

Four questions re Firearms Amendment Act

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Dear *correspondent*,

Thank you very much for your letter of 24th January and my apologies for taking some time to reply. The subject of firearms laws is certainly one that is close to my heart and one that I have spent many years considering. While I am flattered by Dr Härke's views on my knowledge, I must warn you that he is guilty of gross exaggeration.

I am sending you a collection of material, which I hope you will find helpful. I must ask you to return the 2 books, the Lott/Mustard Study and the Home Affairs Committee Reports in due course, but you are most welcome to keep the photocopies.

I have not included the Cullen Report itself, since I assume that you already have it. But I have included the 2 Volumes from the Home Affairs Committee's deliberations, which, while far from perfect, are much sounder overall than Cullen.

The Cullen Report is very good on the analysis of the events leading up to the killings and very poor elsewhere. Unfortunately, his conclusion that there is a positive relationship between gun ownership and violence is the reverse of the truth. This is largely because he seems to have accepted the evidence of Killias and Gabor. The work of these two writers (I am reluctant to refer to them as "Professors" due to the extremely poor quality of their work) are classic examples of the abuse of statistics: identify the desired conclusions first and then massage the data accordingly.

In another crucial weakness in the Report, Lord Cullen also deliberately chose not to consider what might have happened if Hamilton had not had legal guns (see 6.69, "*...too much a matter for speculation.*").

For what it is worth, I am not surprised that even an experienced and able lawyer like Lord Cullen proved incapable of separating truth from mythology in the emotion-drenched atmosphere of the Inquiry. The quality of discussion and debate about firearms, crime and gun control in judicial, government, police and media circles in the UK in the 20th century has been roughly comparable to those on witchcraft in the 16th and 17th centuries.

My answers to your 4 questions are as follows:

1. **The law's effectiveness in stopping similar crimes.**

To the limited extent that the 1997/8 ban on modern pistols will make it very unlikely that a future Dunblane-type incident will be perpetrated by a **civilian** with **lawfully-possessed** pistols, the law could be claimed to be "effective". Unfortunately, military and police personnel also very occasionally go berserk with lawfully-possessed service weapons (in a Swedish incident in 1994, an officer killed 7 strangers with his service rifle). In addition, of course, the vast majority of firearm crimes are committed with illegal guns. Using amnesty hand-in figures, a few years ago it was calculated that there were about 4 or 5 illegal pistols for every legal one.

I would suggest that the real question should be: what procedure; law; physical barrier etc.; or

any combination of these; is genuinely likely to reduce the already very low risk of a group of schoolchildren being murdered (by any method) by an unstable and suicidal individual. And then, assuming something can be devised, what will be the likely costs and other effects. For example, turning schools into high-security prisons might, at a huge cash cost, somewhat reduce the chance of a massacre inside, but what about just outside, when the children are arriving and leaving? Or at a cinema matinee performance for children? Or at a sports ground or swimming pool etc.? And what would be the "cost" to society, of the reduced likelihood that children taught in such surroundings would grow up into confident, outgoing, friendly adults?

If it is accepted that a reduction in the risk of a massacre, **by whatever means**, is the objective, then the law changes have produced and will produce no benefits of any sort, are costing a great deal of money, have been grossly unjust to many thousands of people who have committed no crime and will marginally **reduce** safety. Any individual determined to produce damage broadly of a Dunblane-type and scale has a very large number of options available to them, e.g. petrol, explosives, illegal pistols, or even a machete or like implement. The Dunblane incident took place in rooms from which it was very difficult to escape and where there were no adult males available to oppose Hamilton. Under those circumstances there is little doubt that Hamilton could have done as much damage or more, with a gallon of petrol or a machete, as he did with his pistol.

You may recollect a machete attack that took place shortly after Dunblane. A deranged man attacked some small children in a school playground. A brave young woman teacher placed herself between the man and the children and was badly injured. A few of the children were also injured, but not severely. The absence of deaths was widely used by the media as "proof" of the relative deadliness of guns. I would suggest that there were 3 other factors of considerable importance: it took place in an open playground with the space for the children to scatter; the young woman's intervention allowed the children to scatter; and nearby fathers were able to see what was happening, run up and chase the attacker away. None of these factors were present in the Dunblane schoolroom.

It is a fact that, to date, by far the most effective mechanism available for coping with sudden violent, life-threatening situations à la Hamilton, is for one or more of those under threat to be armed with a pistol with which they are competent. Both "**Targeting Guns**" by Professor Gary Kleck and the massive study by Professor Lott and David Mustard are useful on this subject. The painful truth is that gun control, British-style, only disarms victims.

The British gun laws already in force prior to the '97/8 Amendments, made a scenario in which one of the teachers would have been carrying a pistol for self-defence, extraordinarily unlikely. Thus, the '97/8 Amendments made an already extremely weak self-defence situation, just a little bit worse.

2. Its effect on the sport.

My comments on the effects of the '97/8 Amendments need to be seen in the context of a sport which has been under repressive, legislative pressure to a greater or lesser extent since shortly after the start of the century.

At the beginning of this century guns were commonplace in British homes, with a penetration level of probably about 30 to 50%. Target shooting was a major sport, supported by the Royal Family and society, and the concept that the nation would be better off if every citizen had and was trained in the use of a gun, was widely accepted.

In 1900, the Prime Minister of the UK, Lord Salisbury, was able to say, with widespread support, "*I will laud the day when there is a rifle in every cottage in the country*".

By 1996, decades of misinformation from successive governments and their agencies had led to a situation in which target shooting was a minority sport which the mass media organs could either ignore, deride or viciously attack. In this unhealthy climate of irrational fear and prejudice against guns, the Dunblane massacre ignited a media frenzy in which a Government Minister, David Mellor, could publicly refer, on national TV, to some 57,000 lawful pistol shooters as "*perverts*" and get applauded.

The '97/8 Amendments have, so to speak, substantially tightened the screw still further, specifically in relation to target pistol shooting, but the perverse effects will be felt in every shooting discipline over time.

Target pistol shooting, which has been the most resilient and innovative area of UK target shooting for the past 2 or 3 decades, has been substantially wiped out. Only small segments of the sport are left, e.g. air, black powder and vintage pistol.

In addition, a significant number of clubs have been bankrupted, as have many gun dealers and other specialist suppliers to the target pistol shooting community.

3. Any way the law could be circumvented.

I think that this is largely dealt with in item 1. above. In the limited sense that "circumvention" can be taken to mean "finding a way around an obstacle by legal means", it would be possible for a skilful, experienced person to carry out a mass murder in Dunblane-type circumstances with lawfully-possessed Black Powder revolvers. It would require much **less** skill to do so with petrol, a bomb, or a sword, axe or machete.

In my view, it is wholly irrational for government and the media to focus on the "lawful ownership" issue. As already explained, anybody determined to do some terrible act of this sort, has a wide range of "lawful" means readily available to them.

4. Personal opinion.

The Dunblane massacre and the consequent '97/8 Amendments have to be seen as part of a long, on-going, tragic process. The perverse effects are complex and far-reaching. Reversing the process would have a beneficial effect, both on crime (especially the very high rates of burglary in the UK), as well as on police efficiency and the public/police relationship. But it will take a level of courage, honesty and objectivity which no British government in recent times shows the slightest sign of having.

Enclosures:

"Guns & Violence, The Debate before Lord Cullen", by R.A.I. Munday & J.A. Stevenson, Piedmont Publishing Ltd. ISBN 1-871134-11-0.

"Targeting Guns, Firearms & their Control", by Gary Kleck. Publ. Aldine de Gruyter, 200 Saw Mill River Road, Hawthorne, NY 10532. ISBN 0-202-30569-4.

Lott/Mustard, University of Chicago Study of Effects of "*Right-to-Carry*", July 26, 1996.

Home Affairs Committee, Fifth Report, "*Possession of Handguns*", Volumes I & II.

Various Photocopies.

Postscript re Machete Attack:

The attack was carried out at St. Luke's School, Wolverhampton by Horrett Campbell, who was jailed for life in December 1996. Lisa Potts was the brave nurse and she was awarded the George Medal. One 4 year old girl, Francesca Quintyne, was badly injured as well.