

# **A Polite Society is a Less Armed Society**

**How several democracies changed after  
scrapping many of their guns**

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We've heard so much bad news about firearm death and injury, in this final session I asked to take the road less travelled – to speak to you as an optimist for gun control.

To explain this title, for several years I worked in firearm injury prevention in the United States. Here's one of my favourite slogans:

## **[SLIDE 2: An Armed Society is a Polite Society]**

An Armed Society is a Polite Society. It's commonly seen, often as a bumper sticker.

Today I'll not only suggest that this slogan is untrue – in Iraq, Syria and the United States to name just a few – but I'll also show some evidence to the contrary. Then I'll describe an entire world region which disagrees

with the young American in the T-shirt. That's my part of the world, Oceania. And here's how the debate flared up for us.

### **[SLIDE 3: Mass Shootings, Australia and NZ, 1987-1996]**

In the ten years from 1987 to 1996, **[LINE]** Australia and New Zealand suffered 14 mass shootings in ten years.

In total, **[LINE]** 127 people died, and 55 were injured.

Nearly two-thirds **[LINE]** of the victims were shot with a military-style semi-automatic rifle.

Two-thirds **[LINE]** of the killers were licensed gun owners, firing legally held firearms.

And it came as a surprise to many **[LINE]** that 87% of those perpetrators had no previous history of violent crime...

... and that **[LINE]** two-thirds of the killers had no previous history of mental illness.

Our decade of gun massacres came to a head in 1996, at the tourist town of Port Arthur, when a single young man killed 20 innocent people, with just 29 bullets, in the space of only 90 seconds. His final toll was 35 people shot dead, and 18 seriously wounded. Later, when the killer asked in a police interview if he'd got the world record for a mass shooting, the answer was yes.

In Australia, attitudes to firearms and gun laws changed overnight.

The country's newly elected, Conservative Prime Minister John Howard immediately announced tough, uniform gun laws across the nation, and a ban on the assault rifle-lookalikes used at Port Arthur.

#### **[SLIDE 4: John Howard Wearing Bulletproof Vest]**

When Howard tried to explain his gun ban to a hostile rally of farmers, for the first time ever in Australia, a prime minister was photographed wearing a bullet-proof vest.

But the mood had swung, and most Australians gave their overwhelming support to a long series of gun bans.

#### **[SLIDE 5: Firearms Collected and Destroyed, 1988-2012]**

In the 24 years since 1988, Australians collected and destroyed firearms [LINE] in 38 state and federal amnesties.

[LINE] Most guns were banned and bought back at market value...

[LINE] ... but many more were freely surrendered by their owners, for no recompense, to be melted for scrap

[LINE] The total was close to a million guns, or one-third of the nation's private arsenal.

To add some perspective, a similar effort in the United States would require the destruction of 100 million firearms.

What happened next is still a matter of hot dispute.

## **[SLIDE 6: Australia – Total Gun Deaths 1986-2010]**

That's because total gun deaths in Australia were already falling. You'll see the Port Arthur spike here, in 1996.

Then as the new gun laws took effect, that rate of decline accelerated. In the years since Port Arthur, the risk of an Australian dying by gunshot for any reason fell more than 50 per cent, and stayed there.

## **[SLIDE 7: Australia – Gun Homicides 1988-2010]**

Gun homicide was also falling dramatically. Although Howard's declared intention was to reduce the risk of mass killings, this decline in all gun homicides could be called a side benefit

## **[SLIDE 8: Australia – Gun Suicides 1988-2010]**

But that's also what happened with the most common form of firearm death, which is gun suicide.

The most comprehensive impact study of the Australian interventions found that:

## **[SLIDE 9: Australia – Drop in Gun Suicide (Leigh & Neill 2010)]**

“The buyback led to a drop in the firearm suicide rates of almost 80%, with no significant effect on non-firearm death rates. The effect on firearm homicides is of similar magnitude but is less precise.”

And importantly for any discussion of causality...

**[SLIDE 10: Australia – Largest Fall (Leigh & Neill 2010)]**

“The largest falls in firearm deaths occurred in states where more firearms were bought back.”

**[SLIDE 11: Australia – Gun Households (Leigh & Neill 2010)]**

...that Australia had nearly halved its number of gun-owning households, and by destroying firearms on such a scale, had saved itself 200 deaths by gunshot and US\$500 million in costs each year.

Another study showed that...

**[SLIDE 12: Australia – Rate Decline (Chapman, Alpers et al 2006)]**

“The rates per 100,000 of total firearm deaths, firearm homicides and firearm suicides all at least doubled their existing rates of decline after the revised gun laws.”

I did mention that these results are the subject of hot debate. For example, two researchers who are also active members of the pro-gun lobby concluded that:

**[SLIDE 13: Australia – No Effect (Baker & McPhedran 2007)]**

“the gun buy-back and restrictive legislative changes had no influence on firearm homicide in Australia.”

## **[SLIDE 14: Australia – Targets and Results]**

**[LINE]** Remember Australia's first priority had been to reduce the risk of mass shootings.

**[LINE]** The second, broader target was to reduce the risk of gun death and injury.

And the results...

**[LINE]** There have been no mass shootings in Australia since Port Arthur in 1996.

Now that's not a big finding on its own, because mass shootings are very rare events. The best we can say is that it's an encouraging result.

**[LINE]** Much more significantly, the overall risk of dying by gunshot in Australia has halved since 1996...

**[LINE]** And there's been no evidence of displacement to other methods of homicide or suicide. Killers did not just move to other weapons.

In what amounts to a massive national experiment, most Australians now accept that, political beliefs and fears aside, death and injury by gunshot can be as amenable to public health intervention as were the road toll, drink driving, tobacco-related disease and curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

And other countries have seen similar results.

**[SLIDE 15: United Kingdom – Gun Homicides 1998-2010]**

After the Dunblane Primary School firearm massacre, the UK banned all handguns and tightened its restrictions on long guns.

The reason for the see-saw effect in this graph is very simple: the numbers are tiny. Just 27 gun homicides among a population in 2010 of 62 million.

**[SLIDE 16: Compare the United Kingdom – Rate of Gun Death]**

Compared to the United States on the left, and Germany and Australia in the middle, the United Kingdom has one of the world's lowest rates of private gun ownership – and of deaths by gunshot.

**[SLIDE 17: South Africa – Gun Homicides]**

In South Africa, strict new gun laws, curbing the theft of military and police guns, licensing gun owners and registering their firearms has also been followed by a reduction in gun homicide.

**[SLIDE 18: Brazil – Total Gun Death]**

In Brazil, gun law reform and a massive programme of gun buybacks has saved 24,000 lives, according to the Ministry of Health.

## **[SLIDE 19: Brazil – Rate of Gun Homicide]**

I'm sorry we haven't had the resources to update our Brazil country page for a couple of years, but I can tell you that in recent times the country's rate of gun homicide has begun to climb again.

And I can almost hear you asking – where does Germany fit into all this?

Well, we have the raw data...

## **[SLIDE 20: Germany – Gun Homicides]**

...but I can't tell you what's going on.

You've tinkered with your gun laws a little – nothing significant. You've introduced a better system of firearm registration. But I have yet to read any research that gives a plausible reason for your decline in gun homicides. There's just so much we don't know, about so many countries.

Why is it that we don't know so many things? Well, to public health practitioners, the obstructions to firearm injury research and prevention are nothing new. Here we have an industry and its self-interest groups focussed on denial, the propagation of fear, and quasi-religious objections. To anyone who worked on the road toll, tobacco control or HIV/AIDS it's all very familiar. But the future is also here to see.



In the United States, largely because federal government agencies have enforced a 17-year ban on gun control research, only 15-20 full-time firearm injury prevention academics have stayed in the field. One of the best of those recently said – and this was a few weeks *before* Sandy Hook:

**[SLIDE 21: Guns and Tobacco (Garen Wintemute)]**

"Guns are where tobacco was in the 1950s...There's a little bit of science and a great deal of reluctance to do anything with the results."

But here's the promise of the public health approach. If you like, this is my personal long-term view.

Gunshot injury was once seen almost exclusively as a police and military problem. Catch'em, kill'em, lock'em up. But these days it's catching the attention of more people like us – people who seek to reduce injury from all causes by reducing the risk *before* the damage is done.

At the risk of putting it too simply, to public health practitioners, the gun is to gun violence as the mosquito is to malaria.

With gun violence, as with HIV/AIDS, waste-of-time notions such as evil, blame and retribution can with time be sluiced away to allow long-proven public health procedures. Given the opportunity and the effort, gun injury prevention can save lives as effectively as restricting access to rocket-propelled grenades and explosives, or mandating child-safe lids on poison bottles.

Agreed, it's a slow process, but so was tobacco control, and reversing the soaring road toll graph. So for a little more encouragement, take a look at how it's becoming part of the language:

**[SLIDE 22: The Creep of Public Health Language]**

**[LINE]** The Centers for Disease Control called firearm-related injury “A public health emergency.”

**[LINE]** A US Surgeon-General called gun violence “An epidemic.”

**[LINE]** The American Medical Association and the International Red Cross have both labelled gun injury “A disease.”

**[LINE]** **And both** the United Nations and the Vatican have used an older medical term: “A scourge.”

Finally, I'd like to show you some hopeful signs from my own region.

As in other parts of the world, small arms have been used in the Pacific as tools of intimidation, interpersonal problem-solving and resource allocation. We also call that armed crime, and it's bad for public health.

**[SLIDE 23: Bougainville Combatant and Waterfall]**

Papua New Guinea's Bougainville war lasted nine years, and caused 12 to 15,000 deaths. Then by mutual agreement, tied as it was to aspirations for a separate national identity, gun control became a key to peace.

It was around this time that a broad consensus emerged among stakeholders that the security and destruction of small arms are essential prerequisites for human security, good health and prosperity.

**[SLIDE 24: Child and Assault Rifles in the Nebilyer Valley.]**

In Papua New Guinea and many other developing nations, firearm violence contributes markedly to social disadvantage. Vendors and buyers are kept away from markets, children from schools, and patients from health care.

So for the rule of law and human rights to be re-established in Melanesia, for health care and other essential services to be accessible, for good work to proceed in a safe environment, illicit firearms were seen as the most immediate impediment to recovery and redevelopment.

**[SLIDE 25: Solomons RAMSI 'Weapons Free' Sign]**

So much so that when the troops and police of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands arrived in Honiara, the number one priority of all their governments – with no audible argument – was the immediate collection and destruction of small arms.

**[SLIDE 26: Solomons RAMSI Destruction of Firearms at Sea]**

And they did it with glee. Amid overwhelming public support, more guns were destroyed than the country even knew it had. Solomon Islands is now a 600-000-person Pacific Island laboratory. By law, it's a gun free nation where even the police no longer carry firearms.

What I'm calling the 'Pacific consensus for disarmament' even spread to remote Pitcairn Island, where preparations for a sexual abuse trial included impounding all the .22 rifles used by locals to shoot breadfruit out of trees. This had become a real trend.

But just for a moment, let's highlight the big difference here.

### **[SLIDE 27: An Armed Society is a Polite Society]**

Back to that T-shirt slogan. Not only does it encapsulate America's domestic gun debate, it also illustrates the conviction held by some superpowers that if they flood a troubled area with more guns, an already heavily armed society will become a more polite society.

This story from CNN shows just one of the problems of releasing an estimated 7-8 million additional small arms into uncontrolled possession in Iraq alone.

### **[SLIDE 28: Pentagon Lost Almost 200,000 Weapons in Iraq]**

Washington's own Government Accountability Office found that in just one case, 200,000 small arms newly imported for US allies were just... lost.

"Asked if the 110,000 missing AK-47 rifles and 80,000 pistols might have ended up in the hands of insurgents, a Pentagon spokesman said there was no hard data, but "anything is possible."

And finally, contrast this – and this is the guts of my argument – here's the more Pacific approach. When he landed his recent intervention force

in Dili, the capital of our island neighbour Timor Leste, the commander of our regional peace force was asked for his first priority.

**[SLIDE 29: Troops Will Disarm Timorese: Commander]**

The Australian military commander, Mick Slater, said his soldiers had started to disarm the Timorese military and police, and would also strip the local gangs of their weapons.

"We will be disarming everybody in Dili. The only people in Dili carrying weapons will be the international forces."

And he was serious. What Commander Slater was too polite to mention is that another key gang of East Timorese have also been denied easy access to guns. Those are the politicians.

And so it's my contention that the Pacific region has almost unconsciously forged a new attitude, all on its own. For the time being at least, we've re-written a popular American slogan. Our regional bumper sticker now reads: "An **un**armed society is a polite society."

**[SLIDE 30: GPO and AVRMonitor Logos]**

Thank you.