



## ***EBTC INFORMATION BULLETIN***

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***DATE: January 26, 2006***

***SUBJECT: Arming Canadian Border Guards***

***SOURCE: Canadian Press***

The Conservative justice critic says the party will stand behind its promise to give guns to Canada's border guards a day after two murder suspects from California made a run for the border before they were stopped in a shootout.

"It's simply a practical matter of how soon these officers can be trained and the firearms issued to them," said Vic Toews, the Conservative MP who served as justice critic in Opposition.

"That's our commitment and I trust our minister will do exactly that."

Toews said in an interview Wednesday he was bothered by news that about 20 Canadian border guards left their posts as the gunmen approached the border.

"I think it does nothing for our national image. I find it very disturbing that our officers felt compelled to leave because of this threat to their personal safety," he said from his Manitoba riding of Provencher.

"I understand their concerns very well and don't fault them. What surprises me is that the former government refused to properly equip our officers."

He said he doesn't know what the time line will be.

The move would not require legislation. It would be done by an order in council, which the union representing the guards fully supports.

"The issue won't be then a policy matter that needs to be worked out," said Toews.

British Columbia's solicitor general is onside.

"I think they need to be armed," John Les said outside a cabinet meeting at the provincial legislature in Victoria. "We sometimes have some not very nice people who want to try to get into our country."

The unarmed Canadian border guards left their posts at four crossings along the B.C. border on Tuesday when they heard the murder suspects were coming their way.

A spokeswoman for the Canada Border Services Agency said the guards have the legal right to refuse to work if they believe they are in imminent danger. Guards who leave their posts are replaced by supervisors.

The two men were apprehended at the Peace Arch crossing on the American side of the border by U.S. law enforcement officers after a high-speed chase down Interstate 5 in Washington State.

One of the suspects was injured in the shootout with police. Both men are in federal custody awaiting extradition from Washington to California.

The shootout and police investigation closed the border crossing between Surrey, B.C., and Blaine, Wash., for hours on Tuesday.

A vice president for the Customs Excise Union, which represents border guards, was pleased that Toews said the Tories would keep their election promise.

"We will never work in a safe environment," said Steve Pellerin-Fowlie, who said about 20 guards were involved in the incident. "What we've been calling for years is the tools that will provide the maximum amount of safety possible."

The Tories outlined in their platform promises to arm border guards and double staff at 139 locations where officers work alone.

Pellerin-Fowlie said that guards became resigned to the fact that they weren't going to get the protection of firearms under the Liberal government.

"We have to protect ourselves. Under the labour code, any Canadian has the right to refuse dangerous work," he said.

"That information became better known among our members and over the past few months they have increasingly exercised their rights under the law."

There have been a dozen work refusals by guards across the country in the past year.

As it stands, border guards are supposed to allow anyone suspected of being armed and dangerous into Canada and then call police.

"We are supposed to withdraw because we're not armed," said Pellerin-Fowlie. "In many locations, that simply means the individual has gained entry because the response times are too long, hours, if at all."

There has been a debate in Vancouver about what law enforcement officers should have guns after guards on the public transit system were trained and equipped with firearms last year. Concerns were raised that adding guns to the mix would escalate violence.

Toews says it doesn't. As attorney general of Manitoba, Toews oversaw the arming of Natural Resources officers.

"It enhanced their effectiveness as peace officers," he said.

He envisions peace officers working together with RCMP and in exceptional circumstances with border guards.

He noted that in many rural areas, border guards work alone and RCMP offices are miles away.

"On Nov. 6, we had a person cross into Canada in my riding by simply pointing a gun at a lone official who was there, an unarmed woman. She stepped back and let the individual cross the border."

The man was eventually captured, but not by Canadian authorities. He wasn't caught until he tried to return back the U.S. on a bus, long after he had got rid of his gun north of the border, said Toews