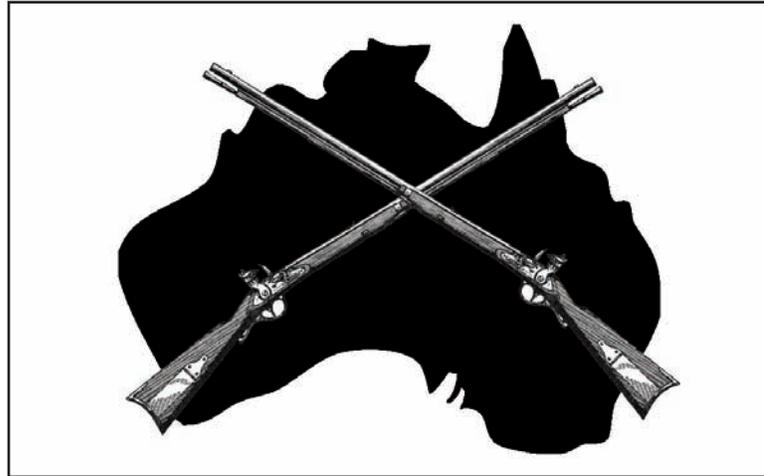


Who Needs Guns?

Lessons From Down Under

by David B. Kopel



H. Ward Sterett

Australia has something under 20 million people living on a continent as large as the continental United States. It is known as a place where an overseas visitor might, in some regions at least, find a frontier atmosphere. There has been good historical reason for that. Australia has an Outback, unique wildlife, and a legendary spirit of independence. Its soldiers, for instance, knew the meaning of a command to fix bayonets, and they acquitted themselves well in those conflicts where they stood beside Americans. The commissioned English officers notoriously did not like the Australians, though, because of Australian disdain for authority. Australian soldiers did not fall in behind bad leaders, and, under pressure, they tended to make their own decisions. It was nevertheless always conceded that Australians displayed great courage and that they did follow leaders who valued equality and fairness. With a state-oriented system of decentralized government and a long historical record as a haven for refugees from unfree countries, Australia has prided herself on tolerance. Now, however, the federal government has begun a war on civil liberty, aimed at destroying the nation's long-established gun culture.

We had to stand in lines. These were up to maybe a couple of hundred yards long in the bigger towns. On a Saturday afternoon during the buy-back time, I'd drive home after running an errand in the city, and I'd see the line yet again, over and over. When the weather was good, it was longer. Blokes would be standing there with

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their guns wrapped up in newspaper and old blankets, talking quietly and shuffling forward.

These are the words of an Australian who wished to remain anonymous. He is describing what happened when the Australian government, on pain of imprisonment, made him hand in his registered .22 rimfire rifle so that it could be destroyed. After a multiple shooting in Tasmania, in April 1996, in which 32 people were killed by a madman using a self-loading rifle with a military appearance, the federal government, under newly elected Prime Minister John Howard enacted laws banning all self-loading rifles and shotguns. All pump-action shotguns were also confiscated. (Pump-action guns were also confiscated in Germany in 2002, and the "Million" Mom March favors similar confiscation in the United States.)

The firearms being surrendered in Australia were not the property of criminals. The guns were plainly sporting arms that had always been legal.

They put up tents. Inside the tents there were especially-trained officers. They'd been told they needed to be watchful and keep order in case any of the people became unruly. So they stood around and looked stern while we all filed past. One tried to make polite conversation with me, but I felt sick. I said, "Nothing personal, mate, but I'm in no mood to talk to you. Just leave me alone." And at least he had enough sense to do that.

The so-called "buyback" was, of course, not a buyback of anything. The government did not own the guns in the first place. The guns were not for sale, either. They were brought to the confiscation centers under pain of imprisonment. The "buyback" euphemism was akin to calling armed robbery "income redistribution."

In all of Australia, state by state, not one single outburst of civil disobedience was recorded. (In Canada, 25,000 supporters of the Law-abiding Unregistered Firearms Association (www.lufa.ca) are refusing to register their sporting rifles and shotguns.)

Australian guns had been registered in the state of Western Australia since the 1930's, but most states imposed long-gun registration only in the last two decades. Civil-liberties activists who raised concerns that registration lists could be used for confiscation were labeled as paranoid extremists.

By the time that gun confiscations began, the authorities mostly knew who officially owned what. In such states as Queensland, where there had previously been no registration, it was brought in contemporaneously with the confiscations. The registration laws are now being used as the foundation for onerous restrictions on the remaining legal gun owners. As in the United Kingdom, harsh and unreasonable burdens are used in order to pressure people to give up shooting sports.

I'll never forget it till the day I die. I was brought up not on a farm, but with access to several guns, and I was trained in gun safety from ten years old. The .22 rifle belonged to my father. It wasn't an expensive model, just a little Browning takedown that took seven rounds in a magazine up through the stock. But as a boy I was trained to shoot with a single shot rifle, and when I was allowed to graduate to that little semi-auto, it was a big day in my life. My father was the one who made that decision. He always used to say that repeating rifles needed a bit more maturity than single shots.

After I was allowed to, I used to break it down, wrap it up and ride a bicycle to wherever the rabbits were thickest. There were times in my early life when my family was damn grateful for those rabbits. We ate a lot of rabbit stew.

I taught my son to shoot with that rifle. It was a part of our family. One day the government declared me to be a public menace because I owned it. Imagine having a father criminal enough to leave a Browning .22 to his son, eh?

The move against guns in Australia had long been prepared. The legislation had been written in advance. After the garish publicity surrounding the multiple murder in Tasmania, the government did not expect much resistance.

Nor did it get much. Six hundred and forty thousand legally owned guns were surrendered, and the exercise, including government compensation money, cost over 500 million Australian dollars, which were raised through a significant nationwide tax increase. Ownership of any gun for self-defense was prohibited.

How could people with such a history of independence suffer their guns and their right to protect their families to be taken forcibly from them?

The media in Australia are heavily dominated by a few names, and the policies of the outlets have been heavily anti-gun for years. That the Rupert Murdoch media outlets in the United States (such as the *New York Post* and Fox News) are relatively more "pro-gun" than their counterparts is more a testament to adroit marketing than to ideological conviction on the part of Murdoch. Australian media standards of fairness and accuracy are considerably below those of most U.S. me-

dia. When Bob Corbin, president of America's National Rifle Association, toured Australia a few years ago, some media publicized claims that Corbin was smuggling huge quantities of guns into the country.

Significantly, despite Australia's vast open spaces, the country's population is now over 85 percent urban, which is about the same as Japan's. And the country's ecology has not lent itself to a rich tradition of hunting like that of North America. Hunting of native quarry in Australia has increasingly come to mean duck hunting in one or two states where the water is good enough to allow it, but even this has been attacked by the "dark Greens" (that is, the especially militant, irrational, and intolerant Greens).

Over the years, many nonnative animals, such as rabbits, foxes, and goats, have been introduced into Australia, but the media have encouraged the public to believe that only specially qualified shooters should be involved in culling these pests.

Historically, Australia has been the land of the rabbit. It follows that it was also the land of the rimfire rifle, and, sadly, it therefore follows that rimfire rifles and popular hunting shotguns were the firearms the government took.

Most crime occurs in the large capitals of the various states. It has continued unabated, and the usual suspicions of gangs, drugs, and illegal guns all ensured rich pickings for the media—so much so, in fact, that, in 2003, John Howard's government has come back for a further round of confiscations, this time taking hundreds of models of handguns, which have been tightly controlled since the 1930's.

To own a handgun, a citizen must endure many months probation with an accredited target-shooting club before being allowed to apply with the police for a licence to possess a registered handgun. Licensees must attend a given number of competition shoots annually or monthly. All handguns over a certain caliber (.38) and barrel length (100mm for revolvers, 120mm for semiautomatics) are weapons prohibited to almost everyone, and, of course, the only people surrendering them are those who have already gone through the licensing procedures.

For handguns that remain legal, highly burdensome "safe storage" requirements, including monitored alarm systems, are required. The restrictions even apply to antique pistols made before 1900, for which no ammunition currently exists. Obviously, the purpose of the new oppressions is not public safety, for there is no problem today involving criminals using stolen 1851-model revolvers to rob banks. Even modern, lawfully owned handguns are almost never used in crime; in 2001 and 2002, for example, only one registered handgun was used in a homicide.

Public safety may be the pretext for more gun laws, but, in fact, the persecution of gun owners is seen as a good in itself, with the objective of forcing people to give up their guns. That is why the government is even "buying back" handguns not covered by the current surrender program, in order to encourage target shooters to give up their sport.

Observing what Australian politicians say about guns is instructive. Mark Latham is an Australian Labor Party luminary whose portfolio includes community security. In a May 21, 2003, interview, he said:

I think it's totally undesirable to have firearms in our suburban homes. . . . [L]et's face the basic statistics, that when there's domestic violence and there's [an argu-

ment] in the house then too often these guns can be used and often they're a source of homicide so we're going to be a much safer society the fewer guns we've got.

The government of Australia funds a great deal of junk science to promote the "statistics" congenial to gun prohibitionists, "proving" that law-abiding gun owners are a menace to society.

On June 4, 2003, Prime Minister Howard told a radio program:

The experience in Australia on the statistical evidence available in the past six years is that the homicide rate from gun use has fallen since the gun laws were brought in, in May of 1996. Now that's the Australian experience. I don't answer for the experience of other countries. . . . There has been a measured improvement. It's not huge. But there has been a measured improvement.

There has been, of course, *no improvement* in the actual murder rate in Australia since the 1996 gun bans. It has become a common trick in gun-banning countries to bring all deaths by shooting, including suicide, into a subset of their own and then to claim that "gun deaths" are declining after the passage of legislation. The Australian murder rate has not dropped, and neither has the suicide rate. People continue to kill themselves and one another, but the fact that fewer guns are involved in these deaths is supposedly a great triumph of public policy. Prime Minister Howard has stopped claiming that his gun laws actually saved lives. While the media have very carefully examined the government's justifications for Australia participation in Gulf War II, Howard is being given a free pass for his sleight of hand on the benefits of gun confiscation.

Billions of dollars have been thrown away on gun registration in Commonwealth nations, when there is no evidence that it has saved a single life. Well over a billion dollars has been spent in Canada alone, with much more still to come. The Canadian government had promised that the cost would be two million dollars. Gun registration has demonstrably failed to bring down crime rates in Australia. New Zealand, temperamentally and ideologically not dissimilar to Australia, repealed gun registration in 1983 at the request of the police because it was both ineffective and a waste of police time, but the gun-prohibition movement and its government allies now appear poised to impose it again.

Why? A letter written by the police minister of New Zealand, George Hawkins, on June 17, 2003, offers an explanation:

I . . . intend to proceed with some form of firearm registration by means of new legislation to be introduced this year. There has also been work undertaken by the United Nations on developing common principles for combating the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, their parts, components and ammunition in a transnational context. If New Zealand is to be a party to this type of multilateral undertaking, then there will need to be amendments to the Arms Act of 1983.

Actually, there is no U.N. treaty or any other document that requires countries to register guns, although some U.N. officials are promoting registration schemes. Indeed, the United States

(where only a minority of states register handguns and hardly any register long guns) has the strongest legal system, which meets and exceeds all U.N. requirements to prevent international arms smuggling. Even so, it is very convenient for politicians to have supposed U.N. requirements to fall back on.

Today, in most Australian states, the remaining 700,000 licensed firearm owners are treated as a social underclass. The ecological value of lawful hunting is continually disparaged, and authoritarian means are constantly employed to take firearms from people. Gun-prohibition advocates are proposing that a citizen must prove "genuine need" in order to own a gun. A similar requirement is being pushed in Belgium, and Mrs. Sarah Brady has declared need-based licensing to be her long-term objective in the United States. In the United Kingdom, a similar standard ("good reason") has been used by the police to reduce lawful gun-owning households to a pitiful four percent of the population. Many government officials and their allies in the gun-prohibition lobbies believe that no one who does not work for the government has a "need" to own a gun, except, perhaps, for some farmers and a few hunters, who might be tolerated for a while longer. The authorities, of course, are there to determine just what constitutes this kind of need, and Australians are finding out that, increasingly, whatever "need" is, they do not possess it.

More and more gun owners who never broke a law in their life are saying they wished they'd never registered their guns. Most will admit to knowing someone who has one that's off the books. Most will say they wish they had one, too. Probably a lot of the time they mean they already do have, but they don't like to say.

