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Reality Check: Liberal handgun ban

Updated Thu. Dec. 8 2005 4:16 PM ET

Phil Hahn, CTV.ca News

The Liberals have promised to outlaw handguns across the country, with Paul Martin branding the weapons as nothing but instruments of threat, intimidation and death.

Martin's pledge for a "Canada Handgun Ban" is part of a sweeping Liberal anti-crime platform, announced Thursday from a section of Toronto that has seen dozens of people cut down from gunfire this year.

The Liberals say the homicide rate jumped 12 per cent in 2004. And in the past four years, handguns have accounted for roughly two-thirds of gun-related murders -- up from approximately one-half in the nineties and one-third before 1990.

"This is not the Canada we imagine," Martin said from the Jane and Finch area of Toronto. "It isn't the Canada we want for our families."

But while few have argued with the need to fight gun violence, many are expressing criticism toward the Liberal government's proposal to outright ban handheld firearms. They say the Liberals have trained their sights on the wrong target.

WHERE THE PARTIES STAND

Liberals

The Liberals say they will ban handguns by:

- making amendments to the criminal code, inviting participation of provinces and territories to make the ban national;
- putting forth a handgun amnesty and buy-back program, based on an Australian model, to collect existing handguns; and
- starting a national "Gunstoppers Program" – which would reward those who provide information leading to the removal of an illegal gun from the street.

These initiatives would come at a cost of \$30 million a year over five years.

The Liberals are also proposing harsher sentences for gun-related crimes, including changing the Criminal Code to double the mandatory minimum sentences for such crimes.

The Liberal plan would also waive the re-licensing fee for the much-criticized federal registry of long firearms, encourage community-based gun prevention with help from a \$50-million Gun Violence and Gang Prevention Fund, and put 75 new Canada Border Services guards at the border to stop illegal importation of handguns from the U.S.

"Taken together, these are reforms designed to reduce crime, to combat gun violence in our cities and better protect Canadians," said Martin.

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Conservatives: *Liberals "must take responsibility for the growth in gun crime" -- Tory Leader Stephen Harper*

Harper said he supports harsher penalties for those who use illegal guns, but he is not advocating an outright ban on handguns across the country. He said a Conservative government would strengthen gun control in Canada by:

- cracking down on illegal gun use;
- stopping the flow of illegal guns at the border; and
- bringing in mandatory minimum prison sentences.

"The Liberals have done none of these things," said Harper in a statement released Thursday. "They must take responsibility for the growth in gun crime on their watch. Gun crime has spun out of control because they have failed to do anything to reduce gun crime."

New Democrats: *It's "smoke and mirrors" -- NDP justice critic Joe Comartin*

New Democrat Leader Jack Layton criticized the Liberals Thursday for failing to tackle the gun problem during their 12 years in power.

"I have said for many, many years -- handguns have no place in cities," he said.

"The problem of guns coming across the border, illegal guns, was flagged. And the fact is, they're still flooding into the country. There's no action that's been taken by the Liberals to stop it."

Windsor New Democrat MP Joe Comartin, the NDP's justice critic, said the Liberal pledge amounts to nothing but "smoke and mirrors."

"Basically, all handguns in Canada are illegal now. The only people who get permits are those who are using them for recreational purposes or those who need it for their own personal safety, and there's not a lot of those that are granted," said Comartin.

Given the number of stolen guns used in crime, Comartin said there had been some discussion earlier this year at the all-party Commons justice committee about tightening regulations governing safe storage and use of handguns. But that is something that falls under provincial jurisdiction.

Comartin said the one thing the federal government could do would be to stop the flow of illegal firearms into Canada from the United States.

Despite his skepticism, Layton said he will study the Liberal proposal in detail. "If we're finally starting to see some action on it, we'll take a look at what's proposed," he said.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

Toronto Police Service

"It is entirely appropriate that law and order has become a priority during this election and that all parties are discussing these issues," the Toronto police said in a statement. We hope that whoever forms the next government will continue to consider these issues a priority and we will work with them then to develop solutions.

"Until then, it is inappropriate to comment on campaign matters."


Mark Dezilva, Community Coordinator, jane-finch.com -- *"Great -- make another law that law-abiding citizens have to suffer with."*


Dezilva, coordinator for a website promoting diversity and unity in Toronto's Jane Finch corridor, said the Liberals' plan needs a different focus -- crime prevention instead of the creation of stiffer laws. He said a politician coming to his neighbourhood to make a policy announcement at this time is simply "in it for the votes."


"People like us in the neighbourhood don't even vote," added Dezilva.


Wendy Cukier, co-founder of the Coalition for Gun Control --

promises 3:46


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"stronger gun laws in Canada have made a big difference."

Cukier said despite the recent surge in gun violence, laws limiting the availability of handguns and the use of rifles and shotguns have been effective.

"Five hundred fewer people are killed with guns today than 16 years ago," Cukier told CTV. "Gun murders are the lowest in 30 years. ... Murders of women with guns are down 66 per cent. So it's really misleading to suggest we're not getting anything for the investment in gun control."

Audette Sheppard, United Mothers Opposing Violence Everywhere (UMOVE) -- *"You never hear about a drive-by knifing"*

Sheppard, who lost her son in a fatal shooting in 2001, said she fully supports the Liberal plan to ban handguns -- but there needs to be even more stringent measures to put a stop to the killing.

She says gun traffickers need to be especially targeted in order to stem the rising tide of gun-related crimes. "The people who supply them -- their sentences should be doubled," Sheppard told CTV.

As for the lobbyists' claim that it's people, not guns, who kill other people, Sheppard had this message: "That's true, but the gun seems to be their weapon of choice. You never hear about a drive-by knifing or a drive-by clubbing."

Bill Trudell, chairman, Canadian Council of Criminal Defence Lawyers -- *"We know it's not going to work"*

Some legal experts believe that tougher sentences will do little to end the violence. In fact, they say such laws will merely strain an already over-taxed court system and put more minority youth behind bars. "There's this real concern out there that we're moving towards this pander to law-and-order types' (trend)," Trudell told the Canadian Press.

"We know it's not going to work."

Wayne Fields, president, Law-Abiding Registered Firearms Association -- *"They're not going to get rid of guns, it's impossible"*

Fields said the Liberal plan will "accomplish nothing."

"There's already all types of legislation and illegal use of handguns is out of control," Fields told the Canadian Press. "They have to concentrate on the illegal drugs and the criminals that are using the firearms -- get them off the street. They're not going to get rid of guns, it's impossible."

Mike Reader, executive director, Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters -- *"criminals who use handguns to commit crimes don't register their guns"*

The OFAH said in a release that the Liberal proposal won't affect criminals, but law-abiding firearms owners.

"The only ones who are impacted by this announcement are the target shooters and collectors who already register their firearms and own them legally," said Mike Reader, O.F.A.H. Executive Director.

"While we agree and support the other aspects of the Liberal's announcement, including tougher penalties, increased law enforcement and border security and applaud the waiving of re-licensing fees for owners of long guns, giving provinces and municipalities the right to ban handguns will not remove illegal handguns from the streets of our communities or stop criminals from using them to kill people."

Jerrold Lundgard, president, Responsible Firearms Owners of Alberta -- *"This is political grandstanding at it's worst"*

Lundgard wrote a letter to Martin expressing his opposition to further restrictions for Canadians who legally own handguns.

"Just remember that a handgun ban will only take handguns out of the possession of law abiding citizens and no one else. A handgun ban will do

nothing to take the individuals that believe it is acceptable to kill other humans off the streets of our cities," wrote Lundgard.

"Remember too that this proves to all firearms owners that registration leads to confiscation. Please remember too that confiscation without compensation is just plain theft."

What others have to say:

- "Guns turn punks into killers," said Toronto Mayor David Miller. "We must choke off the supply of guns here in Canada."
- "The right to bear handguns is not a Canadian value," said Ontario Attorney General Michael Bryant.

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