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Gun-registry math frustrates NDP justice critic

Jane Taber

Joe Comartin has been counting all summer and he's not sure the numbers are there to save the controversial long-gun registry. He figures he's three MPs shy of a win.

As the NDP's justice critic, Mr. Comartin is tasked with trying to reason with his colleagues to vote against Manitoba Conservative MP Candice Hooppner's private member's bill to scrap the costly program.

But he believes there are as many as nine of his MPs who still support her bill, which passed second reading in November. She had help back then – 12 New Democrats and eight Liberals voted with the government.

The registry issue is once again on the radar. Its survival will be tested yet again on September 22.

Against this backdrop, Ms. Hoepfner has launched a [promotional website](#) and is touring the ridings of opposition MPs who supported her bill. And Wednesday, the RCMP officer in charge of the registry – who was in support of it – was [removed](#) from his post to take French-language training.

A coincidence? Mr. Comartin and his opposition colleagues think not. That's why he is so feverishly counting.

“We have to have a minimum of six of our people, of that 12. We have to have six of them vote to kill the bill,” Mr. Comartin told The Globe.

MPs face a two-step in September. First, they will be asked to vote on a Liberal motion from committee that says the House of Commons should not proceed with the Conservative bill to destroy the registry. If that passes, Ms. Hoepfner's bill is dead; if it does not, then her bill will be voted on.

The NDP had 24 votes to keep the registry last time around and that has not changed.

“We've got 24 who are solidly committed to voting for that motion, which would be to kill the bill,” Mr. Comartin said. “There are several of them committed to voting to get rid of the registry. There are probably six, eight or nine who are still deciding.”

Jack Layton is not whipping the NDP vote. Michael Ignatieff, on the other hand, laid down the law. He has told Liberal MPs that those who do not vote for saving the registry will be punished.

Remember the registry was created under Jean Chrétien – at political cost – in response to the 1989 shooting deaths of 14 women at École Polytechnique in Montreal. Some Grit MPs lost their seats for supporting the registry.

The Liberals are putting pressure on the NDP as a result. “Right now the ball is in the NDP's court. We have a unified caucus position,” public safety critic Mark Holland told The Globe. “... The police have a very firm position on this, we are standing with them and it's going to be up to Jack Layton and the NDP to make sure the Conservatives are not able to dismantle this.”

Here's how the math works. There are 308 seats in the House of Commons – 144 Conservative, 77 Liberal (but Speaker Peter Milliken does not vote unless he must break a tie), 48 Bloc, 36 New Democrat, 2 independents and one vacancy as a result of the April resignation of NDP veteran Judy Wasylycia-Leis.

But here's the problem: The Tories have lost Inky Mark, who has announced he

too is stepping down. “So that will take one out of the Conservative column, but we’ve lost Judy so we’ve lost one of out of ours,” Mr. Comartin said.

There are wildcards as well. How will embattled former Conservative minister Helena Guergis vote? Or will she even vote? Mr. Comartin says he doesn’t know that.

And there is speculation that Liberal MP Maurizio Bevilacqua will be stepping down to run as mayor of Vaughan, the community he’s represented federally for more than 20 years. Will he or won’t he be around for the vote?

Mr. Comartin is not clear on this, but his expectation is that Mr. Bevilacqua will have announced his intentions by then. “So that’s one loss out of our column,” he said. “If everybody shows up who is eligible to vote and you do the balancing of those numbers you still need six of our people to change.”

He is also suspicious of Mr. Ignatieff’s whipping ability, suggesting that not all Liberals will show up for the vote.

The NDP caucus meets in Regina next month before the House resumes sitting. Mr. Comartin is hoping by then that he can stop counting.

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