



Public Health Association
AUSTRALIA

The Hon Mark Dreyfus KC, MP
Attorney General
Parliament House, Canberra
by email Attorney@ag.gov.au

28 November 2022

A simple policy change that could boost support for gun safety work

Dear Attorney General,

I write in follow up to our conversation at the Australian Gun Safety Alliances function at Parliament House on Tuesday 22 November 2022 regarding the growing imbalance in resources and voice relating to gun safety policy in Australia.

As pointed out in my speech (copy attached) at the relaunch of the Parliamentary Friends of Gun Safety that evening, there is a perverse and increasingly dangerous unintended consequence of National Firearms Agreement struck in 1996 after the Port Arthur Massacre.

A statutory “proper purpose” required to hold a firearms license in Australia is, for those outside the primary production sector, primarily attained through membership of a gun club. As a result of this requirement, membership of gun clubs of various kinds, and the resulting financial resources available to such clubs, have increased enormously since 1996. There are more than 440 such clubs in Australia today. The national umbrella body Sporting Shooters Association of Australia had approximately 50,000 members in 1996. The number has grown to more than 200,000.

In 2015, annual combined revenue for state and territory and the national Sporting Shooters Associations exceeded \$20million, and asset based exceeded \$34 million. With various government grants and other income, it is reasonable to assume a significant increase on those figures by 2022.

There is a powerful reason why this matters. That revenue has actually resulted in increased capacity to contribute to influencing public policy relating to firearms. This is also illustrated by the growth of ‘shooters’ parties of various kinds being formed to seek political office, mostly in state and territory upper houses, in the hope of gaining balance of power status, and hence disproportionate influence on public policy.

Australians look to their Governments at national and jurisdictional level to undertake the necessary work of ensuring gun safety legislation and its enforcement, as well as administrative infrastructure such as proper and consistent registers recording the ownership and whereabouts of the more than 3.5 million guns in Australia. We also need governments to keep up with and regulate technical advances and developments in the weapons industry. In so doing governments consult with

stakeholders. Given the enormous growth in resources gathered at gun clubs, existing policy has, no doubt unintentionally, created a loud and persistent voice for those supporting the interests of shooters and shooting.

By contrast, the community voice promoting gun safety and proper regulation is not at all resourced. Most official government committees or reference groups at jurisdictional level have an imbalance of those representing shooters, when compared to those representing safety. In some instances there are no voices to balance the views of the shooters groups.

Astonishingly, there is just one person in Australia who has any salary to promote gun safety policies, and he is paid just one day per week to do so. His name is Stephen Bendle and he is employed by the Alannah and Madeline Foundation that was established by Walter Micac after the Port Arthur Massacre.

There is a ludicrous imbalance in the continually contested sphere of policies relating to gun safety policy in Australia.

A solution

I have put a proposal to the Western Australian Police Minister Paul Papalia as he undertakes a review of the firearms legislation in that state. I have proposed that an additional \$10 be added to the annual firearms license in WA for the purpose of establishing and funding a Firearms Safety Research Institute, which would have the purpose of capturing data relevant to the purpose of the Act as a means of evaluating its efficacy in achieving its stated purpose.

Such an Institute would be an independent body which would gather and report information on gun safety related matters, metrics and trends on ownership, and on accidents and injuries relating to firearms. It could provide independent policy advice on any new developments such as new types of firearms, silencers and other developments, based on the best available evidence, to the government of the day and as information for the broader public.

You mentioned in our conversation that this was a notion that you might raise with your fellow Attorneys General at your next meeting.

My letter is to remind you of that undertaking and urge you to explore this notion with all Australian jurisdictions as a matter of public safety.

With over 3.5 million guns in the Australian community in 2022, far more than was the case in 1996, I fear it is a matter of time before another tragic mass shooting occurs in our country. I urge you to support efforts to put better machinery in place to promote stronger firearm safety regulation and capacity. Especially as we see the continued expansion of the resources and influence of the firearms lobby.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Terry Slevin', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Adj Professor Terry Slevin

Chief Executive Officer

Gun control comments Terry Slevin, CEO PHAA

Parliamentary Friends of Gun Safety event

Parliament House, 22 Nov 2022

My Personal history in this issue commenced when I became Founding Chair of the Coalition for Gun Control in Western Australia, which formed soon after the Port Arthur massacre.

I am delighted to see the continuation of the bipartisan approach to this issue as demonstrated by this gathering today at Australia's Parliament House. Gun control is not and never should be a party partisan issue. It is and must always be a community safety issue.

I'm keen to point out a troubling if poorly understood unintended consequence of the [National Firearms Agreement](#) that followed that awful event in Tasmania. State laws now guarantee a multi-million-dollar annual income stream to Australia's pro-gun lobby, most prominent of which is the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia (SSAA).

Since 1996, each applicant for a firearm licence must prove a '[genuine reason](#)' for gun ownership. Primary production, for example, is listed as sufficient reason. But for many thousands of urban and other firearm owners, the only 'genuine reason' which fits is to [join an approved shooting club](#).

This has obvious benefits for public health. Gun clubs can mentor their members in firearm safety and the law, while keeping an eye on careless, troubled or suspicious firearm owners.

Pistol clubs have an added responsibility to approve, or to block a new member's application for a licence to possess a handgun. Such arrangements effectively outsource official responsibilities in the public interest.

Meanwhile the hazards to governance and to this country's limits on the proliferation of firearms are more ideological and political. Gun clubs enshrine in our society a core pledge of shooters, which is to [introduce children to firearms](#) as early as possible. Competitions include 11 year olds.

Australia has over 200,000 licences shooters according to Sporting Shooters Association of Australia. While data from states and territories is not consistent or as available as it should be, the current estimate suggests there are more than 868,000 licenced shooters (up from 478,000 in 2006), who own a combined total of 3.5 million weapons. More than the total in Australia in 1996. In addition there is estimated to be more than 260,000 illegal firearms in the "grey" market.

The SSAA is now one of the country's wealthiest hobby clubs, guaranteed an uncapped income in perpetuity from what is in effect a government tax on shooters.

From 50,000 members in 1996, the 440 SSAA shooting clubs have shot to a national membership of [200,000 gun owners](#), many compelled by law to pay an annual fee. In concert with this are the various Shooter's Parties which have popped up mostly in state election campaigns seeking to gain balance of power positions in state parliaments, and [have already succeeded](#) to some degree in every state and territory. Some members of the fraternity have been shown [shooting at targets of gun control advocates](#) and politicians.

In 2015 just seven top SSAA branches declare combined income of \$20 million and net assets of \$34 million, while the national branch alone collects \$10 million in annual fees. That's more than double the assets of Swimming Australia, and close to the income of Athletics Australia. In its 2015 financial return, SSAA National in Adelaide reported an accumulated war chest of \$6 million in cash.

The largest SSAA state branches have done even better:

- SSAA (VIC) reported \$4.4 million in revenue and assets of \$5 million. Adjusted for inflation, branch assets have increased 559% in value since the 1996-gun laws.
- SSAA (NSW) reported income of \$2.4 million with assets of \$7.2 million (up 717%)
- SSAA (QLD) collected income of \$5 million and holds assets of \$15.7 million, of which \$8.3 million are in cash (up a whopping 2,675% since 1996)

As the law sets no limit on shooting club fees, the SSAA can charge whatever it likes. Annual membership currently costs \$95 for an individual. Many clubs impose additional levies for the use of facilities and offer various add on services at a cost.

Now while we are picking at this theme lest not forget the firearms industry in Australia. I'm afraid I do not have good data on that, but I know of at least one federal MP who is well known to have substantial political donations from the firearms industry, quoted from one source to be in the amount of over \$615,000 from various shooting organisations over the past decade. Might be an interest question to put to the Parliamentary Library?

Meanwhile in this country where we are rightly proud of our gun control efforts, there is one bloke who is paid to work outside government to promote gun safety and to provide policy advice and input across 9 government, state territory and federal. He is paid one a week for that work and he is here today. Stephen Bendle is it.

Let me repeat that: one - day - per – week!

He is supported, on an off by various enthusiast volunteers or other souls who try to squeeze their concerns over gun safety into the hours between 9pm and midnight or on the weekends. That support is for the Australian Gun Safety Alliance – largely, the people and organisations represented here today.

I've heard of David and Goliath but that is starting to get silly.

But I do not want to finish on that note.

I want to thank and congratulate all the hard working and principled leaders, both in the political and public administration sphere, and those in public health and civil

society who seek to represent the fundamental and extremely wide spread view that, while there is legitimate use for firearms in Australia, all firearms:

- should and must be tightly controlled
- with appropriate protections and enforcement
- Proper data should be collected and reported about where they are, who has them and any harm that comes from their use
- And that firearms use in our country should be considered and treated like a privilege, not a right.

Thanks to you all for supporting and promoting those ideas and prosecuting those policies.

Please note much of this speech drew upon the work of Phillip Alpers who reported this data in a piece in the University of Sydney website in 2016. Found here

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2016/12/04/australian-gun-laws-may-lead-their-own-destruction.html>