



AUSTRALIA SHOWS THE WAY WITH GUN REFORMS

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Australia has offered to help the United States reform its gun laws, after a successful two-decade clamp down on firearms in the wake of its own worst mass shooting. The United States is reeling after at least 59 people were killed and more than 500 people injured, when a 64-year-old retired white accountant opened fire on thousands of concertgoers in Las Vegas on Sunday, 1st October 2017. He was described as a multimillionaire who owned several properties in various US states, 2 private planes and a regular online and casino gambler. America grappled with the deadliest mass shooting in its history. Investigators were desperately trying to establish the motive of the killer and remained cautious to an Islamic State (IS) claim that the killer had carried out the massacre on behalf of the jihadist group, which should not be discounted as he frequently took holidays to Europe and the Middle East, e.g. could he have been radicalized when he visited the UAE?

This shocking tragedy has sparked renewed calls for weapons central in the US, a sensitive subject in a country where the pro-gun Lobby, the National Rifle Association (NRA), is a very powerful and influential political force, especially with politician from the Republican Party. The NRA has been reported to donate US\$30 million to President Donald Trump's campaign. Trumps described this incident as an act of a lone wolf, perhaps mentally unstable. His critics say he will find excuses to avoid pinning responsibility on the US's constitutional attachment to deadly firearms.

Australian Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop pointed to a 1996 gun buyback and ban on semi-automatic and automatic weapons Australia was rocked in 1996 when a gunman went on a rampage with semi-automatic weapons at the historic Tasmanians colonial convict site of Port Arthur. Thirty five people died in the massacre, a turning point for a nation that traditionally had a high rate of gun ownership. The then centre-right liberal prime minister, John Howard, and his Deputy PM, Mr. Tim Fischer swiftly enacted tougher gun laws, including bans on certain weapons, a minimum ownership age and licenses. More than 600,000 weapons were destroyed in the aftermath and while controversial at the time, gun control measures now have strong public support. While gun violence has not disappeared, there have been no further mass shootings, in contrast to the United States, where they remain common.

On 8th October 2017, CNN's presenter, Fareed Zakaria, over his weekly programme, "Global Public Square" interviewed Mr. Tim Fischer, the then Deputy Prime Minister and the following is an excerpt of the very interesting interview:

ZAKARIA: When people think about the rest of the world,

they tend to think that countries outside of the United States have a very different culture and attitude towards guns. But Australia is not so different. It's a settler society with a frontier culture. And people have a long and proud history of gun ownership. Was that hard – was it hard to introduce the kind of measures you did, given that culture?

FISCHER: It was hard, John Howard, the then prime minister, and myself as deputy prime minister – we just had to muscle up. We had to make a set of decisions and negotiate with the states and then take the arguments to the public square full-off. And, step by step, John Howard, myself and many others won the arguments, notwithstanding some intervention by the NRA into the Australian scene to try and upend our efforts down here.

ZAKARIA: The part of the country you come from is actually particularly proud of its guns and the gun culture. Were you – what was the argument you made to people who had guns? You're a farmer yourself. You're a gun owner yourself.

FISCHER: Yes, I am, and a Vietnam veteran as well, and I speak to you just a few kilometers from gun shops in Albury-Wodonga. And we have a law-abiding gun culture in this country. I am not anti-gun. I do not hate guns. There's a proper role for guns to Australian farmers to this day and continuing. But we have drained the suburbs and towns of Australia of semi-automatics, most notably, and of course automatics. And that is a good thing and it stacks up when you see the outcome in terms of no mass gun shootings for 21 years since 1996.

ZAKARIA: You think the fundamental thing that is lacking is courage among America's politicians. I've heard you say that before, correct?

FISCHER: I realize – I have respect for democracy and I respect the second amendment as it is printed, as it is worded, including its mention of the word "militia". But there are times-in one sense, it's always difficult to find the exact right time. But I sense this particular period these few days after this mass shooting in Vegas, 1st of October – over 50 people cut down, over 500 wounded. You just cannot do nothing in that circumstance.

And I note in recent times you have had several former presidents join together for the hurricane relief efforts around the USA, a good thing – the two Bushes, Clinton, Carter, Obama, working together. What a powerful thing it would be if five former presidents were to push for incremental steps to bring some common sense before there are other mass shootings across the USA.

ZAKARIA: Do you – are you hopeful? Do you look at the United States and are you frustrated, or do you think something could change?

FISCHER: Do nothing this time around and there will be widespread condemnation, anger and a sense, a belief that the best days of the USA are gone and it's now approaching dysfunctionality and a democracy deficit of the worst kind.

Do only one thing, deal with bump stock, and that's also inadequate, when you think about it. Why do have to have unlimited-sized magazines to go hunting, to go shooting in a legal circumstance? And of course the answer is you do not.

So whilst they, the NRA, often maintain that the problem is not guns, the problem is the power of guns, the number of guns and the availability of those guns in circumstance. And you fail to deal with that, it's going to have implications for your tourism industry and down from the rest of the world, the rest of the global village.

The Acting Ambassador to Australia, James Carouso, admitted his country could learn from Australia when it comes to gun policy. He said, "Every time one of these things happen, US analysts always point to what happened in Australia, and point out that the Australian murder rate with guns has gone down drastically and Australian haven't had the repeat of this sort of mass murder. I think certainly a lot of observers in the US look to the Australian example."

American celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Ariana Grande and Caleb Keeter of the Texas-based Josh Abbott Band used their social media platforms to urge for stricter gun control laws. Lady Gaga, who has a following of more than 71 million persons, said, "This is terrorism, plain and simple. Terror bares no race, gender or religion. Democrats and Republicans, please unite now." She also took to task the call for prayers by Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, who like President Donald Trump and most other Republican leaders, is a staunch opponent of regulations on guns. "This calls to question whether politicians actually act to serve the people or protect their own political careers!"

Ariana Grande, whose own concert in Manchester was attacked in May 2017 by a supporter of the Islamic State group, killing 22 people, said: "My heart is breaking for Las Vegas. We need love, unity, peace, gun control and for people to look at this and call this what it is -terrorism!" Caleb Keeter, a longtime supporter of gun rights, said members of his crew had legal firearms, which were useless in the chaos as bullets rained down. "We need gun control right now. My biggest regret is that I stubbornly didn't realize it until my brothers on the road and myself were threatened by it."

In some ways, though, the legal minutiae can be a distraction. The basic facts are that gun homicides in America run into the thousands every year – more than 12,000 in 2015. All in all, up to 100,000 people annually will die or be injured as a result of gun use. All four of the biggest mass killings have happened in the past decade.

True, America's annual firearm-related death rate (10.54 per 100,000 of population in 2014) compares well to countries such as Brazil (21.2) or El Salvador (45.6 in 2011). However, set against France (2.83 in 2012), the U.K. (0.23 in 2011) or Australia (0.93 in 2013), it would take an ideologue or a madman to conclude that the US gun policy is serving the country well.

Former US President Obama recognised the lunacy of America's attitude to guns. His rage at the deaths during his term in office became ever more apparent with every high-profile shooting; yet the rage was matched only by his inability to bring about sufficiently substantive change. Obama's successor is not cut from the same cloth; indeed he has rallied the gun lobby to his side, declaring in a speech to the National Rifle Association (NRA) in April 2017 that his election had brought an "eight-year assault" on gun ownership rights to a "crashing end." He has regularly trotted out the line beloved of those who support the right to bear arms – that if more people carried weapons there would be more "good guys" when they strike. It is intellectual gibberish of the highest order. The other favoured mantra of the NRA and its fans is that "it isn't guns that kill, its humans", which would be laughable of its disingenuousness if the consequences weren't so severe.

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull recently disclosed the 51,000 illegal firearms, a fifth of all illegal guns in the country, have been surrendered in a 3-month amnesty which ended on 1st October 2017. All the weapons collected were destroyed. He said no one in Australia will be able to acquire the collections of semi-automatic weapons which the Las Vegas shooter was able to. With the country's tough gun ownership laws, Australia has had no mass shootings since 1996. ■

Source:

- AFP, *The Star* 4.10.2017
- Will Gore, *The Independent – The Sun* 4.10.2017
- Reuters, *The Star* 7.10.2017



Las Vegas mass shooting on 1st Oct 2017