

The Development of the British Faith in Strict Gun Control

by

Derek Bernard, 11th May 2009

Faith, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is *“firm belief ... without logical proof”*. Faith is, therefore, the appropriate term for the strong and widespread British belief in strict gun control.

Ever since the late 19th century (*see Note 1*) the English Home Office has assiduously encouraged the view that guns, in and of themselves, are evil, dangerous, anti-social devices that will turn ordinary, non-violent people into murderers. In consequence the Home Office has progressively developed gun control policies and bureaucratic procedures that have no beneficial effect on criminals, but do discourage civilians from possessing firearms for any purpose, but especially not for self-defence.

Sometimes extraordinarily biased data is put forward to support this stance, but knowledgeable review always discloses that the data has been carefully selected to support the Home Office position (e.g. the HO submission to the 1996 Cullen Inquiry into the Dunblane killings, or the 2004 HO Consultation Paper).

It is a deeply-worrying fact that the HO and police policy positions are never based on research into cause and effect, or anything remotely related to cost/benefit analysis. On the contrary, they are virtually always based on opinions expressed as “facts”, which are perceived as so self-evidently true that they require no supporting evidence.

Both of the 2 major documents generated to create and sustain this policy were produced in secret, without research, comment or input from independent experts, either during their preparation or when completed. Indeed, they were both kept secret for decades.

The “Blackwell” Report of 16th November 1918

The Home Office was worried by the 1917 Russian Revolution: perhaps British “working class” soldiers would do the same thing and overthrow the British establishment when they came home at the end of WW1. In the eyes of the Home Office these men, who had been fighting and dying for their country, could not be trusted. The Home Office was much more concerned by the fact that, in fighting for their country, such men had become familiar with firearms, than the greater truth that they had also been prepared to die for their country – and had done so in vast numbers.

In the view of the Home Office guns should only be permitted in the hands of those “approved” by the State.

So a Home Office official, Sir Ernley Blackwell, chaired a secret Committee and his Report of 16th November 1918, "*The Control of Firearms*", was used as the basis for the seminal 1920 Firearms Act. The Blackwell Report itself was never published and only entered the public domain several decades later.

The 1920 Act contained the concept of gun-owner certification, with discretionary approval by the police; and individual firearms registration.

Both these procedures were (and remain) immensely labour-intensive, both for the police and honest gun-owners. But the total absence of any identifiable social benefits, such as reduced crime trends, solving crimes, or catching criminals, either then or later, arising from this substantial and ongoing investment, has never caught the attention of any of the various government agencies charged with cost/benefit analysis, nor has it diverted the Home Office from its apparent, long-term objective of completely disarming the (honest) civilian population.

Whenever enough publicity is generated to the effect that violent crime is increasing and/or that the existing gun controls are "not working", the Home Office uses the clamour to extend the controls, rather than analyse their clear lack of benefit. When the new controls also fail to improve crime trends – which is invariably the case – further new controls are devised. Thus major new controls have been introduced in 1967/8, 1988 and 1997, with a host of lesser impediments in between. Each major firearms law revision of the last 40 years has been promptly followed by significantly worse violent crime trends. At the same time they have all been hugely successful in terms of the Home Office's long-term objectives, by greatly, sometimes dramatically, reducing the numbers of law-abiding citizens owning guns (*see Note 2*).

Although the government has established large, sophisticated and extremely expensive bodies, such as the National Audit Office and the Audit Commission, whose specific remit is to subject government activities to cost/benefit analysis, the overall case for gun control has never been looked at in depth, presumably because they are so self-evidently essential, that such analysis is claimed to be unnecessary, indeed inappropriate. On those occasions when some analysis has been carried out, the terms of reference are always restricted to the efficiency with which the bits of paper and information are handled and resolutely exclude the question of whether the bits of paper and information should be generated at all. But the Home Office is then able to claim that the subject has been "exhaustively" examined.

The second major known document is:

The "McKay" Report of 11th September 1972

This lengthy Report, "*The Working Party on the Control of Firearms*", followed the pattern of the Blackwell Report. A Committee of policemen was chaired by a policeman, John McKay. The Report was based largely on telephone enquiries to other policemen, was compiled in

secret, with no research into cost/effectiveness and without any independent review or input. It repeatedly uses assertions, without any supporting evidence, as the basis of policy, e.g. see page 27, clause 44:

"... we consider that the number of section 1 (i.e. ordinary rifles and pistols) firearms held in private hands should be kept to the absolute minimum."

The attitude behind this assertion continues to be the foundation stone of UK government and police policy to the present day.

The Home Office produced a 1973 Green Paper based on the McKay Report, but this aroused so many objections that it was temporarily shelved – until the emotions aroused by the Hungerford killings of 1987 allowed the Home Office to wheel out the proposals contained in the 1973 Green Paper as the “answer” to the problem.

The McKay Report itself remained secret and unpublished until 1996, when a Parliamentary Select Committee mentioned the rumours that such a Report existed – and a copy was surreptitiously slipped into Parliament’s Library.

Current Home Office “Consultation” Policy

Nowadays, in the interests of “open” government, the Home Office has modified its approach and it usually goes through what it refers to as a “Consultation” process, in which further controls are proposed and the public are invited to submit their comments. For example, this happened in 2000 and 2004 and is currently underway (April 2009) in relation to non-guns, i.e. de-activated, imitation and toy guns.

Many of those submissions to the Home Office that have been copied to the author, are detailed and serious, suggesting considerable research and/or knowledge. What happens to those submissions at the Home Office is unknown to the author, since he has never received even an acknowledgement with respect to his own submissions, much less a thoughtful response which actually deals with the issues and questions. One has difficulty in avoiding the conclusion that the Home Office “Consultation” process is, in fact, a total charade (*see Note 3*).

Effect of the “Guns are Bad” Policy

Not surprisingly, when a policy is maintained, indeed continuously strengthened, for over a century, it becomes an institutionalised belief system, completely eliminating any need for evidence of benefit. In such an unhealthy atmosphere it was disgraceful, but not surprising, to see an editorial in the “*Police Review*” of October 1982 state:

"There is an easily identifiable police attitude towards the possession of guns by members of the public. Every possible difficulty should be put in their way."

This strongly-held belief system, or Faith, sometimes has tragic effects.

The Home Office and police regard and promote themselves as **the** experts on such worrying and emotive subjects as violence and armed crime. Perhaps not surprisingly, this perception of expertise is shared by much of the media and a significant proportion of the public. So the Home Office faith, that guns are evil and dangerous, rather than neutral, inanimate objects, has become widely held. This often confuses and distorts the fundamental reality that it is human willingness to injure and kill that is the all-important characteristic that needs to be assessed, rather than the presence of any particular device.

In consequence, a number of people, some drunk, some disturbed and some playing games, are shot by the police because they have a gun, sometimes a toy or airgun, despite the absence of evidence of dangerous use of the gun.

Excessive “gun sensitivity” led to the tragic killing of Harry Stanley in London in September 1999.

Mr Stanley was walking home with a broken chair leg in a plastic bag when he stopped at a pub. A well-intentioned person in the pub assumed that the chair leg was a shotgun – which automatically implied criminality, danger and violence, as constantly hammered home by the Home Office and police. Thus sensitised, that person was able to mistake Mr Stanley’s Scottish accent as Irish – and called the police to tell them that there was an Irishman in the pub with a sawn-off shotgun.

A police armed response unit came immediately. Just like the caller in the pub, they were “sensitised”: sure that there was a shotgun in the shopping bag and so brainwashed by the police “guns are evil and dangerous” belief system that they were fearful that it would leap into deadly action from inside the shopping bag.

Mr Stanley had no reason to expect anyone to be shouting at him from behind, so probably did not respond instantly to the policemen’s shouted commands. The policemen have claimed that Mr Stanley pointed the bag at them as though it contained a shotgun, putting them in fear for their lives; to believe this, one also has to believe that Mr Stanley had somehow become infected by the gun sensitivity madness and also thought that he had a shotgun in the bag, even though he actually knew it was only a broken chair leg. In any event, from his wounds it is clear that, as soon as he started to turn towards them in response to their shouting, he was shot dead.

The various enquiries have ended with the policemen exonerated, as in all UK police shootings, on the grounds that they were in fear for their lives. The real culprit – the grossly exaggerated Home Office and police belief system that “all guns are evil and dangerous” was never even questioned, much less put in the dock.

Further Costs

In addition to the many hundreds of millions of pounds spent in creating, supporting and encouraging this belief system over the past century (e.g. at least £150m was spent on the

1997 pistol ban, which was followed by a doubling of pistol crime), more related destructive waste is arising in the government support for sport.

In 1986 the Commonwealth Games were held in Edinburgh. Amongst the many investments in new, high-quality sporting facilities were the shooting ranges, which cost several million pounds. Although there has long been a government policy of “legacy benefits”, i.e. that facility investment for major sporting events should provide long-term benefits for the community when the event is over, the entire range complex was destroyed as soon as the Games were over.

Now the same mind-numbing, wasteful policy is to be pursued for the 2012 London Olympics. Rather than invest in long-term range improvements at Bisley, the splendid old British shooting centre less than 30 miles from central London; or build a permanent range facility closer to East London; a very expensive, but temporary, range complex is to be built at Woolwich, at a cost of over £40m and then destroyed as soon as the Olympics are over.

The absence of legacy benefits and the extra millions of wasted taxpayers’ money appear to be of little significance when weighed against supporting “The Faith”.

Glasgow have won their bid to host the 2014 Commonwealth Games. It will be interesting to see what happens to the ranges being specially built for those Games.

Crime

In parallel with this long and expensive construction of The Faith, the Home Office and police have presided over extraordinary growth in crime, especially violent crime. There is now more armed crime in London on an average day than there was in the UK in the whole of 1900 (when there was no gun control whatsoever).

Part of this growth in criminal activity will likely be due to the considerable success of the government’s efforts to demonise self-defence. If the actual or intended victim of an attack has made any attempt to forcefully resist his attacker, the English Criminal Justice system now has great difficulty in distinguishing between them, indeed it is quite likely to treat the victim more severely than the criminal (*see Note 4*).

But these are minor and insignificant sacrifices, well worth making in the great cause of The Faith.

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Notes

1. *In 1870 the UK Gun Licences Act was introduced. It required a licence, readily available for ten shillings, with no personal details needed, for carrying a gun off one’s own property. In 1879 a similar, but more complex Porte d’Armes Law was introduced in the author’s home jurisdiction of the Island of Jersey and wasted everyone’s time and money there for 121 years until it was repealed and replaced with an even more wasteful procedure in 2000.*

In 1881 the Home Office proposed the Regulation of Carrying of Arms Bill, the purpose of which was to “ ... to require any person possessing arms for the suspected purpose of committing an offence to obtain a licence ...”. Perhaps because the unusually honest language made the irrationality clear, the Bill was lost.

In 1882/4 Secretary of State Harcourt strongly criticised the Metropolitan Police Chief for issuing the legal advice that the police had been given about the many circumstances under which it would be constitutionally proper to use a revolver. He insisted that the advice be re-issued with most of the circumstances deleted.

In 1903, after some failed attempts, the Home Office introduced the Pistols Act, which placed various modest pistol purchasing hurdles in the path of anyone who was not a householder, i.e. it was aimed at poorer citizens.

- 2. By creating the widespread belief that guns are evil and dangerous, likely to cause catastrophic accidents and with the capacity to turn ordinary people into criminals and ordinary criminals into murderers, the Home Office and police have been able to justify compulsory security requirements and then use these to force lawful gun-owners out of the sport. The 1988 Act introduced compulsory security for shotguns. For the next 4 years it was used to push 1,000 lawful shotgun owners out of the sport **every week**, i.e. a total of 200,000. In Home Office and police terms it was, therefore, a huge success. The fact that, at the same time, armed robbery **with shotguns** increased by 27% was, no doubt, seen as irrelevant.*

These security requirements now have the strength of “tablets of stone”, so clearly necessary, indeed essential, that they are widely used throughout the British Isles, including Jersey, to harshly prosecute lawful gun-owners who have committed no anti-social act whatsoever. Naturally they have no impact on criminals who have not applied for a Certificate.

- 3. In Jersey, the government has published detailed and eminently sensible consultation rules which all government departments are supposed to follow. Indeed there is a government department whose purpose in life is to train other departments to follow consultation “best practise” and monitor that this is done.*

But what actually happens – when the subject is gun control?

*The equivalent Jersey government department to the English Home Office is currently called Home Affairs. Over the last 25 years or so, the author has sent to Home Affairs (or its predecessor, known as the Defence Committee), a large number of detailed queries and submissions. Very, very few have ever generated even an acknowledgement and **not one** has generated a thoughtful, analytical response to the questions raised or proposals made.*

- 4. **“As members of the public, burglars have the right to be protected from violent householders.”**
British Crown lawyers’ advice to government in 2003, the London Times, 2 November ’04.*

Derek Bernard is a businessman based in the Island of Jersey. Although interested and active in target shooting from 1948 to 1979, he assumed that the constant refrain that “strict gun control” was a civilised necessity, must be substantially true. Surely the government, police and media would not repeat it so often if it were not true?

In 1979, however, he decided to try and understand the complex firearm laws (which he had never even read up to that point) and, further, attempt to determine which of the many control mechanisms in the law, actually produced the social benefits.

After 3 years of reading, writing and research he was forced – with a considerable sense of shock – to the conclusion that there were no measurable benefits to any of the control mechanisms, either individually or collectively.

A further 27 years of amateur work in the field has greatly reinforced those conclusions.