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Harper quashes any notion Ottawa will eliminate 'prohibited' firearms category

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OTTAWA—A “very concerned” Prime Minister Stephen Harper slammed a door on recommendations from the hand-picked Canadian firearms advisory committee that urged gun laws be relaxed, suggesting he will shake up the committee’s membership.

On the 23rd anniversary of the École Polytechnique massacre, after moving tributes by opposition leaders to the 14 women killed by a troubled Montreal gunman, Harper faced a barrage of questions on gun control prompted by the [Star’s story Thursday on the committee’s call to further ease the gun laws](#).

Harper quashed any suggestion that Ottawa would eliminate the “prohibited” category of firearms in section 12 of the Firearms Act — one of the recommendations reported by the Star. That category includes fully automatic weapons, assault rifles and many handguns. The committee urged that for the purpose of registration they be “restricted” instead of “prohibited.”



Women gather Thursday to protest against violence towards women in front of the Montreal courthouse on the 23rd anniversary of the École Polytechnique massacre, when a troubled gunman killed 14 women.

PAUL CHIASSON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

On Thursday, Harper said: “Prohibited weapons exist as a category under the law for essential reasons of public security. The government has absolutely no intention of weakening that category of protection.”

It was a direct repudiation of the [advisory committee](#), which had called the “prohibited” category a “repressive and costly classification” to administer. It claimed the weapons would still be subject to adequate safety controls.

The NDP also pressed Harper about concerns by police over the recommendation to extend licences for gun owner from five to 10 years — a proposal contained as recently as 2011 in bill C-301, a private member’s bill by Conservative MP Garry Breitkreuz that was later withdrawn.

“This could reduce mental health checks for those renewing gun licences,” said NDP justice critic Françoise Boivin.

Harper, Public Safety Minister Vic Toews and other MPs refused to respond directly to questions, pointing only to the Conservative record on stiffer penalties for gun crime and greater support for victims.

Finally, Liberal Leader Bob Rae suggested that to reach “a more balanced approach” Harper should consider “adding the chiefs of police to the group of people who will be on the committee, as well as those who are engaged in combating domestic violence and those who are dealing with suicide prevention.”

Harper, who rarely concedes anything to opposition critics, declared: “I just want to emphasize that the positions in this report do not reflect the positions of the government.”

“I will take the advice of the leader of the Liberal Party under consideration. Obviously (I’m) very concerned with some of the recommendations made in that report, and I think that the committee does need some re-examination in that light.”

The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, which has been asking since 2011 to have a representative on the firearms advisory committee, said in a statement: “There is a need for a constructive dialogue on this issue, in which the public should engage.”

“Our priority, as always, is the public safety of Canadians. In that light, we have obvious concerns which we look forward to discussing directly with decision-makers in government.”

Rae later suggested Harper "was probably taken aback by, frankly, the (committee's) lack of political sensitivity and common sense."

Gun control advocates cheered what appeared to be a small opening.

"I am very relieved with that announcement from Mr. Harper," said Nathalie Provost, a survivor of the Polytechnique massacre. "At least we have that."

Shaun O'Brien, a lawyer with the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, which provides counselling and legal services for women who are victims of violence, urged the government to squarely reject the licensing extension. "That's been frightening for us."

She welcomed Harper's words, and called for a "more equal and fair membership on the committee."

Advisory committee co-chair Steve Torino and member Tony Bernardo did not return calls from the Star seeking comment. However, Bernardo told the CBC the committee was not seeking to circumvent public safety laws for gun owners; it was just trying to devise a better system.

He did take aim at the committee's critics: "We got into this dog's breakfast of a gun control system because of inclusion of people who didn't know anything about firearms making up laws about them."

"I feel very much for Miss Provost but unfortunately being shot does not make you an expert in firearms or firearms control any more than being run over by a car makes you an automotive engineer."