Guns don't die. People do

Simon Chapman

"We must stop walking down the American path of gun culture." That one statement distils the essence of the collective will to reform Australia's gun laws that developed after the massacre of 35 people at Tasmania's Port Arthur. Australia's prime minister, John Howard, gave it early prominence—"The governments of Australia decided that this country was not to go down the American path," and nearly every editorial writer, columnist, and radio host in the country repeated it endlessly. It became the argument that short circuited the need for any other explanation.

I have just spent five weeks in the United States working on a book analysing the passage of Australia's new gun laws inspired by the Port Arthur massacre. The American path motif was hard to ignore. Gun deaths here are an obvious place to start. Apart from Colombia—where soccer players can get killed for an own goal—and (interestingly) Russia, no other country outside a war zone comes near to the USA when it comes to gun deaths.

Figures speak for themselves

- From 1968 to 1991 deaths caused by motor vehicle declined by 21% (from 54 420 to 43 536) while in the same period deaths caused by guns increased by 60% (from 23 875 to 38 317).¹ In eight states gun deaths exceed road deaths—in Washington DC by fivefold.²
- In 1991 guns were used in 60.1% of all suicides and 67.8% of all homicides in the USA. Deaths from guns were the fourth leading cause of years of potential life lost before the age of 65.
- There were 26 513 homicide victims in the US in 1991. Of those 13 122 (49%) were males aged 15-34 years. This is the second leading cause of death among males in that age group.
- For every person killed by a gun another 2.5 are injured. In 1992 99 250 people were treated for non-fatal gun injuries in US hospital emergency departments.³
- In 1992 there were more gun dealers (about 245 000) than petrol stations (about 210 000).⁴ Recent law reform outlawing "kitchen table" dealerships has seen the number fall to a mere 142 094.⁵

The US has nearly 14 times Australia's population. It has 64 times Australia's total gun deaths, and 211 times its gun homicides. In the other direction we have Japan with the world's toughest gun laws. Japan has just over seven times Australia's population, but in 1992, enjoying the world's lowest homicide rate, it had just 60 people murdered with guns—nearly 30% less than Australia's recent annual average of 85 people murdered with guns. If Australia had the America's gun homicide rate, we would have 1894—more than five a day.

Each Thursday in among its "What's On in Washington" lifestyle pages the *Washington Post* publishes two broadsheet pages listing all major crime. Last week police were investigating the murders of five people shot dead in separate incidents in the past five days, bringing the total number of homicides so far this year in the Washington district to 253. There were also 34 robberies and one sexual assault where the assailants were armed.⁶

Packing heat

When you get your breath back on all this, the astonishing thing about the gun control debate in the US is

the way that the gun lobby here is succeeding in arguing that possessing guns actually "reduces" violent crime and death. The bible of this perspective is a book by a Florida criminologist Gary Kleck.⁷ Kleck claims to show evidence that those carrying arms deter robbers and assailants. Among his evidence are interviews with convicted felons who report that they would be deterred from robbery if they thought they might run into a gun. The National Rifle Association (the major organisation lobbying for the right of citizens to possess guns and carry them at will) argues that in Miami it is tourists who regularly get held up because the criminals know that the locals are probably armed.

The corollary of this for the National Rifle Association is that gun controls will actually increase crime. The only sensible option for the law abiding American, it argues, is to "pack heat," and in 33 states the association has succeeded in lobbying for laws that allow people to carry concealed weapons. The cartoon in a North Carolina newspaper showed two diners being asked by a restaurant waiter, "Will that be toting or non-toting?"

When you go to the Washington offices of Handgun Control, the main organisation lobbying against liberal gun laws in the US, you will not find its name on the lobby directory. When you press the elevator button for their floor nothing happens. The building concierge has to clear you and then insert a security release key.

Handgun Control has 400 000 supporters across the United States who each pay a minimum of \$15 a year membership. Many give much more. With this and a staff of 60, they try to advance the case for reforming the gun laws in the US and counter the efforts of the National Rifle Association to do the opposite. The National Rifle Association employs about 400 people and serves a membership of 2.7 million, though that has been declining since its president gaffed by apologising to Americans for the Oklahoma City bombing. Hundreds of thousands of members apparently resigned, refusing to take any more of this jelly back nonsense.

Only one new handgun a month

I spoke to a staff meeting at Handgun Control about Australia's new gun laws. To them I was reciting a fairy story. They simply couldn't take it in. Gun control in the US has been preoccupied with advancing the outrageous proposal that there should be a six day cooling off

Department of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of Sydney, Westmead Hospital, Westmead, NSW 2145, Australia
Simon Chapman, associate professor

BMJ 1996;313:739-40

period before you purchase a handgun. Rifle and shotgun controls are barely on the agenda.

There is a much lauded victory that saw military assault weapons banned. But let's read that again: newly manufactured assault weapons are banned, but not the hundreds of thousands of second-hand machine guns that can be openly traded with no gun register to track them, nor the tens of thousands that were stockpiled by gun dealers when they were given many months forewarning of the ban.

Last week I went to a sporting goods store in Virginia, some 10 km from the heart of Washington DC. It was the size of an aircraft hangar. The place teemed with families buying joggers, rollerblades, and baseball gear. As natural as apple pie, an entire wall of the store was covered with rifles and shotguns, with a glass counter that ran about 20 metres filled with handguns. The American who took me there said with a straight face "Virginia has introduced very strict new gun laws—you can only buy one handgun a month."

The National Rifle Association has a slogan "Guns don't kill people. People kill people" to which Handgun Control replies "Guns don't die. People do." American media parochialism shields most Americans from

realising that the home-as-fortress mentality they live under is not normal. Thank heavens Australia's openness to the world allowed us enlightenment enough to read the sign "Go back—you're going the wrong way."

SC is a spokesperson for the Coalition for Gun Control.

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(Accepted 5 September 1996)

Care of Older People

Community care: the independent sector

S Barodawala

This is the 11th in a series of 14 articles edited by Eileen Burns, Neil Penn, and Graham Mulley

The independent sector, which consists of the voluntary and private sectors, is a vital element in supporting older people in the community. The voluntary sector, coordinated by the Council for Voluntary Service and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, provides a variety of services, including practical help, reassurance and companionship, and advice, information, campaigning, and advocacy. The private sector owns all of the nursing homes and most of the residential homes and is gradually becoming more involved with the provision of services to help support older people in their own homes. With this increase in size and importance of the independent sector over recent years, there is now a real need for greater communication between the private, voluntary, and statutory agencies in any one region. In some areas, forums made up of representatives of these various sectors meet to discuss relevant issues and construct local policies, thus allowing a more coordinated approach to the delivery of services.

Over the past 20 years the emphasis on supporting older people has shifted from institutional care to care in the community, which is provided in combination by the social services department, the voluntary and private sectors, and informal groups.

Since the implementation of the Community Care Act in 1993, the needs of older people and their carers are now formally assessed; ideally, suitable services are then provided. These reforms have meant that voluntary and private organisations are now increasingly being asked to provide residential care, day care, and home based services under contract to social services departments.

The voluntary sector

The role of the voluntary sector in society is becoming ever more important. Voluntary organisations vary tremendously from large, national organisations with paid staff, to small, local charities providing advocacy, self help, and specific services to communities. Also, as

"Study of a head (St Ambrose)" by Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)

St James's University Hospital, Leeds LS9 7TF
S Barodawala, registrar in medicine for the elderly

BMJ 1996;313:740-3