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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome, everyone, to meeting number 44 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security. We will start by acknowledging that we are meeting on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Thursday, June 23, 2022, the committee resumes consideration of Bill C-21, an act to amend certain acts and to make certain consequential amendments (firearms).

Today we have two panels. In the first hour we have with us, by video conference, Meaghan Hennegan, spokesperson for the families of Dawson. In person in the room today we have, from PolySeSouvient, Heidi Rathjen, coordinator, and Nathalie Provost, spokesperson.

We will ask each group to present an opening statement of up to five minutes. We will start with—

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): On a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Can you please confirm that we have done sound tests with the witness who is joining us virtually?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you for that good intervention.

The clerk assures me that, yes, it is so.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: I certainly thank everyone online for properly wearing your headsets. It is critically important for the interpreters. Thank you, all.

We will invite Ms. Rathjen and Ms. Provost to make an opening statement.

Please go ahead for five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Provost (Spokesperson, PolySeSouvient): My name is Nathalie Provost. I am the spokesperson for PolySeSouvient, and I am also one of the persons wounded during the femicide that took place at the Polytechnique. I will be speaking with one of my former classmates, Heidi Rathjen, the coordinator for PolySeSouvient.

Here with us today are: Serge St-Arneault, the brother of Annie St-Arneault, who is representing the families of the victims; Stéphane Rouillon, a survivor and graduate of the Polytechnique, and Hélène Thibault, who also graduated from the Polytechnique. Both of them are volunteers with PolySeSouvient. We also have with us William Sylvain and Juliette Gagnon, members of the Confédération pour le rayonnement étudiant en ingénierie au Québec and the student organization NOT HERE.

Today, we will be talking about ways we can improve Bill C-21. We believe that this is how we can make the best contribution. Please note that some of the things that we will be talking about today are requests that we have been making for nearly 33 years now since the massacre.

We know that the problem of gun violence is complex and that the causes of violence are vast and diverse, but one thing is certain: the combination of bad intentions and an easy access to firearms increases the risk of severe injury and death. That is our prime concern.

We are asking for a robust legal framework for firearms which exponentially increase the risk of violence. We have to reduce the risk of firearms falling in the wrong hands.

I know what I'm talking about. I came face to face with a man holding a powerful gun with a high-capacity magazine. The Polytechnique shooter, just like other mass murderers, was the legal owner of the weapon.

No ordinary citizen should have the legal right to own weapons that give them the ability to kill many people in a matter of seconds by simply squeezing a finger. That's the reason that we, along with the majority of Canadians, are seeking a ban on handguns and assault rifles, as well as high-capacity magazines.

We are here today to help make Canada safe for us and our children; that is our main goal. This is a crucial bill for us. After watching violence increase over 33 years, we believe it is one minute to midnight: we have to act now, and you have the power to do so.

• (1535)

[English]

Ms. Heidi Rathjen (Coordinator, PolySeSouvient): Since we have little time, I'm just going to focus on some of the key amendments we are hoping to convince the committee to adopt.

The first amendment we are eagerly awaiting is one that was promised by Minister Mendicino on the day this bill was tabled, that is, to introduce a comprehensive ban on assault weapons, including those that were not captured by the May 2020 orders in council.

The second is in terms of domestic violence. Remove clauses 4 to 12, which introduce American-style red flag measures. That is not needed, relevant or helpful in the Canadian context.

The third is to strengthen the wording of clause 36 of the bill, instructing chief firearms officers to refuse or revoke a licence when they determine an individual has been involved in “domestic violence or stalking”. It should not be up to one person to subjectively determine whether or not such an occurrence has taken place, as the definition varies, and also because some provincial firearms officers have been appointed—literally appointed—to protect gun owners' rights.

The fourth is to amend clause 36 of the bill to exclude employment as a justification for exempting an individual from licence revocation linked to a protection order.

The fifth is to include an expansive definition of “domestic violence” to include all intimate and family violence, including non-physical forms like coercive control and threats of suicide.

The sixth, regarding handguns, is to limit the current blanket exemptions from the handgun freeze for businesses in order to exclude gun clubs and gun ranges, and exempt only retailers who provide handguns to police or security firms, and only for those specific handguns.

The seventh is to restrict the exemption for Olympic shooting disciplines to those that are currently on the program of the Olympics. Failing to provide other legislative solutions, limit the exemptions to coaches and athletes who currently compete, train or coach in handgun-shooting Olympic disciplines, instead of the blanket exemption for any and all future beginners. In addition, the exemption should apply only to handguns that are used in Olympic disciplines. We would obviously strongly oppose any expansion of the exemption beyond the Olympic exemption.

The eighth is to amend the bill to ensure continuous eligibility for the Olympic exemption—not a lifetime exemption, as it is written now, by requiring an annual letter to the chief firearms officers. This principle of continuous eligibility should also apply to the legal qualification to owner-restricted weapons.

The ninth is magazines. Do not neglect the issue of large-capacity magazines. The government has promised regulations to ban magazines that can be converted to their full illegal capacity, as has been done by a number of mass shooters. This is a good thing. However, there are many other exemptions and loopholes that also need to be eliminated.

Finally, we hope the committee will push for rapid drafting of regulations alongside the bill. Experience has taught us that regulations can make or break a measure. Providing draft regulations in a timely manner is a way to be transparent on how these measures will look once implemented. It took four years to enact regulations after the tabling of Bill C-71. This is scandalous and should not be repeated.

The Chair: Thank you.

We go now to Ms. Hennegan.

Please go ahead for five minutes.

• (1540)

Ms. Meaghan Hennegan (Spokesperson, Families of Dawson): Hello to the chair and to committee members.

Sixteen years ago, at Dawson College, I was shot in the arm and the lower extremity. I was one of 19 people shot. Anastasia De Sousa, who was shot 12 times at close range, died. She was 18 years old.

The shooter was a young man who was obsessed with guns. He posted on his website at least 55 photos of himself posing with knives and rifles. He frequented shooting clubs and ranges, including the club where the 1992 Concordia mass shooter trained. He trained dressed in combat boots and a dark trench coat. The club administrators never raised any flags. In fact, he bought guns from at least two Montreal clubs. He tried to join the Canadian Armed Forces, but he never got through basic training. He should never have owned guns, yet our laws allowed him to own handguns and assault weapons.

This means two things. First, our screening system is flawed. We need more thorough background checks, and we need authorities to prioritize public safety.

Second, it means that until we have a perfect system, it won't be possible to prevent all at-risk individuals from having access to guns because police can't read people's minds. That's why some weapons are just too dangerous for private ownership. That's also why my family, Anastasia De Sousa's family and other survivors, like Hayder Khadim, have been calling for tougher gun control laws, including a ban on handguns and assault weapons.

I was shot with a Beretta Cx4 Storm. This gun, like many others, should have been prohibited. The coroner who investigated the shooting said that had the spirit of the 1995 law been respected, it would have been banned.

We need a comprehensive ban on assault weapons, and we need them to be taken out of circulation. We're looking forward to the promised amendment to ban all assault weapons and to the launch of the mandatory buyback program.

The killer also used a .45 calibre handgun. Like 70% of Canadians, we support a ban on handguns. The freeze on new purchases is a step in the right direction, and we support this measure. However, exemptions go too far. For example, why exempt gun clubs and ranges? Why should they be allowed to purchase new handguns, and why should we be perpetuating the so-called sports shooting that use handguns? Why teach people how to shoot weapons that are easy to conceal and that can kill anyone in the vicinity by squeezing a finger?

Twenty-five years ago, a legal handgun owner killed 15 elementary schoolchildren and a teacher in Dunblane, Scotland. The tragedy prompted a popular movement that led to the ban on private ownership of handguns in Great Britain. Just two days ago, the families of the victims called on their government to ban these so-called practical or tactical shooting games. Though they use long guns, the ones here in Canada are using handguns.

I agree with these families. The clubs are trivializing the use of dangerous weapons. These types of clubs glamorize shooting and weapons. It's an Americanized sport, and it's everything we want to get away from in Canada and the U.K. We would really be pleased if the bill was amended to make sure that the handgun freeze applies to gun clubs as well.

Finally, we're looking forward to the promised regulations to ban modifiable magazines, which can be restored to their full illegal capacity. However, it's important to not forget to fix other flaws and rules surrounding magazines. For example, even though the Beretta Cx4 Storm was restricted, it was a long gun, so its magazine would normally be limited to five bullets. However, a loophole in the regulations says that if the magazine is not purposely designed for a specific gun that it fits, it's exempt from the five/10 limits. This loophole was blamed by the coroner during the Dawson investigation for allowing the gunman to use 10-round magazines instead of five-round ones.

PolySeSouvient has been fighting for these measures since I've been alive. I'm 34 years old. I've been fighting for these measures for my entire adult life. My mother fought beside me for 15 years. She passed away last March without ever seeing the fruits of her labours. The coroner in the Dawson case said that without 10 rounds, the killer may have shot only half as many people on the sidewalk before entering the school. I was shot on the sidewalk. My mother was standing next to me.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll start our round of questions now with Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Shipley, please go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Doug Shipley (Barrie—Springwater—Oro-Medonte, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today. Obviously, many of you have been through very

tragic incidents in the past, and our hearts go out to you as you try to carry on with your day-to-day lives.

My first question today is for Ms. Rathjen and Ms. Provost, please.

In your organization's brief on Bill C-21, you state that you, along with other major women's organizations, oppose the *ex parte* red flag measures that invite victims to go to court themselves to have firearms removed from their abusers. Can you please explain why you oppose this measure?

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: First, there is not one women's group that asked for this measure.

Second, it's not relevant in the Canadian context, because in the Canadian context, women victims of abuse can call the police. It's up to the police to come and investigate, and they have all the legislative tools necessary to remove the weapons if they deem that there is a risk. The problem we've seen in too many cases now is that often the police don't take complaints seriously and don't do their due diligence and prioritize public safety. That needs to be improved.

There are some important measures in the bill that protect victims of domestic violence, but this measure is dangerous in the sense that it could encourage and allow police to offload their responsibility onto victims. I hope women's groups will have a chance to testify and explain how expecting victims to go to court is unrealistic. That may be relevant in the American context, because they have their right to own guns and there's room for going to court to remove weapons from dangerous individuals, but that's not the case here in Canada.

• (1550)

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you for that answer.

Would you propose anything you'd like to see instead, if we had to amend this, or would you just like it removed?

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: We have a number of amendments that we feel would improve the situation. Some just tighten up measures that are in the bill.

For example, we propose an amendment to the language of the clause dealing with chief firearms officers' evaluation of whether or not it's in the public interest to grant a licence. That could be strengthened, because right now the chief firearms officer needs to consider a list of factors but can decide either way.

There have been too many cases where, despite knowing about suicidal behaviour, domestic abuse or even police officers coming often to a home, removing the guns and then giving them back... We can strengthen that language. The chief firearms officers, if there are risk factors, would normally refuse a licence, and there should be more of a burden to allow the granting of a licence in those circumstances.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you for that. You went through your list of amendments, and I was trying to scribble them very quickly, and I missed a couple.

I hope the one you just mentioned about the chief firearms officers is in clause 36, because if isn't, I'm going to ask you to repeat yourself, because I missed that amendment. Could you just repeat that part of what you said about clause 36? I didn't get a chance to get that down.

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: When there is a protection order that's imposed on an individual, the chief firearms officer.... Oh, I'm sorry. That's a different one.

In one of the proposed sections, if the chief firearms officer “determines” that there was domestic abuse or stalking, they need to revoke the licence. That is a really good thing, but because we have some provinces now that have appointed chief firearms officers with the explicit mandate to protect gun owner rights, we feel that allowing one individual to determine this is too subjective, and it could be strengthened by inserting a more reasonable standard. If the CFO, for example, receives information that any reasonable person would consider to be a case of domestic violence, then he should revoke the licence.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you for that.

Ms. Hennegan, you mentioned quite clearly that the screening system is flawed. Obviously, hearing what you went through and some of the shooter's prior actions, I agree.

Could you expand on that? What do you think is flawed, and what changes could we make to help strengthen that?

Ms. Meaghan Hennegan: Yes. I'm actually going to refer that question to Heidi, because she's excellent with the ins and outs of the screening. That's not really my area of expertise. While I think it's important, she's better suited to answer that question.

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: There are some things that could be improved in screening. For example, right now, if somebody has suffered from mental illness associated with violence, that is a factor to consider. We would argue that it should go further, that you could have Alzheimer's or you could be an alcoholic and have serious mental health issues that aren't necessarily associated with violence but that would still justify the prevention of access to firearms or their removal. That's one example of what could be tightened up in terms of screening.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

We go now to Ms. Damoff for six minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all three witnesses for being here and sharing your stories. That can't have been easy, but it's important for us to hear from you, so I just want to begin by thanking you.

My first question has to do with a provision in Bill C-21. A chief firearms officer may issue a conditional licence despite a person having engaged in domestic violence “if the revocation constitutes a virtual prohibition against employment in the only vocation open to the individual.”

I know, having spoken to the women's shelter in my riding, Halton Women's Place, that the women who come to their shelter are in an abusive relationship with someone who works as a police officer or a correctional officer, and a firearm would remain available to that individual because of their occupation.

Do you feel that condition should be removed?

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: That's one of the amendments we're proposing, to remove that exemption. We don't understand why the life of a potential victim is less important than somebody's job. I don't believe it's impossible for a police officer or a security guard to find another job, in a temporary way too, because prohibition orders are temporary.

Yes, we would definitely argue for the removal of that exemption. I don't know about Canada, but I know that in the United States domestic violence and abuse are more prevalent among police officers than they are among the general public. That's a well-documented fact and another reason this exemption shouldn't exist.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Someone described to me that if someone who used their car for work was charged in Ontario, their car would be impounded and they would lose their driver's licence. We don't allow them to keep their driver's licence just because of their job. They might be put on desk duty, for example, so I think when we're talking about a woman's life, it should certainly be taken into consideration.

Do you want to add anything, Ms. Hennegan?

Ms. Meaghan Hennegan: No. I'm in complete agreement. There's no single job that needs you to have a gun that is the only job you're ever going to have in your entire life. It's absolutely ridiculous to think that jeopardizing someone's job is more important than someone possibly dying.

I completely agree with Heidi. I absolutely think that should be removed.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

There's one red flag. I want to push back a bit on this, because I have heard of cases in which women have not been comfortable calling the police. The provision in the bill was not meant to replace that but to provide an additional tool. I think it was a year or two ago that there was an indigenous woman in the north who called the police. She ended up being arrested. She had breached her parole because she'd been drinking.

Someone like that is never going to feel comfortable calling the police to have the firearm removed. So we could give people like that an additional tool. Take the situation we just talked about, in which the abusive partner is a police officer. That woman is never going to call the police, but she might go through a women's shelter or go through the courts to have that gun removed.

I just want to push back a little on that. Do you see situations like that in which the current provisions don't work?

• (1600)

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: I don't think I'm in a position to comment on specific cases. All I can say is that on balance we feel that the existence of such a measure will undermine the reforms that need to take place in those kinds of cases where police don't take complaints seriously enough. That should be the focus of improving the system, because that is the most effective system in terms of protecting victims and potential victims, especially of domestic abuse.

We have the tools, but they're not being used properly. That is the best solution, and we feel that having this nice-sounding red flag measure would jeopardize what needs to be done to improve the system.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Emergency room physicians have asked for an amendment that would give them a mechanism to identify and report individuals at risk of inappropriate access to firearms.

Are you supportive of an amendment that would allow physicians to report?

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: We would support the position of the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians. In Quebec, we have the Anastasia law, which allows such a thing, so I'm not sure about jurisdictional issues, but certainly doctors, especially emergency doctors who confront these at-risk individuals, should be able to report them and trigger action in a timely manner.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

We go now to Ms. Michaud.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here today, ladies. We are very grateful.

Thank you for your courage and thank you especially for carrying on fighting for the last 33 years, which is far too long. I know that you have been waiting for legislative amendments for a long time. Unfortunately, Bill C-21 is not yet what is needed, and I know that you would like to see changes.

On the other hand, we have been receiving requests from other groups who would like to dilute certain provisions of the bill. You know as well as I do that the International Practical Shooting Confederation, otherwise known as the IPSC, is asking to be exempted from the national ban on handguns.

Can you explain to us why it would not be a good idea to exempt as many groups as possible? I agree that this would make the ban practically useless.

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: Thank you for the question.

Currently, the vast majority of people who own a handgun give as a reason the fact that they are a member of a shooting club.

A group such as the IPSC receives funds from the arms industry, uses handguns and assault-style firearms, and organizes games which are the polar opposite of legitimate sport shooting, i.e.,

Olympic shooting. The IPSC's members organize games based on hostage taking, violent home invasions, etc.

If the IPSC and its members were exempt, IPSC competitions could in theory be held in all shooting clubs. All members of the IPSC who currently own handguns could be exempt. That is essentially what one of the directors of the IPSC admitted in a letter sent to its members.

Such an exemption would nullify the objective of the ban. The objective is to limit the number of handguns in circulation. Exempting sport shooting with handguns would be tantamount to keeping the status quo.

Ms. Nathalie Provost: What is worrying us is seeing how more and more Canadians are looking to protect themselves with firearms. We see it, we hear it and it's in the media. Giving all sorts of exemptions would legitimize people's desire to protect themselves with a firearm. That is the most dangerous thing.

We have always used firearms in Canada, but mainly for subsistence and trophy hunting, not to protect ourselves. This new use is not in keeping with Canada's strategy and values. In our opinion, the more bans on assault-style guns and handguns are enforced and the fewer exemptions are granted, the stronger our bills will be.

• (1605)

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

We can see this in Montreal, where gunshots are heard and a growing number of young people are joining street gangs. Other young people could seek to legally acquire a gun to protect themselves, as you say, which contributes to this American-style culture that is coming here.

To further limit the number of people with access to such weapons, your organization even recommends that the exemption granted to Olympic shooters be renewed every year instead of being given for life, and that this exemption only be granted to Olympic shooters who are officially training or who are going to the Olympic Games in recognized categories, rather than to anyone who one day might become an Olympic shooter.

Could you please tell us more about the changes you are proposing?

Ms. Nathalie Provost: I do understand how proud Canadian Olympic shooting champions are. I had the privilege of meeting a shooter when I was working with the Canadian Firearms Advisory Committee.

Nonetheless, I would go as far as to require guarantees from the Shooting Federation of Canada that all its members seeking an exemption do not represent a risk. We have to make the Federation responsible for its members. I can understand that it is seeking exemptions for its shooters, but in that case, it has to take ownership and real responsibility.

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: Stuff is happening right now. For example, a group such as the International Practical Shooting Confederation has been lobbying for decades to have its sport recognized by the Olympics. It is making progress and gaining recognition. This is a big international lobby that faces no opposition, because groups like ours do not have a seat at the table.

Consequently, it is very possible that new sports such as handgun shooting will be added to the Olympic program. With the way Bill C-21 is currently worded, shooters in these sporting categories would also be exempt. That is why we are asking that the bill limit exemptions to those shooting categories that are currently on the Olympic program.

Moreover, we have tried to find ways to prevent any loopholes. Sport shooters can suddenly express a desire to become Olympic shooters. There are no standards in place and we can't question the sincerity of these people. Under such conditions, will there be a new wave of shooters looking to participate in the Olympic Games who will be exempted from the ban? This would allow them to buy any type of firearm, because we know that the act does not limit the definition of a handgun to Olympic shooting weapons.

These are possible scenarios that would allow people to circumvent the exemption, which would be against the spirit of the act as it is intended.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. I have to cut you off there.

Merci, Madame.

We'll go now to Mr. MacGregor, if you please, for six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you very much to the witnesses for appearing today and helping guide this committee through our study of Bill C-21.

I took note when you were making your opening remarks and you made reference to the May 30 press conference announcing Bill C-21. I remember Minister Mendicino making a promise, I believe it might have been to a reporter's question, about bringing in an additional amendment.

Thank you also for providing my office with a list of some of the ways Bill C-21 can be strengthened.

You identified the fact that there's a problem with the definition of prohibited weapons, and I find this is a constant with all legislation. When you try to make a list of something, there's always the danger that you're missing out on something or that it can be expanded. I think that's why, although the original OIC was around 1,500, it's now climbed to 1,800. Of course, manufacturers can exploit loopholes by simply saying, "We have a new model that's not on the list, therefore it's allowed."

We haven't yet seen what this amendment will look like. I hope my Liberal colleagues are working with the Minister of Public Safety to bring forward what he promised the public.

Can you help guide this committee as to how you would like to see that definition included? Could you share any thoughts to help guide our committee on that particular amendment?

• (1610)

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: You're right that having a list of prohibited weapons is what happened. In fact, that's the approach that was taken in the 1990s, and the lists were never updated. Having just lists means that you depend on future governments to update the list, which was not done under either government. That's how we found ourselves, years later, with a market full of military-style semi-automatic assault weapons.

In terms of the definition, we're not ballistics experts. We know what the semi-automatic military-style weapons are capable of, especially with large capacity magazines. The same weapons that are used in the United States in all of the mass shootings were legal here. Some continue to be.

In terms of definitions, there are different ways to go at it. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in the United States has a list of criteria that can be used to determine whether or not a weapon is military-style. I think California also has a definition, which includes all semi-automatics that can accommodate magazines and have at least one other military feature. That's probably as far as we would go. We would also point to the New Zealand model, which is most centre-fire semi-automatics that can accept large capacity magazines.

That's pretty much as far as we can go, but like Nathalie and Meaghan said, if a gun is able to be used to kill dozens of people in a matter of seconds, it should not be in the hands of an ordinary Canadian. We will defer to the experts—your experts and the experts of the government and the RCMP—to draw that line, which we know won't be easy, but currently the orders in council and the criteria that are in there do not cover all assault weapons, and that needs to change. We've been fighting for that for 33 years, and that's our top priority.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you for that.

In my remaining time, I think with the red flag law, that's something—and I think I can speak for all committee members—that we've really been struggling with, because we have had testimony on both sides of the issue. We had police services here saying, "Well, it might be nice to have an additional option." Of course, if someone's life is in danger, they should always, always go to the police first and foremost.

It's hard for us to navigate this. I just want you to know that the committee is struggling with the question of what to do with the red flag laws.

In your submission, you called for the removal of several clauses for the majority of the red flag laws, but you said you support prohibition orders against individuals cohabiting with someone prohibited from owning firearms. You think that should be retained. Can you expand a little on that for us, please?

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: It makes sense that, if somebody is prohibited from owning firearms for public safety reasons, they shouldn't have access to firearms, and if they live with somebody who has firearms, that's a problem. That was inserted in the *ex parte* red flag measure, and that was one element we felt was helpful. It should maybe be removed from that section and added to another section to keep it in the bill.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: You said, I think, that the issue is that in some cases, the police may not take complaints as seriously. How do we further the national conversation on that, so that people can be assured that when they make calls to the police with legitimate concerns, they are acted upon and they do not have to use this alternate route? I don't have much time left.

• (1615)

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: It's not part of the bill, but we've said many times that there needs to be more training and more resources for better screening and for better preventative intervention, including training for judges, police officers and firearms officers.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

We're starting our second round of questions now with Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Shipley, please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Hennegan, I'm going to start with you again.

In your opening statement, I didn't quite catch what you said. Could you expand on it? If I'm misquoting you, please correct me. You mentioned something about practical or shooting games. Can you just expand on that? Did I say it right, and what did you mean by that?

Ms. Meaghan Hennegan: Yes. If you think about practical or tactical shooting, it's basically a bunch of guys who want to go in and play the guy with the gun. You practice, following the so-called self-defence measures that are used, especially in the training of law enforcement and all of that. When you think of the American gun nut, this guy is the image that comes to mind.

In Canada it doesn't make sense to even have this as a sport or a game that people will go to play because, one, guns are not toys and, two, we do not have the same rights to self-defence as people in the U.S. have, never mind the right to guns. If some guy came into my house right now and tried to steal my TV, if I shot him, I would also be in trouble. I don't have the right to use excessive force against someone if running away is going to do just as good a job of protecting me.

Going out and playing the big, tough macho man who shoots down all these bad guys is not a game. It's not healthy. It doesn't encourage a very community-minded, safety-minded environment, and I don't really think there is a place for it.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you for that.

I'd like to ask you a question and please, I hope you don't take this the wrong way. I'm doing this because we're trying to get down to some.... I really don't want to talk about your incident because I'm sure you don't want to talk about it either, but I just have to ask

a couple of questions, if you don't mind, because you mentioned that this horrible human being who did this to you had not passed basic training.

Just recently, in South Simcoe, the person who shot the two police officers had not passed basic training either. Do you know anything more about—and if you don't know, or you don't even want to talk about this, I understand—why he was kicked out? Perhaps we should have some communication—and when I say “we”, I'm talking about the government, not you and me—as to when someone is removed for certain reasons. We don't know why they're removed or don't pass basic training, and perhaps that should be flagged and put on record, because there are two instances here. One instance you have talked about, and the second, as I said, was the recent tragic shooting of two South Simcoe police officers. The accused in that case had also been removed from basic training.

Do you know anything surrounding that case? Perhaps if we don't, we need to start communicating about that when it takes place. What I'm trying to say is maybe that's a flag.

Ms. Meaghan Hennegan: Yes, it definitely is a flag. If the army doesn't want you around its weapons, you probably shouldn't be around any weapons at all.

I am not entirely familiar with the reasons he had been kicked out of basic training, but I know that it takes some pretty serious stuff for them to kick you out before you even get halfway through. There were a lot of mental health concerns in the past that were brought up. Yes, if the army says it doesn't think you're fit for duty after having accepted you, that definitely needs to be looked into when you're looking to own a firearm, because there is a reason they didn't want you around firearms in the army.

It's really important that all these different systems be able to communicate with each other, because right now they're not, so you can pretty much go through life just.... If you're in this one spot and that happened and you move to another spot and try again, you may have very different results, right? If you're somewhere where the doctor needs to be able to report, or there needs to be a database of reasons that someone was kicked out of basic training, or maybe if someone was asked to leave a gun club.... These are important measures that need to be addressed when someone is looking to buy something as dangerous as these guns are.

• (1620)

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you for that answer. I must add that I don't know—and this has nothing to do with your case—whether the firearms used in South Simcoe were legally purchased. These might have been illegally purchased, which wouldn't have helped in a situation where they red-flagged him.

Thank you for all your information, and once again, thank you for being here today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

The clerk has just advised me, Ms. Hennegan, that you have a four-month-old, and that you're working around the exigencies of this today and your father has come to help you out. Congratulations.

Ms. Meaghan Hennegan: Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Bendayan, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Rachel Bendayan (Outremont, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I, too, would like to thank our witnesses. Ms. Rathjen and Ms. Provost, from PolySeSouvient, words fail when I try to express my gratitude, but I would like once again to thank you for the exceptional work that you do so that the tragedy that befell Outremont 33 years ago never ever happens again in Canada.

I would like to go back to a question that was asked earlier about sport shooters. The bill contains a targeted exception for those who are training for an Olympic or Paralympic sport.

However, certain members of the Opposition, such as those from the NDP, are asking for an exemption for competitions organized by the International Practical Shooting Confederation, the IPSC. The firearms lobby is backing this request, which is not very surprising, given that the exemption would create a loophole in the firearms ban. Even the Shooting Federation of Canada has stated that if more exemptions were granted, it would be akin to facilitating handgun ownership in Canada.

It's certainly worrying, especially given that 80% of Canadians would like to see stricter firearms controls.

I know you have already spoken about this, but do you have anything more to say about the dangers associated with such an exemption?

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: First of all, not only are the majority of Canadians in favour of a ban on the type of weapons used in these sports, but the majority of firearm owners are in favour of banning assault-style guns. What's more, a number of surveys show that between half and two thirds of gun owners are also in favour of a ban on handguns.

Amongst firearm owners, only a minority use handguns or assault-style firearms for sport shooting. Amongst those, there is a minority that plays war or role-playing games in which they imitate police officers or simulate self-defence scenarios. It is that group that constitutes the firearms lobby. Actually, that is the firearms lobby. The IPSC is funded by the arms industry. It promotes handguns and assault-style weapons, and that's its bread and butter.

If you grant an exemption for this type of shooting sport, which is the polar opposite of what a legitimate Olympic sport is, the ban will mean nothing. Current handgun owners can keep their guns and continue to practise shooting sports. We just want to keep the situation from getting worse and keep shooting clubs from becoming places where this type of American-style sport is practised.

Ms. Rachel Bendayan: I understand.

I would also like to go back to the question asked by my colleague, Mr. MacGregor, about an amendment aimed at strengthening the assault-style gun ban. That is your first request amongst the amendments that you are seeking.

In answer to my colleague, yes, we are working on such an amendment. It is also a priority for me, personally, as well as for our government.

Could you provide more details to the committee on the importance of such a measure?

• (1625)

Ms. Nathalie Provost: After what happened at the Polytechnique in 1989, the first thing we did was to ask for a ban on this type of weapon in Canada. We were students at the time. There are photographs of me, Heidi and other classmates. We were between 22 and 24 years old.

We made the request to the government of Canada and we were not the only ones. At that time, there was no Internet, and there weren't any e-petitions. We had a very long petition that was signed by Canadians from all regions. The request didn't just come from Quebec or Montreal: it was a Canada-wide request.

That was when the Canadian Coalition for Gun Control was set up, which led to the enactment, in 1995, of The Firearms Act. However, because a firearms registry was seen as a useful tool at the time, the government didn't follow through with a blanket ban on assault-style firearms.

The market has changed and evolved. Today, we are seeing a firearms epidemic, actually it's more of a pandemic, because all the countries of the world are suffering from this epidemic. Firearms have become ordinary toys that people want to get. If you want our support for this bill, you absolutely have to bring in a robust amendment that would completely ban assault-style firearms and set out a mandatory buyback program for all these firearms.

In our opinion, these measures are glaringly obvious and more than necessary. The parents of the victims of the massacre at the Polytechnique are dying now. They fought for 33 years for such a ban, and they might not see their efforts succeed. We have to act now. The more time passes, the harder it will be for the government to enact strong legislation at a reasonable cost. We need a bill that clearly defines what an assault-style firearm is and completely bans this type of firearm, and we have to do so in 2022. Those are the conditions of our support for the government's bill.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Bendayan.

I should have mentioned earlier that we will have to cut this round short. We'll have to end it after Mr. MacGregor.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Provost, you can count on the Bloc Québécois to propose such an amendment if ever the government does not do so.

When you testified during our study on firearms and street gangs, you said that all magazines should only contain five bullets and that the industry was perfectly capable of doing this.

The government promised regulations that would ban magazines that could be converted to their full illegal capacity.

Since we had to wait four years the last time before regulations were put into place, do you have any hope that this will happen quickly, or do you think that we should amend Bill C-21 to tackle the problem, rather than wait for regulations?

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: That is actually what we are recommending. Ideally, we would like to see such a ban in the legislation. It would be legitimate and it would be more efficient, because it would be harder to make any changes afterwards.

The government has stated that it would like to take the regulatory route. Currently, there are regulations that ban different types of magazines. In the past, the federal government, under a different party, decided to exempt from the act any magazine that had not been expressly designed for the firearm that it would be used for, which was an interpretation that went against the spirit of the law. Actually, a member of Kim Campbell's team was quoted afterwards in the media saying that this exemption was ridiculous and absurd.

It would be easier for the next government to change the regulations rather than the act.

In answer to your question, we would indeed like to see a change brought to the act, if it is possible.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Finally, I know that when people get involved in politics or choose to fight for something publicly, they become the target of negative comments which are sometimes degrading or even threatening.

I know that you have been especially targeted because of your activism, which is most unfortunate. Sometimes, such a reaction can stem from a lack of education. People only read the first few lines and become haters straight away...

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I would have so much liked to ask my question. Oh well.

[English]

The Chair: We go now to Mr. MacGregor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I remember—I think it was in your opening comments or in response to one of my colleagues' questions—you talked about clause 34. I think you referenced the fact that some chief firearms officers, in certain provinces, have shown a willingness to be confrontational with the federal government, even though both the Criminal Code and Firearms Act are entirely federal in jurisdiction.

I think one of your recommendations.... This goes specifically to the “yellow flag” law. You want the words changed from “may” to

“shall” suspend use. I guess you want to take away any ability of the CFO to have some leeway in that.

Can you expand on that a bit?

Ms. Heidi Rathjen: After 33 years of experience, we know legislation needs to be rock-solid, and that any grey zone or discretion can be exploited, and often is, depending on the values of the government in place, whether it's federal or provincial. It's like we see now in some of the western provinces. They have appointed chief firearms officers because of their involvement with and ownership of guns. It's explicitly to protect gun owners' rights.

The more there are words like “may” or “could”, the more chance there is that these authorities will not err on the side of public safety. If a chief firearms officer has reasonable grounds to suspect an individual is no longer eligible to hold a licence, why would the possibility of allowing that individual to keep their licence exist? If they aren't eligible, the licence should be revoked. It's that simple.

Tightening up some of the language—and this is one good example—would go a long way to ensuring that public safety is a priority.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

I'll end by thanking you for your appearance today. I think there will be a willingness to tighten up language in some of these sections, for sure.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

I thank all the witnesses for joining us today. Their interventions are most helpful and important.

With that, we will suspend and bring in the next panel.

Thank you, all.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

For the panel in this second hour, by video conference we have the Airsoft Association of British Columbia and Scott Hackenbruch, director. With us in person we have Matt Wasilewicz, owner and president of Canadian Airsoft Imports.

I'll invite each group to make a statement of up to five minutes.

We will start with Mr. Hackenbruch for five minutes, please.

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch (Director, Airsoft Association of British Columbia): Thank you for having me here to talk about Bill C-21 and its impact on airsoft.

My name is Scott Hackenbruch and I am the director of the Airsoft Association of British Columbia. I have played airsoft for over 15 years. I have organized and run some of the largest games in western Canada.

The Airsoft Association of B.C. was founded to represent the players of our sport, educate the public and work with government, law enforcement and various other stakeholders to ensure that we can safely practice our sport and help it grow.

We've seen countless stories of people whose lives have been changed for the better by the sport. In addition to being a player, business owner and organizer, I am also a new father, and I hope to one day be able to introduce my son to the sport that means so much to me, in a safe manner and also at the appropriate time.

Some of the most heartwarming and gratifying stories are when parents approach me to tell me about how transformative airsoft has been in their children's lives. Learning how to communicate clearly and effectively, gaining sportsmanship, building long and lasting friendships, and cementing bonds with their parents are just a few of the stories I've been fortunate enough to be a part of.

We have heard testimony in this committee that has spoken of the public safety concerns that our law enforcement and officers potentially face due to the misuse of airsoft devices. We want to solve these problems with a constructive and collaborative approach.

We've also heard from our colleagues in the ASIC and the FSAQ about the potential of Bill C-21 to effectively end airsoft in Canada. Fear, uncertainty and doubt permeate our community. Overnight, families and businesses with life savings invested in the industry could see their livelihoods destroyed and would be left with vast amounts of merchandise they can no longer sell, export or return to the manufacturers, should the bill in its current form pass. This would devastate many in an already difficult economy.

Prohibiting the importation, sale or transfer of an airsoft device that is intended to exactly resemble or resemble with near precision a firearm will remove the vast majority of devices available to the Canadian market. Due to the relative size of our consumer market, it would be unlikely that manufacturers would design and build custom airsoft devices for our retailers and distributors.

The broad definition would also leave it open to interpretation that anything resembling a barrel with a grip and a trigger could be considered a firearm, regardless of its being intended to resemble a commercially available firearm or not. One thing is apparent: This is a complex and nuanced issue.

Airsoft is a competitive team sport that relies heavily on integrity and character. We value rules. We value safety. For the last two decades, airsoft has been a self-regulated sport in which the community has determined the equipment and regulations needed to compete in a safe and responsible manner. We recognize the need to work with the greater community of Canada to ensure that we can safely enjoy our sport and address the needs of Canadians.

We propose one or more of the following solutions to address those needs in the short term. These include adding an 18-plus minimum age to the purchase of an airsoft device; mandatory trans-

portation in an opaque and solid container; warning labels on the packaging of airsoft devices informing the end user of the potential consequences of misuse; orange tips required for the sale and transport of airsoft devices; and the dissemination of educational materials through retailers, local fields and provincial associations.

A more comprehensive solution may be the implementation of a national organization or a group of provincial organizations. To purchase an airsoft device in Canada, it would be compulsory to be a member of one of these organizations. This would remove the burden of cost for any regulatory framework from the federal government, while addressing concerns for the public safety of Canadians.

As representatives of our community of players, we are standing before our duly elected representatives asking you to consider the joy, friendship and growth this sport has brought to every one of us. It has built lifelong friendships, sparked entrepreneurial spirit and led us to push our boundaries. These are foundational qualities that improve and enrich our community every day. We are ready to work together with you on finding a solution that will keep us all safe.

I thank the committee for the time and welcome any questions you may have.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hackenbruch.

We will go now to Mr. Wasilewicz for his statement.

Please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz (Owner and President, Canadian Airsoft Imports): Hello. First, I would like to say thank you to the members of the committee for inviting me here today to speak on behalf of my industry.

I am here specifically more to speak on airsoft, but I would like to make a point that has not been touched upon too much, which is that this bill affects not only the entire airsoft industry, but traditional BB and pellet guns as well, which are also very popular and common in Canada. However, I am here to speak more specifically on the airsoft industry itself.

I will give you a quick background of my experience in the industry. I have been involved in both the paintball and airsoft industries now for the past 25 years. Since 2009, I have owned a paintball and airsoft playing facility, as well as a retail location, and since 2012 I have owned Canadian Airsoft Imports. We are one of Canada's largest importers and distributors of airsoft products, supplying approximately 150 retail locations and playing fields from coast to coast in Canada.

I was going to give you a quick background on airsoft, but I think at this point most of you are pretty aware of what airsoft is. It's a team sport played very similarly to paintball as a game. The majority of airsoft is played on designated airsoft playing fields, either indoor or outdoor, both in cities and in rural areas.

As an industry, we definitely understand there are public safety concerns that must be addressed, and I would like to stress that in consultation with other retailers and importers in this industry, we are very committed to working with the government to find solutions that will both address these issues and, at the same time, allow our industry to continue to prosper for everyone.

At this point I'll just go over some of the proposals we have come up with. In my brief I have listed these proposals, but I'll go over them here now. I have divided them into two categories. One would be more basic proposals that could be implemented without extra administration or extra co-operation with a government entity, and ones that require extra administration or co-operation with a government entity, which would obviously need a bit more consideration to implement.

These basic proposals have been touched upon numerous times now, but I'll just list them again.

Our industry 100% supports making it clear and concise that the purchase of any airgun in Canada should be only by individuals who are over the age of 18.

It should also be clear and concise that the transportation of airguns should be done in a way that conceals them from public view, in either a gun case or a concealed container, similar to what you would already do with a real firearm.

Another change that we are able to make would be the addition of brightly coloured orange tips on the ends of the guns. This helps in aiding identification from a quick glance at a distance.

Another proposal that our industry very strongly supports is the standardization of a dos and don'ts waiver, as I would like to put it, that is mandatory to be signed with the buyer at the point of sale. This has a twofold benefit. One would be education to new players and new users who are getting into the sport, as I believe the best course of action to stop any honest mistakes with airsoft or airguns in general is through education and making sure people who purchase these items know what is required of them for owning them, such as safe transportation, storage and that sort of thing.

The other thing about having a waiver like this at the point of sale, so someone has to sign and obviously show ID at the same time, is that it also, I believe, would act as an effective deterrent to a lot of people who would perhaps have ill intent when using an airgun, so I believe this could also be a deterrent as well for that type of situation.

Another proposal I have, and this comes more from my background in the paintball industry, would be that airguns should be sold in the packaging with what's called a barrel bag.

● (1645)

If any of you have ever played paintball or seen it, the barrel bag is a device that goes over the end of the barrel. It is attached to the

end of the gun. It's usually brightly coloured, at least in the paintball industry, and a lot of airsoft fields do this now as standard practice to basically show everyone that the gun is safe and cannot shoot. It's usually in staging areas, so you know it's safe and accidents can't happen.

The Chair: Are you able to wrap up quickly?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I'm sorry.

As for my advanced proposals, this one has been brought up to me before a couple of times in my conversations with the public safety office. It would be adopting a more comprehensive model that includes all of the above, such as the model that's used in the U.K. It's a two-tier system.

Another proposal is access to a weapons ban list. I don't know if a mechanism like this already exists, but I'm sure retailers would like to have something like that at their disposal as well. That could also be useful.

That will conclude my opening statement for now.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now start our rounds of questions with Mr. Lloyd.

Mr. Lloyd, please go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I can't say I'm an expert on airsoft myself, although I have paintballed a few times.

It seems to me that law enforcement had a few concerns. Their one concern was that there have been cases when a police officer has mistaken an airsoft gun or a replica gun for a real gun, and then a tragic thing happened.

Is this something that is common, or is this an extremely rare event?

● (1650)

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I don't think it's as common as maybe we would think, but I think law enforcement could probably better answer that question. They would have the statistics on how often that happens.

I believe that in order to avoid situations like that, having distinct markings such as brightly coloured tips or going a step further with the two-tier system the U.K. uses is probably a more effective approach to reduce that type of situation. Education to the consumer at point of sale is also going to be very effective, because—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I would agree with you. In the army, we use BFAs at the end of our rifles when we're shooting blank ammunition. It also shows that the rifle is safe at the time. Using a brightly coloured tip on an airsoft seems a reasonable compromise to be made, although if somebody is intent on using a replica airsoft firearm in a nefarious way, obviously they could spray paint the brightly coloured tip on that.

There's nothing that law-abiding, fun-loving airsoft people can really do about people who are determined to use airsoft guns for bad purposes. Is that correct?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I agree that it would be mostly correct. It's very difficult to regulate criminals, because they don't follow the laws in the first place. Our proposals are more focused on reducing honest mistakes among people who don't have any ill intent or who maybe just didn't know the rules or what procedures they needed to follow when it comes to the use of airsoft or air guns in general.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: What we're looking at is an industry that is overwhelmingly safe. The data shows that it's an overwhelmingly safe sport to play and that the members who play the sport are competent people who aren't engaging in criminal activity, yet we're contemplating legislation that will, as you or another witness said, completely end the sport of airsoft in Canada.

One of the things we consider as government, when we're making legislation, is proportionality. Do you think this legislation is disproportionate in banning airsoft in Canada?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: As currently written, I would definitely have to agree with you. It's not even disproportionate; it's totalitarian. It completely closes our entire industry all at once. That's why we're committed to working with the government on finding solutions that address legitimate public safety concerns and, at the same time, will allow our industry to continue.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: What are the monetary figures we're talking about, the GDP figures, of the airsoft industry in Canada? Do you have an estimate on that?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: My best estimate would be over \$200 million, and that is factoring in playing fields and retail locations. This is just kind of based on what I know my business and others import and the types of business my customers do. If you were to factor in the other industries, though, that are also affected, such as the more traditional BB guns and pellet guns you'd find in Wal-marts and Canadian Tires, that figure would definitely grow significantly.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Now, a second concern that law enforcement had is the ability to convert airsoft guns into a regular firearm. As far as I've seen, it's not like we can convert an airsoft easily, and if we could convert it, you're not talking about heavy calibres. I think we're talking about a 0.22, which is a pretty small calibre of firearm.

How prevalent is the conversion, and, frankly, why would anyone want to convert an airsoft gun to a regular firearm?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: To answer the second part of your question first, I think the only reason you'd want to do that is if you were a criminal with ill intent, but as far as the convertibility goes, this really affects only a small percentage of airsoft guns that are

available, and that would be typically guns that are called "gas blowback". They operate on a gas rather than an electric function. About 90% of the market is electric airsoft guns.

This is something the RCMP already has quite a good handle on.

• (1655)

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I have only 30 seconds left. If there were a proposal whereby the regulations applied only to these gas blowback-powered airsoft guns as opposed to electric guns, would that be a positive thing for your industry? Is that something you would support?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: That is something we could support, because the mechanism already exists to determine if they are allowed or not—it's getting a so-called FRT number. Typically, when something is imported, if there is a question it is submitted to the RCMP lab. They do their studies on it, and they assign an FRT number, either giving it basically the "all clear" or determining that it does pose a risk. They've been doing this now for quite some time; it's an ongoing process.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lloyd.

We go now to Mr. Noormohamed for five minutes, please.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed (Vancouver Granville, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Hackenbruch and Mr. Wasilewicz—I hope I got your name right.

I want to begin by thanking both of you for putting forward what I think are some really good ideas in terms of how we can ensure the longevity of your sport.

I had the pleasure of meeting with a couple of other individuals yesterday from your industry who shared similar views in terms of finding ways to work with government, which I think is really important. I want to be very clear that my intent, and the intent of many of us—certainly all of us on this committee—is not to kill the industry. The proposals you are making are really important in helping us get to a good place around ensuring public safety in respect of your industry.

You spoke in terms of carrying these guns and making sure they are carried in a similar manner as live-round firearms. Can you talk a little more about what you're proposing there? Can you talk a bit more specifically around the potential registration when these items are sold to those aged 18-plus? What do you think the industry is willing to do to address those two specific things? Just elaborate a little on what you talked about.

First, maybe, Mr. Hackenbruch, you can lead off, and then Mr. Wasilewicz, you can add additional comments if you have any.

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: As far as transportation goes, many of us already purchase plastic cases that are opaque in nature, usually intended for traditional firearms. Transporting them in those allows for a lock to be attached, so the case can't be opened quickly. We use those if we're transporting them on aircraft to go to international events or crossing the border.

We feel that would be a good way of ensuring that the devices are not accidentally seen or waved around in public, causing unnecessary scares, as it were, and escalating a situation beyond what's immediately required.

Forgive me. I forgot the second half of your question.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: The 18-plus piece, and then ensuring that it remains regulated.

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: There are a number of options we could look at. The two largest that spring to mind are what the United Kingdom has, something known as UKARA and UKAPA. They are two associations that work with each other, UKARA being retailer-based and UKAPA being the player version of that.

In order to purchase airsoft guns, you would need to be a member of UKAPA. In order to sell them, you would have to be a member of UKARA. There is also the Netherlands, which uses a number of local associations to effectively do the same thing. The associations would be responsible for maintaining records, as well as for an age verification system to ensure that those purchasing the firearms are 18 or older.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you.

Mr. Wasilewicz, did you want to add anything to that, or should I go on to my next question?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: For transportation, the best way to get those rules across so players know is at the point of sale, through the waiver we discussed. I think education is probably the best approach to making sure people know that.

I agree that the two-tier system that is used in the United Kingdom is probably the best approach to ensuring there's still regulation after sale. Basically, that concept ensures that only people who are dedicated to the sport are able to purchase the normal airsoft equipment we see now. People who aren't dedicated—maybe just the casual user—are basically limited to purchasing very brightly coloured ones. As evidence that they're not real airsoft guns, that's usually a very bright colour covering about 50% of the surface area.

• (1700)

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: I'll dig in a bit now. If we're able to proceed and it's 18 plus for purchase, that's great, but how do you make sure or what do you think the industry is willing to do to make sure that when those guns go home.... The 18-plus dad or mom buys it. It's sitting around the house and now a kid picks it up, takes it to school and we start to see tragedies like the one we saw not long ago.

What would the industry be prepared to do, in terms of working with government, to ensure that this doesn't happen? What recommendations would you be willing to make or work with such that we avoid those types of circumstances happening, sometimes with tragic consequences?

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: It's very difficult to police what people do in their own home with their own children, but making it clear that these devices are intended for adults is part of that. Restricting the sale to 18 plus and instructing the purchaser that the intention is they're meant for adults, not for children, I think, goes a long way towards that. Again, I don't know what we could do once it's in a

private home beyond explaining to people what the laws are. If they choose to violate those laws, I don't know how to stop that.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: What about storage requirements similar to what is currently required for folks who have live-round guns at home?

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: That's definitely a potential option to pursue.

My stuff is always stored in its case on a very high shelf, so my one-year-old can't ever get a hold of it. I think a perfectly reasonable solution is making sure they're stored in a way that they can't be improperly accessed by the wrong parties.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: To the second part of the conversation we had prior, I think Mr. Wasilewicz talked about having 50% of the weapon being brightly coloured—

The Chair: Mr. Noormohamed, I'm sorry. Your time's up.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you.

The Chair: We go next to Madame Michaud.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here with us today. What a pleasure it is to see you.

We have already heard the Fédération sportive d'airsoft du Québec as well as the Canadian Airsoft Association. We quickly understood that your industry was not consulted before the bill was tabled. I also gather that you have the impression that the airsoft industry has been unfairly targeted by the bill.

Since the bill seems to effectively ban airsoft markers and replica firearms, airsoft enthusiasts have been quick to submit proposals as a compromise. The associations that we have heard seemed to be open to finding other solutions, such as more regulations so that these sports can still be practised and not be subject to an out-and-out ban. I think that is what you are also proposing.

I know that this has already been said, but I am repeating it because I think it is extremely useful to go and check what is being done elsewhere. Obviously, as elected officials, we are not specialists in all subjects. We do learn a lot, however. Fortunately, we are helped by parliamentary assistants as well as the Library of Parliament analysts that provide us with interesting information.

We looked at what New Zealand is doing, and you spoke of this. As you know, ordinary air guns are not considered to be firearms. Under section 21 of the Arms Act, to own such a weapon, you have to be at least 18 years old, or have a firearm licence if you are between the ages of 16 and 18.

I gather you would agree with this sort of regulatory age limit in Canada. Is that correct?

[English]

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: Yes. That is one of the proposals we are making, 18 years plus, in Canada.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I also understand that the industry is heavily regulated in the United Kingdom, too.

I find it interesting that we use an orange tip to distinguish an airsoft gun from a real gun. In the United Kingdom, to better differentiate between the two types of guns, they sell two tone airsoft guns, whereby 51% of the surface is covered in blue, green or orange. This makes the gun much less realistic and clearly shows that it is not a real gun.

If the government were to impose regulations that would require distributors to sell guns that have been painted in different colours, would you be okay with that?

• (1705)

[English]

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: In the two-tiered system in the U.K., if you are not a member of the UKAPA organization, you have to purchase what you're specifying by the coloured variant, as it were. Membership would allow you to purchase the sorts of devices that we presently have in Canada, so there is a restriction there. We are open to discussion of the sort of two-tiered system that allows for that methodology.

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: In consultation with the various retailers I deal with on a daily basis, most are definitely supportive of trying to adapt to a two-tier system as they do in the U.K. I believe it is probably the most effective and comprehensive solution to address all the issues.

If that were to be the direction, further consideration would probably have to be given to how that would be implemented to other airguns that are affected by this industry. Airsoft is primarily sold through very specialized stores that are able to accommodate this sort of solution, which we definitely can and would do. However, larger, big-box retailers that sell traditional BB or pellet guns might have significant challenges adapting to a solution like that.

You would have to either do something extra for them or make some sort of distinction between airsoft and traditional BB and pellet guns. I don't know what that would be, but further thought would have to be put into that.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

We received lots of emails and suggestions about storage and the use of certain cases or bags for transportation. Some businesses have told us that the best way to follow the suggestions of other airsoft stakeholders, such as the ASIC, would be to ban individuals from importing airsoft markers. Here in Canada, that would mean that airsoft equipment could only be sold by Canadian distributors.

What do you think of that?

[English]

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: I'm not sure I quite understand what's being asked.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I will try to be clearer.

We are seeking to regulate airsoft equipment imports. If Canadians could only buy this type of equipment from Canadian distributors, and nowhere else, would you be okay with that?

[English]

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I think I understand the point you're trying to make. If the product can be imported only by actual importers, such as my business or retailers, that puts an added level of control on how it makes it to the end-user, rather than end-users being able to import the products themselves.

Is that your question? Yes. Okay.

Yes, I definitely think that could be effective, because right now end-users can import by themselves. There's nothing special required in order to do so. Of course, if you limit it to businesses that are importing the product, that controls the supply chain a bit more and makes sure that end-users have to purchase their product through Canadian retailers that will use these safe practices at sale to ensure that they are educated and so forth.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam.

Mr. MacGregor, if you please.

You have six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm glad you brought up the issue of pellet guns. I grew up with a pellet gun, and I know a lot of my friends have pellet guns. A lot of them look like real rifles from a distance. Of course, functionally, you can see the difference right away.

You said that the unintended consequences of how Bill C-21 is currently written could potentially also impact the owners of pellet guns and their ability to sell or transfer what they have lawfully purchased.

Can you expand a bit on that as well?

• (1710)

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: Yes, that would be correct. The way it's written is basically that anything that looks like a gun and shoots a projectile becomes prohibited, so, absolutely, that affects more traditional pellet guns or your Red Ryder BB gun. That kind of thing is affected, absolutely, so we have to make sure we don't forget about that. Even though we're talking specifically about airsoft, it's still important to consider.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: You mentioned that about 90% of airsoft users use a device with an electric motor in it. Is that correct? Did I quote you correctly there?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: Yes, that is pretty accurate for any rifle. I would say approximately 90% of the market is electrically powered.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Roughly 10% are the gas-powered options for rifles—

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: That's correct.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I've seen the internal workings of the electric ones. Certainly converting that to a fully functioning firearm would be pretty much impossible, but you're saying that it's most likely the gas-powered ones that could be converted, with the technical know-how to convert, to something that could maybe fire a few rounds of real bullets.

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: Yes, and that is rare, but there are certain models.... A lot of them come from Japan, where they don't really have real firearms, so they'll make things almost exact, but the RCMP does a good job at identifying these and signing FRT numbers if they determine there is a risk or if they don't pose a risk. Like I said, these are primarily gas models. As far as I'm aware, no electric rifle has ever been determined by the RCMP to pose a risk for convertibility. They are quite significantly different, despite aesthetic appearances.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I think the struggle our committee is having with Bill C-21 is that the way it's written does not give us a lot of wiggle room on how to amend it to what the industry would like to see. It's not easy for us to insert requirements for age, requirements for membership of a national organization or requirements to sign a waiver, because Bill C-21 basically amends the Criminal Code, changes the definition of what a replica firearm is and deems certain firearms to be prohibitive devices.

You are right in the concerns you have for your industry, because after Bill C-21, if it is passed as written and you were the owner of one of these, suddenly, if you were to transfer it to another person, you could be charged with weapons trafficking. If you were to have a bunch of them, the police may say that you are possessing a bunch of them because you are going to traffic them, so I can understand the very real concerns that people have.

I'm just going to make a comment here. One of the options before our committee is that we may just have to send the government back to the drawing board, because I don't think enough consultation was done. We have such a narrow laneway open to us to try to incorporate what the industry is asking for, and I agree. I think a lot of the concerns are very reasonable.

Airsoft in Canada provided me with a briefing. They've taken some time to specify their understanding of the bill and some of the options they would like to see.

You have a business. You have quite a large stock of airsoft. Can you talk a little about how difficult it would be, given your stock of airsoft guns and the imports you get, to make the changes to require that a certain percentage of the barrel be coloured? Could you rank them by how difficult it would be to make the major manufacturers comply with what you're proposing?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: If we are implementing a measure such as an orange tip, that is relatively easy to do. All manufacturers are already set up to do this, because that is a requirement in the United States, and they are quite a large market for airsoft, along with Europe. Even if you had to retroactively go back and make current inventory comply by having an orange tip, that is pretty easy to do. I don't really see that as being a very large burden. It would just be a matter of ordering in the tips, swapping out what you have for your current inventory, and then you would be in compliance.

Adopting more of a two-tier model like they use in the U.K. would allow us to continue using current inventory and then also add new products that are brightly coloured for that lower tier of people who aren't engaged in airsoft.

The other measures we have proposed don't really have anything much to do with the physical inventory itself, unless maybe we decide to put on an extra warning. A lot of brands already have warning labels in the manuals and on the boxes, but that's not standardized among manufacturers, so that's also easy to do. If we had a standard warning label, we could put it on the box and put it in the manuals, and that's pretty easy to accomplish.

• (1715)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you for that.

That about takes my time, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

We'll start our second round of questions. This will be a shortened round again.

We will start with Mr. Motz, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Is the sport of airsoft inherently dangerous at all?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I would say no. In all the years I've owned a playing facility, I've seen a broken ankle and a broken wrist. That was from tripping over logs running around in the forest.

It is a non-contact sport. It's mandatory to wear a lot of protective equipment. It's definitely very safe. I would imagine you'd see more injuries in a contact sport like football, for example.

Mr. Glen Motz: Would you agree with that, Mr. Hackenbruch?

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: Yes, sir. All the injuries I've ever seen are related to, as Matt pointed out, running around. It's no more dangerous than running, jogging or hiking.

Mr. Glen Motz: It strikes me as odd.

How many Canadians do you think are involved in airsoft in Canada? Do we have any numbers, offhand?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I would say it would be in the hundreds of thousands. The Airsoft Canada forum, which is one of the most popular forums that players join to talk about airsoft and that kind of thing, currently has 380,000 members right now, I believe. Of course, there are a lot of people who aren't necessarily on that forum who participate in airsoft as well.

It is quite a large community, for sure.

Mr. Glen Motz: Mr. Hackenbruch, does the inclusion of airsoft in Bill C-21 seem to be more ideologically driven than driven by public safety?

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: I can't really speak to what's in the minds of the people drafting the bill. I just know that the way we read it, clauses 1(1) and 1(2) would eliminate it.

Mr. Glen Motz: Are you aware of any evidence to suggest that those who are involved in the airsoft sport have a greater propensity towards violence or criminality at all?

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: No, sir.

A great number of members are part of the law enforcement community or military members. We're husbands and fathers, and it's just our hobby on the weekend. It's our sport.

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I would agree with that.

Mr. Glen Motz: One challenge that many Canadians have with Bill C-21 is that it seems to target law-abiding citizens, who have never been the problem—and stats confirm this—with the gun violence we're seeing in our country. It doesn't focus on the acts of smuggled firearms used by criminals.

If you look at this piece of legislation, what recommendations would you make to ensure that the legislation is focused in the right direction, forgetting your industry in airsoft?

How can we ensure that this firearms legislation actually makes a difference for public safety and actually focuses on those who commit crimes with firearms—the criminals? How do we do that?

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: Primarily, the conversation around airsoft tends to be the misuse of the devices. The solutions we've proposed would eliminate that in large part by restricting it to older individuals who are not going to abuse them, and with restrictions on the transportation, etc.

As for criminals, the laws already exist to prosecute people who misuse these devices. That, in and of itself, could be a hindrance and a deterrent.

Mr. Glen Motz: I just have one last question in the minute and half or so that I have left.

As I understand it, an unamended Bill C-21—and I think my NDP colleague creates a dangerous legal precedent and some ambiguity around the possession of airsoft firearms, although they're not really firearms in the extent of it—would cause a really chilling effect on the industry and a real minefield, if you will, for those who are in the sport.

It's been stated by public safety officials and legislators that airsoft people don't have to worry with Bill C-21. It's fine for those who continually use these, yet the new classifications, as we know, prohibit these devices. It sends some mixed messages.

Where do you see us going from here?

• (1720)

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: That is definitely problematic. The only way to really go from this is to.... If we're going to add more regulation for airsoft, we have to come at it with a more comprehensive package that acknowledges what airsoft is, and then we go from there to implicate some of the regulations we've proposed, making it a little more specific.

Mr. Glen Motz: Anything from you, Mr.—

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Motz, but we're done.

Thank you.

We will go now to Mr. Van Bynen. You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to come back to the notion that the consideration this committee is undertaking is much more than airsoft. It's about gun safety, etc. The crossover point at this moment, for this discussion, is likely the types of risks the airsoft weapons present to our community.

I'm going to go back to the testimony of Chief Evan Bray, the chief of police in Regina. He stated, "When a gun that looks exactly like a Glock, which is the gun we carry at the Regina Police Service, is brought out and used in the commission of an offence, most of the time even police officers, in the heat of the moment, can't determine whether the firearm is real or not. It does pose an absolute threat."

I'd like to come back to how we differentiate. If the airsoft weapons, or if the airsoft equipment—I don't know how you wish to classify it—represents a risk, why is there a reluctance to make it not look like a weapon that creates a risk when it is in a confrontation? Why is there that reluctance, that resistance?

Go ahead, Mr. Wasilewicz.

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I'm not really sure what you're proposing here. If we're talking about making, let's say, airsoft guns look nothing like a real firearm, then I'm not really sure how you would accomplish that.

There's a saying that "form follows function". If you're trying to design a device that can shoot a BB, then you need to be able to hold it and you need to have a trigger to operate it. It doesn't really matter. At the end of the day, it's going to end up looking like a firearm, especially from a distance.

That being said, there are real firearms, actually, that look more like space guns that are used in movies all the time, so you get a blurred line there of what something is supposed to look like in order to not look like a firearm, especially from a distance. That's why we believe our proposals, which are focused more on education and stopping honest mistakes, are probably the most effective when it comes to a criminal who is trying to use something while committing a crime. They're making that choice to commit a crime, so the police have to respond, in turn, to that.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: You mentioned a two-stage system in the U.K. Can you explain that to me, please?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: Yes. The way that system works is it ensures that traditional airsoft guns are available only to those who are active in the community, who have gone through education. They know what they are supposed to do with them and how to safely own them. It ensures that people who have not gone through that far, for instance the casual user who wants to just walk into a store and buy something to play around with at the back of their farm, are limited to buying only a product that is very brightly coloured, to make it very evident that it is not a real firearm.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Could that not be applied to all weapons that create a problem?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: To have them all be brightly coloured.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Yes.

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: That definitely poses a bit of a problem for players in airsoft.

First, I don't think they're the ones who are going to be walking down the street in public with them. They know the rules, and they're engaged in the sport.

Also, when playing a game like that in a field, having something that is bright pink is not exactly conducive to trying to hide, and that sort of thing.

• (1725)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: It could become colour-coded.

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: Yes, I would say that's probably the reason. That's why I think the two-tiered approach is probably the most effective as a good compromise.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: I'm trying to find ways to eliminate the risk that people see these weapons presenting, outside of your theatre, I guess.

There were a number of items that I think you agreed on together with Scott, and there were some you didn't agree on. For example, you mentioned that you would support safe transportation and safe storage regulations.

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: Absolutely.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Okay. Is that held throughout the industry?

My concern here is if you wish to be self-regulated, how could we ensure that everybody's interpretation of what is acceptable for safe storage, maintenance and transportation of the unit...? How could that be accomplished without it being regulated nationally?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: That's where we want to be able to adopt a standardized waiver, if you will, that has to be signed at point of sale by users, and that would be standardized across the industry, so everyone is made aware of, at point of sale, what they are required to do to own such a device. Being standardized, everyone is working off the same framework.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: What are your thoughts around individuals being required to be licensed to purchase an airsoft gun?

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: It depends how far you're talking about when it comes to a licence. If you're talking about a full PAL, that might be a bit of overkill for a BB gun. For licensing, what I think would be more appropriate would be something like the two-tier model that's used in the U.K., where you're educating and vetting that person ahead of time, before they purchase, by having them join the association and having to, more or less, complete a test so they know the rules of what they're supposed to do.

If that would be considered a form of licensing, and you'd get an airsoft licence after that so you could purchase normal airsoft equipment, I think that would probably be more in tune with—

The Chair: Thank you. I'm going to have to cut you off there.

Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to go back to what my colleague, Mr. Van Bynen was saying. He mentioned that the police association has suggested that airsoft guns should be banned because they look too much like real firearms. We have also heard the story of a person who was stopped and arrested by the police because they seemed to be carrying a firearm, when in fact it was a camera on a tripod.

According to the officials from the Fédération sportive d'airsoft du Québec, there seems to be a gray area in Bill C-21, which targets airsoft guns, but not flare guns or starter pistols that are used at sporting competitions, although they look like real firearms.

Do you think there is a problem in the bill and that the government really wanted to target the airsoft industry?

[*English*]

Mr. Matt Wasilewicz: I'm not sure I can comment on whether the bill was intended to target the airsoft industry in particular. I really don't have any way of knowing that. There definitely is a lot of grey zone as far as what looks exactly like a real firearm. It is very difficult to draw a line there, especially because things advance over time, looks change and styles change, so that's definitely difficult to do.

I'm not really sure what else to say on that.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Mr. Hackenbruch, do you wish to add something?

[English]

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: Yes, I would say that the example you've given of a camera being mistaken.... At range, anything in a dark alley or whatever could be mistaken for an airsoft pistol, rifle or whatever.

What I will say is that the Criminal Code of Canada right now clearly states that if you are misusing an airsoft pistol, you'll be charged as though it were a real firearm. Cases where that happens and someone is prosecuted accordingly would go a long way towards being a deterrent. On our end, in the community, educating people about what these devices will be treated like in the public is a huge part of the solution.

● (1730)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

[English]

We now go to Mr. MacGregor for two and half minutes, please.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

On that last point, exactly: If you were to use an airsoft gun in the commission of a robbery, it would be treated as an armed robbery, because the person being robbed has really no idea, in the heat of the moment, as to whether it's a real firearm. If you are going to be using an airsoft gun in the commission of an offence, I think any reasonable person would expect the police to respond as if it were a real firearm.

The problematic things are when we see teenaged children accidentally bringing something to school, and they may not know better. We know children don't always think ahead. The idea is putting in that age requirement and strongly educating responsible adults on how they need to keep their guns secure from young children, so they're not accidentally bringing them out in public and having the police respond to what was an accidental incident, which they then have to treat very seriously.

Mr. Hackenbruch, I'd like to turn to you. You mentioned that your association was created to work with government and law enforcement. You've heard the testimony we've received from law enforcement on their concerns. In your conversations with law enforcement, how have they received some of your proposals? Can you maybe inform us a bit on your work in that respect?

Mr. Scott Hackenbruch: Many of the individuals we've spoken with are amiable to a number of our suggestions. I know that here in British Columbia we have some provincial-based legislation that is going a long way towards restricting the age at which these sorts of things can be sold and participants can engage in the sport.

There is some work being done. It's a big conversation, though, and there are still lots of other people we need to speak with to get their understanding of how the industry works and is perceived, and also to get our side of things out there more.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thanks to both of you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

That wraps up our questions for this panel. I thank both witnesses for being here today. I thank you for sharing with us your time, your experience and your expertise, and for helping us with our inquiries.

With that, I would invite the witnesses to leave, if they wish.

The committee has a couple of things to talk about, and perhaps committee members would stick around.

The matter before us, of course, is that at this time we have an option to sit on Wednesday evening.

Ms. Pam Damoff: It's Thursday evening.

The Chair: I stand corrected—Thursday evening.

That came about because I was trying to make sure we didn't lose time on this bill while we accommodated the meeting with the minister and the commissioner. When I thought they were available to us this coming Thursday, in the morning, I was looking for another meeting slot in order to do Bill C-21, and that was as of last Thursday. That's what I believed. We nailed down that meeting on Thursday night. We have witnesses lined up. The clerk had to go through whatever gyrations and administration to get it done. It's there. It's available. It's locked down.

When I discovered that the minister was not going to be available on Wednesday morning, or the commissioner, I kept it so that we would have options. For example, perhaps the minister would have been available for this meeting. When I found out that the minister was available on Monday, and we heard through the grapevine that AGRI were not going to be using their meeting slot, we were able to nail that down. That's how we came to this situation.

It's not cast in stone. It's an option. It seems to me a waste if we throw it away. We have an opportunity, as the witnesses are all lined up to go forward with it, but it's really a decision for the committee to make.

Mr. Shipley, do you have a comment?

Mr. Doug Shipley: Yes. I gave you great praise last week about fitting in meetings. You are going above and beyond now in fitting in meetings, so it's good work, I think.

For full disclosure, I have a funeral Friday morning that I have to be back home for, so I will be travelling Thursday night. I'd have to find a replacement on Thursday night, and that may not be the easiest. I've sat in for the rest of Bill C-21, so I'd like to be here. It's unfortunate, obviously. I can't change those plans, so I'll take the will of the room and see what happens. Unfortunately, I would not be able to attend personally on Thursday evening.

● (1735)

The Chair: I understand. Consolations, of course.

Thursday night is a terrible time for a meeting. I hate it. The only thing worse is a Friday meeting. The only thing worse than that is a constituency week meeting. For people like myself and Mr. MacGregor, who of course are trying to get to the west coast, it's really nasty. I understand that.

I'm certainly willing to put up with that, because I would like to get this work done so we can move on to other things as well.

Ms. Dancho, please.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I have a couple of things.

My understanding, when we were attempting to schedule an additional meeting for our committee yesterday, was that the point was made by certain members of the committee that the interpreters are having a difficult time. There were a lot of comments made about the additional strain we would be putting on interpreters by having another meeting in addition to the two we already have.

I'm just wondering if that issue has been resolved and our interpreters are no longer dealing with health consequences in the last few days since that point was made.

Is that no longer a concern?

The Chair: We're not adding to the overall workload of the interpreters. For example, for yesterday, AGRI committee was scheduled for them. They had that slot, but they weren't going to do that.

I'm sorry?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Four meetings for us in one week is completely fine for the interpreters, rather than two.

The Chair: Yes. That's one of the things, of course, when we try to get an extra meeting slot, you know. Our poor clerk has to work overtime to try to organize that. It has to go through channels; we have to get the interpreters on board, and everybody else.

That's where we're coming from. We got it all nailed down. If it's the will of the committee to not meet on Thursday, we don't have to. I certainly would encourage us to do so.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: My second concern is that I feel a bit of the goodwill that we put forward in the motion.... I think it's fair to say and I think it's acceptable that we put forward a motion to have options if the meeting yesterday were to take away from Bill C-21. I feel that goodwill has been taken advantage of, Mr. Chair.

The goodwill we put forward to work together on that has now been manoeuvred so there's a new meeting. That's not what the work plan is that we agreed to. We agreed as a committee to a very specific work plan. We're preparing our amendments. We have members of our committee who are flying home for funerals and others who are flying to be home with their families.

I'm just quite concerned that the goodwill we established now seems to not be a consideration in this regard. The first I heard about that was yesterday, but it sounds like this has been worked on since Friday. I'm not sure why, as the vice-chair, I was not informed of this until I heard it from a staff member. I didn't hear it from you. I didn't hear from the clerk.

I'm just a bit disappointed in the process of this, given that this committee has worked very hard for a whole year to come together on issues that I would say we normally don't agree on. We found a way to work together, so I'm just concerned that perhaps there's a new tone that we're setting by doing this. I'm concerned about what that means for our working together moving forward.

Perhaps you can explain to us why we weren't informed of this—why I wasn't informed of this—until late yesterday?

The Chair: I certainly appreciate the goodwill the committee has developed among all parties. As I mentioned, the reason behind the Thursday evening meeting was that the motion to try to fit in the minister arose at a time when I thought we were going to have the minister on Thursday morning. In order to keep our schedule, I was able to find another meeting slot that was available. Our clerk was able to get that approved through all of the administration processes, as well as getting all the whips on board with it.

As I have said, it's not cast in stone. When the opportunity came for the minister and commissioner to come yesterday, and we were able to secure the slot from another committee, it certainly became an extra meeting that we didn't necessarily need to have, but it's all set up and ready to go if we want to take it.

I certainly appreciate the goodwill. I don't want to do anything to thwart that, but it kind of arose because of trying to fit everything in. Since it's there, I guess that's my argument. It's set up. We don't have to take it, but it's an option for us to do so if we wish.

• (1740)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: May I just ask a final question?

When were the witnesses invited? They have already been invited, have they not?

When did those invites go out?

The Chair: Yes. Those invitations started to go out last Thursday. When, as I mentioned to Mr. Motz and Mr. MacGregor last Thursday, we were expecting to meet this coming Thursday evening because of the ministers, the clerk started to try to set that up. They need a certain lead time to do that, so he started setting it up then.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Just to be clear, as of last Thursday, there was this plan to have a Bill C-21 meeting on Thursday night.

The Chair: It was, at that point, still tentative, because we weren't absolutely sure we were going to be able to lock it down. We weren't absolutely sure what was going to go on with the minister or the commissioner. It was tentative. I mentioned it to Mr. Motz and Mr. MacGregor on Thursday.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay.

Mr. Chair, I would just ask that in the future, you have those conversations with me as well, so I can be in the loop.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Motz, please.

Mr. Glen Motz: Thank you. There are a couple of things.

First, could the clerk read the motion from last meeting, when we made the decision to have an extra one, please? I think that will clarify a lot of misunderstanding.

The Chair: I don't think there's any misunderstanding.

Mr. Glen Motz: No, there is.

The Chair: I know that the motion allowed for—

Mr. Glen Motz: For an extra meeting, and we had an extra meeting on Monday. Is that correct? That was exactly the point of the motion.

The Chair: Yes, but it doesn't include our deciding as a committee to go forward with yet another meeting.

Mr. Glen Motz: Okay.

The other thing is, like Mr. Shipley, I'm involved in the Special Joint Committee on the Declaration of the Emergencies Act. That happens on Thursday night as well. Ms. Bendayan is on that committee too. I too wish to participate in the Bill C-21 study, but I will be at the Emergencies Act meeting, so I won't be here that night.

The Chair: I understand, but as I've said, it is a matter for the committee to decide today, whether we don't go ahead with that....

Madame Michaud.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know that you acted in good faith when you wanted to reserve a time slot.

We heard Commissioner Lucki and the minister on Monday, but I wasn't aware that we had slowed down our study of Bill C-21. I thought we could continue meeting in our usual time slots this week.

What is really worrying me is that we are getting closer to the date that amendments have to be tabled. I don't know what the other parties think, but we are not quite ready yet. Procedures must be followed with the legislative clerks to ensure that our amendments are admissible. That is what is worrying me.

I understand that we want to speed up the study, but if I look at the last work plan that was submitted by the clerk, we still have plenty of dates in December. If some members are worried that we won't be able to finish our study on Bill C-21 before the holiday break, I would answer that there are still quite a few time slots available during our regular committee hours.

We all agreed in good faith and we have discussed the motion for a few minutes now. Why the change without any consultations?

I am mainly worried about tabling the amendments. On which date will we be able to do so if we have a meeting Thursday evening? From what I understand, we are no longer meeting on November 17th.

[*English*]

The Chair: Well, I'm also proposing that we bring amendments forward, because we will have more time.

We have to abandon this room shortly.

I see Mr. Lloyd wants to speak, and I think then it's Mr. Motz.

I'm hoping we can discuss the matter of the deadline for amendments, maybe on Thursday morning, depending on what we decide for the evening. I'm wondering if—because we are getting pushed for time here—we could have a quick vote on whether to go ahead with the meeting on Thursday evening.

Would that be acceptable to you, Mr. Lloyd, or do you need to speak to—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I just want to say one thing quickly.

We talk a big game about trying to make a work-life balance in this place and trying to help families. I have a two-month-old. I'm not trying to do an appeal to pity here, but having an additional meeting on a Thursday night—booked with very short notice—does a considerable disruption to my life and to my family.

I have been at every single meeting we have had on Bill C-21 and I've been very involved in this process. I just feel it's somewhat.... I understand what you've done, Chair, in trying to find an additional meeting, because there was the possibility that the minister would take up our Thursday morning meeting, and I respect that. I'm not trying to derail Bill C-21's timeline in any way, but to have an additional meeting on Thursday to accelerate this is not something that I gave my consent to, and frankly, is disrespecting my work-life balance.

I understand if members of the committee want to have a vote on it, and want to do that, but we talk a big game about having a work-life balance with family, and if we're going to vote to just override that for some members because some people want to accelerate this, then I guess those are just empty words.

That's all I have to say about that. Thank you.

• (1745)

The Chair: The point isn't necessarily to accelerate it. It's the fact that we have this meeting slot that became available to us through this whole process I described. I personally don't want to waste it. It potentially would accelerate the study a little. It would give us more time to do amendments, in any case. I believe Ms. Damoff would like to speak, and I would really like to get to a vote on this if we could. Did you wish to speak? Go ahead.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I know we're short on resources, so we can just vote if you prefer, Chair.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Mr. Chair, I would like an answer to my question, because that will help me vote.

If we hold a meeting on Thursday evening and we lose an entire week that could be used to prepare amendments to be tabled, my vote might be different.

[*English*]

The Chair: It doesn't have to. The current date for amendments was a week later than that, but it would allow us as a committee to decide if we're able to get our amendments sooner, to accelerate that as well. This decision is simply whether or not we have the meeting on Thursday. Whether we do the amendments sooner or later is a whole other question.

Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: We're starting to see patterns in the testimony. There are three big areas of contention: airsoft, the red flag laws and witnesses being on both sides of the handgun freeze. We're very aware of what the possible amendments to this bill will be, and I don't know if we're going to hear anything different.

I'm speaking as someone who is a member of three committees. I'm okay with meeting on Thursday night. I know that may not make some of my colleagues happy. I already had Thursday blocked off anyway. I'm one of those lucky people who has a committee on Friday morning, so I'm not getting out of here until Friday evening anyway. I would be okay with finishing up witness testimony this week. However, I think Ms. Michaud's point about the amendments and the date those should be received by bears some serious consideration by this committee.

The Chair: I certainly agree. I want to emphasize that this decision does not necessarily affect that decision.

Go ahead.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I will say something. We should just decide if we want to meet Thursday night. In terms of amendments, I agree with Alistair in the sense that we kind of already know where we're going, but I don't think we should necessarily move up the date for amendments, because we don't know whether the legislative clerk is going to have them ready in time. As a committee, we decided on dates for the amendments. I think we should have that conversation among ourselves to decide that.

If the time is booked, I personally wouldn't mind finishing the witness testimony before the break week, and then we can work over the break week on amendments and have that conversation, even, on Thursday. If we want as a committee to move up the date for amendments, we can look at that. If we don't want to, we already have a work plan, but I think we can decide today solely on whether we meet Thursday night or not.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I agree with Kristina in the sense that I am concerned about moving up the amendment date. I think we agreed to that as a committee, and we need to have a commitment today that the date stands. That changes a lot of our work. We have a number of amendments we'd like to bring forward, and while I agree that we've heard several areas of testimony about amendments, I think there is still more that we'd like to learn.

I am concerned a bit, and given what we feel is a very underhanded approach, Chair, that this was scheduled on Thursday for days without my being made aware as the lead on the official opposition, I feel that perhaps it would be an underhanded approach if we moved this date on the amendments. Again, this is what happens when we don't talk about this, as we have for a year. Now it seems like we're changing the tone.

We are concerned about that, and now I feel I need to approach everything I just said with skepticism. It's quite disappointing, Mr. Chair, but we can vote on this and move forward.

The Chair: Fair enough, but as I've emphasized, this decision is only, solely and strictly about whether we meet on Thursday. It has nothing whatsoever to do with amendments. That's a matter to be taken up at another meeting.

Madame Michaud.

• (1750)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I understand what you are saying, but I get the impression that some people want to bring forward our hearings with the witnesses before the week-long break, so that we start the clause-by-clause study after the break. If that is indeed the case, we will have to have our amendments ready. That is what I understood from the reason that was given to justify an extra meeting this week.

If we still have witnesses to hear after the break, that will give us a bit more time for the amendments. That is what I see looking at the work plan, but perhaps I am getting it wrong.

[*English*]

The Chair: From the previous work plan, we finished up our witness testimony, I think, on Tuesday. We had a deadline for Friday. That's three days. That doesn't necessarily have to change because of anything we're doing here tonight.

All I'm asking is that we have the meeting time slot set up and we have witnesses available. We can reschedule them. All I'm saying is that we can have the meeting on Thursday night or not. It's your decision. If we stick to the regular amendment date that we formally discussed, that actually gives us all an extra week to get that done. That's something I think we need to take up later. We don't really have time. We've already kind of abused our schedule here a bit.

Can we just go to a vote on this now? The vote is on whether we stick with the meeting on Thursday night.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6, nays 5)

The Chair: We're going to stick to having the meeting on Thursday. I apologize to everybody who feels that this is inappropriate, but as you saw, it came about because we were trying to accommodate the extra meetings for the minister and so forth. We can deal with the amendments separately and, if need be, we have that extra time to get appropriate amendments going forward.

That being the case and there being no further business, I thank the members.

We are now adjourned.

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