organization that formed after the Danforth violence was Doctors for Protection from Guns. This group included medical professionals such as Dr. Najma Ahmed, who had treated Danforth victims, as well as physicians such as Dr. Alan Drummond, who had worked on improving gun safety for decades. These doctors demanded that firearm policy be treated like a public health issue. Several prominent medical organizations, such as the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians, Ontario Medical Association, Trauma Association of Canada, and Canadian Nurses Association, eventually endorsed the position statement of Doctors for Protection from Guns³ (STANBROOKE 2019; LORIGGIO 2019; BROWN 2019c). Several big city mayors and city councillors spoke in favour of a national handgun ban after the Danforth shooting, including Toronto mayor John Tory, Montreal mayor Valérie Plante, and Winnipeg mayor Brian Bowman. Mayor Tory mused: "Why does anyone in this city need to have a gun at all?" The editorial boards of several leading newspapers also called for gun control measures (TORONTO STAR 2018; LAFRAMBOISE 2018).

In October 2018, Prime Minister Trudeau responded to calls for even stronger gun control measures by tasking Bill Blair, the Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction, with conducting a national consultation to consider a prohibition on civilian ownership of handguns and assault weapons. Firearm groups objected to the phrase 'assault weapon' in the original terms of reference for the consultation. They charged that assault weapons referred only to

³ The Canadian Coalition for Firearm Rights responded to the work of the Doctors for Protection from Guns by asking its members to flood the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons with complaints about their public health advocacy work, all of which were eventually dismissed as baseless.

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firearms that had a 'select-fire' capability – that is, that could be fired in either semi-automatic or automatic modes. Since automatic rifles had been banned in the late 1970s, gun organizations said Ottawa's use of 'assault weapon' (or 'assault rifle') was motivated by a desire to stir public fear of these guns⁴ (BROWN 2020a). The federal government agreed to abandon the phrase 'assault weapon' and instead adopted 'assault-style rifle' (which gun groups also called a made-up, meaningless term).

The consultation process included roundtables and bilateral meetings with various organizations representing gun owners, victims of violence, provincial and municipal governments, police, First Nations, and medical professionals. The Trudeau government also invited a select number of people or groups to provide written feedback. Many of these people or groups tended to be either strongly in favour of, or opposed to, gun control. In addition, Ottawa launched an online consultation process to allow anyone to complete a survey and offer comments on the idea of banning handguns and assault-style rifles.

The design of the consultation process produced results suggesting that banning handguns and assault-style rifles was a polarizing idea. The report found that "participants were strongly polarized on the issue of banning handguns and assault-style firearms" (HILL+KNOWLTON 2019, 1). The on-line questionnaire results mostly reflected the views of gun owners, who filled out the questionnaire in large numbers. The consultation received almost 135,000 completed questionnaires. However, one firearms owner admitted that he submitted up to 35,000 responses using a computer program (WHITE and CARDOSO 2019). Despite this problem, the consultation released a statistical breakdown based on the questionnaire that created the erroneous impression that the results came from a scientifically sampled survey of Canadians. Only 18 percent of respondents agreed with the proposition that more should be done to limit access to handguns, and just 21 percent agreed that more should be done to limit access to assault weapons (HILL+KNOWLTON 2019, 18-19). It is unclear whether the poor methodology employed was intentional or accidental. What is clear is that the results provided cover for the Liberals to say that gun bans were a divisive idea, a conclusion which allowed the government to delay taking action despite the fact that scientific public polling continued to show high levels of support for banning handguns, and, especially, assault rifles. For example, in 2018 Environics

⁴ This criticism was a bit farcical since gun retailers had often advertised semi-automatic rifles as 'assault rifles' until the Montreal Massacre, after which concerns that such guns might be prohibited led the gun community to abandon this term and instead insist on calling firearms like the AR-15 'modern sporting rifles'.

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Research Group found that 81 per cent of Canadians supported the statement that “Private ownership of semi-automatic assault weapons for recreational purposes should not be legal in Canada” (NAUMETZ, 2018). Angus Reid found similar results in May 2019: 77 per cent of Canadians felt that more should be done to limit access to assault weapons. Angus Reid also reported that 55 per cent of current or former gun owners agreed that assault weapons should be banned, which highlighted a disparity between the strong rhetoric of gun lobby groups and the views of many ordinary gun owners⁵ (ANGUS REID 2019).

The Liberals, however, moved slowly, and avoided taking steps beyond those included in Bill C-71. Passing even the mild Bill C-71 had proven difficult, and taking bolder action risked engaging more of Canada’s firearms community in opposition to the government. This was a concern given that the Liberal Party hoped to retain several Parliamentary seats located in rural areas or in provinces generally home to modest levels of Liberal support. However, another mass shooting intervened in the gun control debate, though this occurred not in Canada or the United States but on the other side of the globe. The death of 51 people at two Christchurch, New Zealand mosques in March 2019 added fuel to the debate about whether Canada should ban assault-style rifles. The shooter in Christchurch was driven by a hatred of Muslims, and broadcast his attack live on Facebook. He had emblazoned his guns with right-wing slogans and the names of people he wished to emulate, including the shooter at the Quebec City mosque attack of 2017. The progressive New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, received applause from gun control advocates around the world for deciding within days to ban almost all semi-automatic rifles. In taking this step, New Zealand largely adopted the same policy regarding semi-automatic rifles implemented in Great Britain and Australia after mass shootings in the 1990s. For gun control proponents who had lobbied for decades for Canada to ban assault rifles, Prime Minister Ardern’s quick action led them to ask why Prime Minister Trudeau seemed unwilling to act decisively. École Polytechnique survivors Provost and Rathjen wrote an op-ed with the president of the Quebec Islamic Cultural Centre, Boufeldja Benabdallah, calling for Canada to follow the lead of New Zealand: “Trudeau should respect our common values of peace and good government and follow the example of Prime Minister Ardern by swiftly announcing a ban on handguns, assault weapons and magazines that exceed five bullets” (PROVOST,

⁵ In 2020, Angus Reid reported that 78 percent Canadians supported a complete ban on civilian possession of assault weapons. Forty-five per cent of current gun owners and 70 per of former gun owners agreed with such a ban. Angus Reid Institute, “Four-in-five Canadians support complete ban on civilian possession of assault style weapons,” 1 May 2020, <http://angusreid.org/assault-weapons-ban/>

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BENABDALLAH, and RATHJEN 2019). They urged Ottawa to use an order-in-council to prohibit many models of semi-automatic rifles.

The Trudeau government, however, chose not to use an order-in-council to prohibit more firearms (leading Provost to quit the federal firearms advisory committee) and instead made gun control a key plank of the Liberal Party's 2019 election platform (BRONSKILL 2019). The Liberals promised to "ban assault rifles and crack down on gun crime." The Liberals targeted "military-style assault rifles," saying these guns were "designed to inflict mass casualties and have no place in Canada." The party said it rejected the practice in the United States of responding to mass shootings with just 'thoughts and prayers'. As it did in 2015, the Liberal platform juxtaposed the party's position with that of the Conservative Party, and promised that it would "move forward with a ban on all military-style assault rifles, including the AR-15," and take other steps to keep people safe from gun violence, including: more resources for law enforcement; working with provinces and territories to give municipalities the ability to further restrict access to handguns or even to ban them; provide an additional 50 million dollars each year fight gang-related violence; ensure the Canada Border Services Agency and RCMP had the resources needed to detect and stop the flow of weapons at Canada's borders; and strengthen safe-storage laws.

These promises raised new questions. What kinds of firearms would be considered 'military-style assault rifles', and could the federal government empower municipalities to ban handguns, particularly if provincial governments opposed this idea? Critics also questioned the wisdom of allowing the creation of a patchwork of municipal rules regarding handgun ownership. Gun control advocates and critics pointed to the fact that municipal gun controls in the United States had often failed to reduce firearm violence, since guns easily flowed from areas with weaker firearm laws into cities. The Liberal proposal to empower municipalities seemed driven by a desire to off-load responsibility for the issue onto local governments, despite the fact that the federal government had taken the lead in regulating handguns since the late nineteenth century. Even supporters of the Liberal gun control platform said many of the proposals were vague or half measures, or both. And, the desire to avoid angering the gun community still poked through the 2019 Liberal platform. The Liberals promised, for example, to introduce a buyback program for all legally owned assault rifles caught up in its proposed prohibition. The Liberals also committed to "protecting the rights of hunters and farmers, by not bringing back the long-gun registry" (LIBERAL PARTY 2019, 38).

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Postscript and Conclusion

In the federal election held on 21 October 2019, the Liberals were reduced to a minority government. Gun control advocates nevertheless breathed a sigh of relief since the Conservative Party had promised to repeal Bill C-71, a threat made easier by the fact that the Liberals had failed to make operative many of the provisions of the legislation before the election. Key amendments in Bill C-71 required a cabinet order to take effect, but the Liberals had not issued the necessary orders. Delayed provisions included the expanded background checks for licence eligibility, and the requirement that sellers validate that the purchaser had a valid firearms license. (NAUMETZ 2020b)

Gun control advocates pressed the Liberals to act decisively, and on the thirtieth anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, the Liberal government indicated that it would act. Prime Minister Trudeau said that his government would “strengthen gun laws and ban the type of weapons used at Ecole Polytechnique” (CANADIAN PRESS 2019). However, the new year brought with it a series of events that delayed action on gun control. The government dealt with the shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner carrying dozens of Canadians in January 2020, then pipeline and railway protests across Canada sparked by the construction of the Coastal GasLink Pipeline through Wet’suwet’en First Nation territory, and then the economic and health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite this turmoil, the Trudeau government finally acted on its promise to ban assault rifles after the murder of twenty-two people in Nova Scotia by a man armed with semi-automatic rifles and handguns on 18-19 April 2020. On 1 May, Prime Minister Trudeau announced an immediate ban on some 1,500 models of semi-automatic rifles and a handful of other weapons. Gun owners would be able to hand in these weapons to the government in exchange for financial compensation in the next two years, or, under a so-called ‘grandfather provision’, could retain the guns after the two years but with limited ability to use them. This announcement won the Trudeau government headlines around the world, with many news outlets comparing Trudeau’s announcement to the decisive action taken by Prime Minister Ardern after the Christchurch massacre. Gun control advocates in Canada, however, expressed frustration that existing owners would have the option of retaining their prohibited firearms under the ‘grandfathering’ provision – an option not included in the Liberals’ 2019 platform. A close examination of the government’s announcement also revealed that the ban was less bold and comprehensive than Ardern’s action. Some semi-automatic rifles were moved from either the non-restricted or restricted classifications to prohibited, but other very similar guns remained categorized as non-restricted or restricted firearms (BROWN 2020b). The government promised

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to pass more comprehensive gun legislation after the Covid-19 crisis that would fulfill some of its other 2019 campaign promises regarding firearms, including toughening safe storage rules, and allowing municipalities to ban handguns (KESTLER-D'AMOURS 2020). Several firearm owners and gun lobby groups responded by launching legal challenges to the May 1 order in council⁶ (NAUMETZ 2020a).

The incomplete assault rifle ban is not surprising given the Liberal Party's historical approach to gun control. Public polling since the 1970s suggested substantial levels of support for stronger gun laws in Canada, and Liberals have periodically introduced measures as a means of appealing to urban and progressive voters. However, the lesson Liberals took from the battles over firearm regulation since the 1970s was that gun control could be undermined if reframed by opponents as a fiscal issue and / or if it affected too many gun owners. Keeping costs down and adopting policies that only impacted a minority of the firearms community were thus key factors in shaping the Liberal Party's actions, even after the Nova Scotia mass shooting. This tentative, measured approach was fully on display throughout the first mandate of Prime Minister Trudeau. The party wanted to show it had fulfilled its modest 2015 campaign promises, while hassling gun owners as little as possible. The government provided money to help fight gang violence, and added new members to the firearms advisory committee, then passed legislation that slightly tightened rules regarding the transportation of some firearms, background checks, and the recording of gun sales. However, the government failed to implement many of the provisions of Bill C-71 before the 2019 election, and refused to make operational the gun marking regulations, perhaps because doing so would contribute to fears that the Liberal Party desired to recreate the gun registry.

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⁶ These legal challenges are ongoing at the time of the preparation of this article.

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