

# New National Gun Laws— Are They Cost Effective?

All the great and good told us that the national gun laws were a great idea.  
Just like the republic. But what are the facts?

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**T**HE Port Arthur massacre of April 1996 provoked new laws and the destruction of 600,000 guns at a cost to the taxpayer of \$500 million. The indiscriminate mass destruction of the legally owned property of tens of thousands of honest citizens is unprecedented and was done without any prior inquiry. Prime Minister Howard promised a 'safer society'. Is it working? The public is entitled to know the essential facts.

## BEFORE PORT ARTHUR

An extensive study of the changes in the gun laws of England and Wales over six decades found no correlation between legal gun ownership and violent crime, and that gun accidents and gun suicides showed a steady decrease, although non-gun suicides steadily increased. Violent crime was lower prior to 1903 when there were no gun controls in Britain at all. The study also presented evidence that the abolition of the death penalty coincided with an increased willingness of *professional* criminals to resort to violence in pre-planned robberies.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Richard Harding studied the Australian situation up to 1981. Harding found that about 10 per cent of the population were gun owners, averaging two guns each, and that 26 per cent of households had one or more guns. At that time, 40 per cent of murders involved guns. Harding also found, however, no correlation between gun availability and *total* suicide, although there is a correlation with *gun* suicide rates.<sup>2</sup>

Following dramatic mass public shootings in the 1980s, the National Committee on Violence (NCV) found that macro-social factors predisposing to a violent society are high levels of poverty, a wide gap between rich and poor and deteriorating social support services.

For individuals, the single most important predictive factor was a prior history of violent behaviour. Other factors were poverty, unemployment, poor education level and alcohol abuse. Not surprisingly, Aboriginals are at greater risk than whites, with a murder rate up to 13 times higher than white Australians. Similar risk factors applied to victims.<sup>3</sup> These findings were subsequently replicated in the 1996 study 'Indicators of Aggressive Behaviour', carried out by the Australian Institute of Criminology.<sup>4</sup>

The NCV made numerous recommendations, particularly concerning which types of firearms should be permitted and these subsequently formed the basis for the new laws. No evidence

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was provided that such restrictions would, however, actually reduce death or crime rates. The NCV did *not* advise arbitrary mass confiscation of legally owned guns. NCV *did* recommend that:

Programs and policies for the prevention and control of violence should be subject to rigorous independent evaluation and provision for such evaluation should be incorporated in the design and budget of

the program in question

The Committee also added that:

Good intentions, warm feelings and trendy ideas—are not a sufficient basis for the expenditure of public funds. Measures ... should not be blindly embraced without careful provision for their evaluation and eventual dismantling in the event of unsatisfactory performance. Australia simply cannot afford to waste money on ineffective ventures.

The National Homicide Monitoring Program found that guns were used in only 20 per cent of murders, knives being the commonest weapon. About 70 per cent of murderers were unemployed, had prior criminal records and were drunk at the time of offence. Aboriginals were greatly over-represented. Similar findings applied to victims. Suicides accounted for 80 per cent of gun deaths. Handguns were used in only 4 per cent of murders. Hence, removing all legal guns could only prevent a maximum of 20 per cent of suicides and 5 per cent of murders, assuming that there was no method substitution. Total legal handgun destruction could prevent only about 1 per cent of murders, assuming that sawn-off long guns were not substituted. Other AIC studies showed that the total murder rate had hardly altered since 1915, although the percentage due to guns fluctuated up to a maximum of 40 per cent. Gun accidents had declined steadily since 1915.

US criminologists also found no correlation between legal gun ownership and crime. Murder was commonest in the group with fewest legal guns—black inner city teenage males, who had a rate eight times higher than their white counterparts. Most murderers had prior convictions which would preclude legal gun ownership in either Australia or the US. Racial differences in domestic murder disappeared after correcting ▶

for poverty. Allowing for racial differences, adjoining US States and Canadian Provinces had very similar homicide rates in spite of the 10-fold greater numbers of handguns on the US side of the border.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, lawful defensive gun use was found to be two-to-three times more common than criminal misuse. Criminals were rarely shot, the mere threat by the armed victim usually being all that was necessary to forestall the attack. Victims who resisted by threat or use of a gun were injured only half as often as those who did not resist at all or used other means. Shooting as a means of suicide was only marginally more effective than hanging, drowning or car exhaust gas.<sup>6</sup>

Most murders occur between family members and acquaintances. Violent criminals also have, however, family and friends and, in most domestic murders, there is a long history of prior sub-lethal criminal violence. The FBI definition of acquaintance includes drug users and dealers, prostitutes and clients and members of criminal gangs—not the sort of ‘acquaintance’ most of us have.

#### SO WHAT?

While the buy-back would reduce the number of legally-owned guns, any objective review would have raised serious doubts about whether it would succeed in reducing suicide and violent crime. As ‘success’ was never defined in writing at the outset, anyone is free to make up their own definitions of ‘success’ and change them whenever they wish. This makes objective evaluation difficult!

#### SINCE PORT ARTHUR

The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported a 3 per cent increase in murder for 1997 and an 11.5 per cent decrease for 1998, giving a total two-year decrease of 8.5 per cent. This is, however, within the normal range of annual fluctuations as shown by AIC figures over the 20 years 1975 to 1995. Armed robbery increases were 44 per cent and 20 per cent, for a total increase of 72 per cent. The AIC reported in May 1999 that total gun deaths had indeed decreased, but this was almost entirely due to a continuation of the trend of decreasing gun suicides.

Total suicides increased, largely due to hangings and car exhaust gas inhalation. While total murders decreased, gun murders increased slightly. The massive armed robbery increase involved relatively more knives, but fewer guns. This may not be beneficial. While knives may

be less dangerous, robbers are more likely to use them and the two effects largely cancel out.

By contrast, the FBI and US Department of Justice found that the much-criticized USA had an 8 per cent decrease in its murder rate and a 17 per cent decrease in armed robbery for 1997-99, for *no* increase in taxes and *no* confiscations at all. This occurred in spite of a steady increase in legal gun ownership. In 1998, Professors John Lott and David Mustard of the University of Chicago published data showing that murder and violent crime rates decreased in those US States allowing law-abiding citizens to carry concealed defensive handguns. Mass public shootings began to decline immediately and almost vanished about five years after such laws were enacted. According to anti-gun dogma, violent crime should have increased.<sup>7</sup>

Australia is also frequently compared with Japan. Japanese gun ownership is about 2 per cent of the Australian level, but their murder rate is about 60 per cent

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of ours and their suicide rate is almost double that of Australia and the US. Japan also has the death penalty, but does not have trial by jury.<sup>8</sup> Those who urge us to adopt Japanese gun laws do not mention this.

The AIC Director is now on record as stating that criminals will neither register nor surrender their guns.<sup>9</sup> No political party has any plan for controlling criminal misuse of firearms.

#### WHAT NEXT?

It is particularly important that we do not allow ourselves to be stampeded into hasty action. The AIC states that it will take at least five years to fully assess the effects of the buy-back: that is, we will have to wait until mid-2003.<sup>10</sup> Regard-

less of this, some activists advocate an ongoing campaign of emotional media manipulation to prepare the public to pay for the next round of confiscations, particularly of handguns,<sup>11</sup> even those these account for only four per cent of murders. There are strong rumours that the necessary legislation has already been drafted and will be implemented at the first excuse that occurs after the 2000 Olympics.

#### CONCLUSION

The experiment has been done and we must now evaluate the results. We must take the necessary five years to determine what effect our \$500 million buy-back has actually produced, before any further spending of taxpayers' funds. Preliminary results are not encouraging.

#### NOTES

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- 2 Harding R., *Firearms and Violence in Australian Life. An Examination of Gun Ownership and Use in Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, 1981.
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- 4 McDonald, D. and Brown, M., *Indicators of Aggressive Behaviour*, Australian Institute of Criminology, August 1996.
- 5 Centrewall, B., ‘Race, Socioeconomic Status and Domestic Homicide’, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 273, No. 22 pages 955-8, 14 June 1995, ‘Homicide and the Prevalence of Handguns in Canada and US’ *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Vol 134, No 11, pages 1245-60, December 1991. Kopel, D., *Guns: Who Should Have Them?*, Prometheus Books, 1990.
- 6 Kleck, G., *Targeting Guns: Firearms and their Control*, Walter de Gruyter, 1977.
- 7 Lott, J.R., and Mustard, D.B., ‘Crime, Deterrence and the Right to Carry Concealed Handguns’, *Journal of Legal Studies*, January 1997. Lott, J.R., *More Guns Less Crime*, University of Chicago Press, Chapter 4 and pages 100-102.
- 8 Kopel, *op. cit.*
- 9 Station 5RN South Australia, ‘Life Matters’, 11 March 1999 at 9:05 am.
- 10 *Firearms Related Violence*, AIC Paper 116.
- 11 Chapman, S., *Over Our Dead Bodies: Port Arthur and the Fight for Gun Control*, Pluto Press, 1998, pages 1, 5.

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