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The Right Honourable Stephen Harper  
Prime Minister of Canada  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0A6

October 10, 2006

Dear Sir:

I would like to thank you for taking steps to dismantle the long-gun registry. I understand that this is a difficult task for a minority government, and I appreciate your willingness to attempt the challenge.

However, I am hearing very disturbing rumours that your office is looking at the possibility of banning some or all non-restricted semi-automatic long guns.

For example, Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay, was quoted as saying.

**“I would suggest (there are things we can do) as well around the issue of firearms themselves. Certain types of weapons. Automatic and semi-automatic weapons. The time has come to question whether weapons that can be fired in rapid succession should be available to the public, and whether their use should be further limited”.**

(Ottawa Citizen, September 16, 2006, Page A6).

I realize you and your government are under pressure from the media, and possibly from fellow Conservatives, to be seen to do something because of the shootings at Dawson College. I urge you to stick to your principles, and to not initiate an ineffective program merely for the illusion of action.

As you yourself have said earlier, it is important to get the facts before acting. According to CBC Radio's The House, September 2006, you were quoted as saying:

**“But let's find out the facts and make sure that our actions fit the facts. A decade ago people ran out and created a gun registry that, in fact, didn't do anything to prevent these kinds of tragedies and did so at an enormous cost. We want to make sure that what we do is actually effective.”**

In the light of your search for facts, I am writing to you to argue that banning semi-

automatic firearms would not be effective at reducing criminal violence.

A wide variety of jurisdictions have attempted partial or complete firearm bans over the past 40 years under similar political pressure. These firearm bans – whether of semi-automatic firearms or handguns or even all firearms – did not succeed in reducing firearm homicide (viz., Hahn, et al., 2003; Mauser, 2003; Wellford, et al., 2004)<sup>1</sup>. Anyone reading these studies cannot avoid the impression that their authors only reached their conclusions with considerable reluctance and palpable disappointment.

Two examples are particularly relevant to the Canadian situation: Australia and the United Kingdom. Australia banned semi-automatic rifles and shotguns (including pump-action rifles) in 1996 and the United Kingdom banned handguns in 1997.

The results are clear: there is no convincing evidence that these firearm bans were effective in reducing firearms-related criminal violence. In Australia, the ban of semi-automatic firearms has had no demonstrable effect on either firearm-homicide or total homicide. As the two Australian charts show, Figure 1 and Figure 4 (from Baker and McPhedran), firearm homicide had been falling before the ban on semi-automatic firearms, and it continued to fall afterwards. Statistical analysis shows that the trend continued at the same rate both before and after the ban (Baker and McPhedran, forthcoming). Therefore, while it is true that firearm homicide declined after semi-automatic firearms were banned, the ban could not logically be causally responsible.

This conclusion is supported by the most reputable Australian researchers. Even the prestigious Australian Institute of Criminology has stated that they can not find evidence that the ban of semi-automatic firearms was responsible for the decline in firearms homicide. See Mouzos, 2000, 2001; Mouzos and Rushforth, 2003; Reuter and Mouzos, 2003).

In the United Kingdom, both firearms-related homicide and total homicide have continued to rise despite the 1997 handgun ban. Figure 2 shows the trends in both firearm homicides and total homicides in England and Wales before and after handguns were prohibited<sup>2</sup>. For further analysis, see Kates and Mauser (forthcoming), Malcolm (2002) or Mauser (2003).

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<sup>1</sup> Several municipalities in the US (e.g., New York City and Washington, DC) have banned all firearms. Independent reviews of firearms laws in US jurisdictions were conducted recently by two prestigious organizations, the US National Academy of Sciences and the US Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia (Hahn, et al., 2003; Wellford, et al., 2004). Both studies concluded that no solid evidence was available to support the proposition that firearm bans were effective.

<sup>2</sup> The trends for England and Wales are presented here for simplicity. The Home Office publishes crime statistics for England and Wales as a single jurisdiction and it constitutes almost 90% of the UK. The trends for Scotland are quite similar, but not Northern Ireland. Kates and Mauser (forthcoming) discuss the trends more completely within the major jurisdictions in the UK.

Two other countries deserve mention in passing. Both the Republic of Ireland and Jamaica have attempted near-total firearm prohibitions. In neither country have firearm bans proven capable of reducing either firearms violence or homicide rates (Kates and Mauser, forthcoming; Mauser, forthcoming). Since both Ireland and Jamaica are island nations, one might have thought these governments would have had greater success with firearm prohibitions. It was not to be. Homicide and firearms-related homicide continued to increase in both countries after the ban. However, the situations in these two countries differ so dramatically from that in Canada that comparisons are not very useful.

In conclusion, banning firearms – or any type of firearm – failed to reduce firearms-related homicide or total homicide in any of the countries considered here (Australia, Jamaica, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom).

Make no mistake: firearm bans are expensive. Just as in Canada the attempt to register long guns has cost taxpayers at least one billion dollars, the ban of semi-automatic firearms in Australia was also quite expensive (See Lawson, 1999). Despite the difficulties in getting good estimates of the costs of the firearm bans in the United Kingdom or in Jamaica, it is not difficult to imagine that the costs are considerable. Firearm bans, like registration, stimulate an unproductive growth in bureaucracy.

In this letter, I have only briefly touched on these issues. To help you or your office to verify my claims, I have attached a copy of an earlier paper, **The Failed Experiment**, that analyzes the countries mentioned in this letter at greater depth. Recently, I have updated these analyses in a paper for the Institute of Economic Affairs, London, England (Mauser, forthcoming).

In closing, I would like to repeat my admonition against banning semi-automatic firearms. Such a decision might promise temporary political advantages for the Conservatives in Ontario and Quebec, but the resulting backlash among current supporters might well tarnish the belief that the Conservative Party is different from other political parties in that it keeps its campaign promises.

Respectfully yours,

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The Honourable Vic Toews  
Minister of Justice

Attachments: **The Failed Experiment**, and the graphs for Australia and England and Wales.

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