

UK – no defence against “mass killing” events (e.g. Hungerford 1987, Dunblane 1996, Cumbria 2010)

Background – in December 2010, the Home Affairs Committee of the UK Parliament held an Inquiry into the mass shootings by Derrick Bird in Cumbria the previous June. Caroline Lucas, MP, the Leader of the UK Green Party, recommended to a constituent that the UK's gun laws should be dramatically tightened. I wrote to Caroline Lucas¹ and circulated my letter to my mailing list. A subscriber wrote to congratulate me on the letter, opining that it would have a beneficial effect on Ms. Lucas. My response to my subscriber is below.

15th January 2011

Dear

I'm very doubtful that it will have a beneficial effect. I suspect that Caroline Lucas is relatively sincere and actually believes “*only government should have guns*” and in the flat-earth economic policies that she promotes. She gives a strong impression of being the sort of committed evangelist who would cry while burning non-believers at the stake. Like the mother who, when asked what effect it might have had if the teachers at Dunblane primary school had been armed, said that it was better for the 16 little kids to be killed than arming teachers.

There is something schizophrenic about the public protection policies and realities of the British authorities. There is the firm, very deeply-entrenched view that the public should not use force to defend themselves – that it should be “*left to the police*”. In practise, even if the prospective victim(s) manage to 'phone the police, the normal end result of a serious event is that the police arrive in time to clean up the site. Then, if the victims' relatives attempt to sue the police for their failure to protect the victims, the courts will **always** rule that the state has no duty to protect anyone.

In 2003 a Mrs Pemberton of Newbury, Berks called the local police to say that she had “*about 1 minute to live*”. She had reported her husband's extremely worrying behaviour to the police several times before. When the police arrived over 6 hours later, she, her son and the killer (her husband), were all long dead.

You may remember the 16 Hungerford killings and over 30 woundings by Michael Ryan in 1987. His first murder was just outside the town, he then tried to kill a filling station attendant, then drove in to the town and walked about shooting people, until he had done enough destruction to satisfy his madness. He then hid in a deserted school. The police were informed right at the beginning of the rampage, but the Thames Valley Tactical Firearms Unit (“TFU”) did not arrive on scene until about 2 hours after Ryan had finished shooting. They then took another hour or 2 to locate him in the deserted school, where he eventually committed suicide.

The police in the town had no access to guns and no armed member of the public appeared.

The TFU was on a Newbury range only 20 miles away – about 20/30 minutes driving moderately quickly on an excellent, straight road. The public were told that their radios were not working, so they didn't hear about the event until it was all over.

Even so, even if their radios had been working and they had left quickly, all the murders would have been committed by the time they could have realistically arrived in the appropriate vicinity. **When seconds count, the police are** (at the very best) **only minutes away.**

In my view, the only “what if” scenarios that offer practical and realistic chances of being able to have stopped the murders before Ryan had had enough, all involve 2 characteristics being available together in a single individual (police officer or private citizen) who happens to be in the vicinity:

- Suitable gun availability (i.e. **immediately** to hand)
- Appropriate motivation and competence (both mental toughness and shooting skill)

Many mass killings are completed in a very few minutes (Luby's, Dunblane, Virginia Tech, etc). In these events, a realistic prospective “saviour” has to be in the immediate vicinity when it starts. In that sense, Hungerford was a much better opportunity for stopping the killings, as it involved several streets and lasted an hour or so.

The chance of success will be hugely improved by a social culture and a legal framework in which a person who stopped such a killer would be regarded as a hero, rather than as somebody barely, if at all, distinguishable from the killer. It will also be hugely improved if the type of individual identified above is not tremendously unusual. At the 1% level there might be a reasonable chance of 1 or 2 such people in the average street. In 2011 the incidence of such people will be effectively zero².

In fact, almost all of these characteristics have been very substantially crushed in the UK for many decades. The UK's chances of successfully stopping another Dunblane are zero and of bringing a Hungerford or a Cumbria to a speedy end are no better than some quite small number, perhaps 5% or so. This is based on a dodgy assumption that, in a small proportion of cases, a competent FTU might be nearby and available; and could get its act together and be on site within a very few minutes.

What sad ponderings

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¹ Letter to Caroline Lucas, MP, 14th January 2011. Copy available on request.

² In 1909, when firearms were readily available in the UK and the UK's crime rates were probably the lowest in the developed world, the “Tottenham Outrage” incident took place in London. It had some similarities to Hungerford; and a huge difference – numerous private citizens joined in the pursuit of the criminals and others lent guns to the police. Copy of article “Tottenham + Mumbai” of 8th December 2008 available on request.