



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

Hansard 25 May 1999

WEAPONS AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. A. M. BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care and Minister for Disability Services) (10.24 p.m.): In common with most members of this House, members of the One Nation Party say that they believe in the importance of protecting families. In Australian politics it is a rare thing for any politician, on any side of politics, to say anything other than that they support families and are pro-family. However, their actions often betray these sentiments. One Nation is no different in this regard. This was seen in the election policies that they issued last year, particularly their families, youth and community care policy that was announced by Heather Hill on 21 May. That policy stated—

"(One Nation will work) with Queensland families to rebuild the foundation of our society—the family ... Safe, secure and happy societies require as guiding principles strong functional family units."

It further states—

"(The) policy clearly articulates the commitment of Pauline Hanson's One Nation to rebuild and maintain the foundation of our society—'the family'."

Indeed, an important goal of this Bill is supposedly to protect families. For example, when the Leader of One Nation introduced this Bill into the House in November last year, he said that one of the key underlying principles for its introduction was to protect the safety of families. He said, "Australians have the right to defend themselves and their families in their own homes."

Despite those noble statements by the One Nation Party to allegedly protect families, the provisions of this Bill are at grave risk of achieving the opposite. It is my view that the provisions of this Bill will do little more than further endanger the lives of many families. As such, the Bill represents a clear contradiction of One Nation's policies and again shows to the Queensland people the sham that is One Nation. While on the one hand it says that it is pro-family, on the other hand it introduces anti-family legislation.

The Bill endangers families for a range of reasons. It removes the principle of weapons ownership for public safety and instead focuses on a belief that any fit and proper person should be able to hold a weapons licence. The Bill removes the requirement to deal with a licensed dealer when buying or selling certain types of firearms. The Bill changes the current requirement to provide that a person must be on a register of prohibited persons before the prohibition takes effect. It expands the genuine reasons for possession of a weapon to defence of a person or a person's family in the person's place of residence, that is, authorised possession of a weapon in contemplation of its use against a person—a clear contemplation of its use against another human being.

This fixation on the right to defend one's residence, one's family and one's property was hotly debated during the 1996 gun law reform debate. I can tell members of One Nation who were not in the House at the time that this was, in fact, a very controversial proposal for the Queensland community. Members from both sides of the House were inundated by correspondence and representations from people who felt very passionately, outlining views on all sides of the argument. I have no doubt that every member's office received as much correspondence as mine did.

I represent an inner city seat and, like all inner city areas of all State capital cities in Australia and throughout the world, there are very high rates of property crime and personal crime in my

electorate. However, I have to say that I did not receive a single piece of correspondence from a member of my electorate calling for a loosening of the gun laws. Every single piece of correspondence that I received from within my own electorate supported the gun laws. One would think that if there was a tidal wave of people seeking to have the right to defend their homes, it would come from an area where their homes were most at threat. My experience was that that was not the case.

The Bill proposes to expand the term of a firearm licence from five years maximum to an indefinite term. It reduces the restrictions on category C weapons—for example, semiautomatic guns and pump-action shotguns—so that those weapons receive the same treatment as category A and category B weapons. All of these provisions will have an enormous impact on the availability of guns in our community and, therefore, will have a negative impact on the safety of families. I would like to focus on two particular areas in which this Bill will endanger families: firstly, its effect on domestic violence and, secondly, on youth suicide.

Along with their stated belief in the importance of the family, One Nation says that domestic violence is a major social problem. Their election policy of last year states—

"Domestic violence continues to be a growing problem within the community and requires stricter regulations for removal of the perpetrator and support of the victims."

However, it is again clear that despite their rhetoric, their actions do not speak as loudly as their words. Evidence shows a clear link between patterns of gun ownership and domestic violence, and a clear link between the availability of guns and family safety.

Figures from the Australian Institute of Criminology show that about 40% of homicides committed with a firearm result from disputes between sexual intimates. Other research from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department shows that in a household where a firearm is kept it is 48 times more likely that the firearm will be used to kill a member of the household than to kill an intruder. Figures from the Queensland Police Service show the alarming extent to which firearms are used in domestic violence incidents. For example, of all the domestic violence related homicides between 1994 and 1998 in Queensland, firearms were used in at least one third of all of these incidents. Do these figures show that guns increase the safety of families? I think not.

Further, the Bill seeks to increase the number of weapons in the community. It will impact on the number of injuries and increase the seriousness of such injuries in domestic violence situations. Of major concern is the Bill's proposal to establish a prohibited persons register instead of the automatic prohibition currently contained in the Weapons Act. The Bill states that a person can be removed from this register if a doctor or a psychologist informs the commissioner that the person is no longer unsuitable to possess a firearm. These are grossly inadequate safeguards, especially if there is no recourse to any other checks.

The Weapons Amendment Bill would also significantly water down a range of important legislative protections contained in the Weapons Act and the domestic violence Act against perpetrators of domestic violence gaining access to weapons. For example, the current Domestic Violence (Family Protection) Act provides for the automatic suspension of a respondent spouse's weapons licence where a temporary protection order is made, and the automatic revocation where a domestic violence order is made. The proposal for such a register simply misses the point in relation to family-based violence. The pattern of family-based violence in our community is depressingly familiar. People who kill their partners and their children are ordinary people. They are people who have had no previous indicators. All too often they are ordinary husbands, ordinary fathers or ordinary mothers who are driven by extraordinary circumstances to commit a single devastating act of violence, and their access to a gun makes their violence irretrievable.

Another area that this proposal will impact on in a very damaging way is youth suicide. Gun availability affects families in this way. In this regard, the Bill is another example of One Nation being anti-family. Of the 587 deaths by firearms in Queensland between 1980 and 1989, 446, or 76%, of these deaths by firearms were suicide. I heard other members in the debate trying to discredit figures by a researcher called Kellerman. I am not familiar with the research, but they tried to discredit it by saying, "These weren't gun homicides, these were gun suicides", as if that somehow makes it all right—as if a suicide is somehow less of a problem and something that we should not be dealing with. The Bill will impact on the number of guns in the community and therefore influence the patterns of suicide, especially among young people. In Queensland, young people commit suicide at a rate that is 17% above the national average. That is a shocking figure. It is something that should bring shame upon all of us and we have an obligation to do anything and everything in our power to remove the source of self-harm among our young people.

Similar to domestic violence, there is a clear and irrefutable link between patterns of suicide and patterns of gun ownership. It is a legitimate question for members of One Nation to ask: does regulation work? Do we have any evidence that regulation of guns actually works to reduce the incidence of homicide or suicide? There is clear evidence. For example, prior to the 1996 amendments

Queensland had a higher rate of suicide by firearm than the Australian national average. Research already suggests that this higher rate could have been due to the less restrictive gun legislation at the time. According to data from the Australian Institute of Suicide Prevention and Research, deaths by firearm suicide in Queensland for young people in 1995 and 1996 were 17 and 24 respectively. However, in 1997, 12 months after the 1996 reforms, only eight young people died by firearm suicide in Queensland. That is half and one third of the figures in the years preceding the reforms. It is the lowest number of firearm suicides for this age group in 20 years and in relative terms—rates per 100,000—is the lowest since recording began in 1964.

Also in terms of youth suicide, under this Bill people will be able to store firearms unobtrusively in a vehicle rather than in a securely closed container that is out of sight. This in effect lifts the restrictions to access by those who may contemplate self-harm and suicide. Research also shows us that the choice of suicide method by individuals is influenced by many factors, and access to guns is only one of those. However, availability, the scope for second thought and the chances of intervention do influence their success. It seems that guns are preferred, especially by young men, for their lethal potential, their violence and the greater familiarity that young men often have with and greater ownership of firearms.

In this debate I hesitate to use the word "international", but I think it is important that we look at evidence from other countries. The United States is a good example of the impact that loose firearm restrictions can have. For instance, the United States has nearly 14 times our population and yet it has 64 times our total gun deaths and 211 times our gun homicide rate. The 1997 survey data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States indicates that approximately 8.3% of high school students carried a weapon in the 30 days preceding the survey. I think we have seen enough evidence over the past couple of weeks of what happens when students have guns in schools. None of us wants that to happen here.

In summary, there is overwhelming evidence that shows that strong gun laws do have an impact. They are not perfect. They do not stop everything. They are not a complete panacea. Tonight we have heard a lot about alleged failures in the gun buyback scheme. I do not doubt that there have been some failures in this scheme. I do not doubt that there are people who should have returned their guns but who have not. However, the failures are no excuse not to attempt to regulate. If we believed that a flaw in a regulatory system was enough to abolish the system, we would not be here making laws. But it is a step in the right direction. It is a step that will help to influence a decline in some of these social problems. But despite the evidence that is being put forward by members from both sides of the House, One Nation members and gun extremists fail to grasp the fact and they are unable to rise above their ideological beliefs.

A couple of weeks ago, I heard the member for Caboolture on 4QR saying that he hoped this debate would be conducted in a reasonable and rational atmosphere. I think it is important for all of us to remind ourselves of the misguided motivations of those people who are advocating a relaxation of the laws. We saw examples of this type of thinking in the opening speeches of many members of the One Nation Party in July last year, when allegations were made about a deep, dark international conspiracy that resulted in the Port Arthur massacre, allegedly only to see gun laws put in place. What rubbish! It is irresponsible for anybody in this House to suggest that the Government of Australia or, indeed, any other Government deliberately enacted the Port Arthur massacre simply to push through a political solution to gun laws. Any such suggestion by members opposite is an irresponsible reinforcement of what can only be described as some crazy civil militia views. Over the past couple of weeks in this debate I have heard it put by some of the civil militia groups in this country that Martin Bryant was not responsible for the Port Arthur massacre; that the gun wounds have been examined and it could have been done only by a professional marksman. How does any of this contribute to a reasonable or rational debate?

Members will not hear me say this very often in this Parliament: I do not have a lot of respect for John Howard, for many of his policies or for much of what he does; but for what he did in relation to the gun law reform he has earned my respect. I have to say that any suggestion that John Howard, for all of my doubts about him and his politics, would have deliberately enacted the Port Arthur massacre to push through an ideological commitment to gun law reform is offensive and an insult. I am proud to stand up here tonight and dissociate myself from that suggestion. If One Nation wanted to have any credibility in this debate, it would similarly stand up and dissociate itself from that type of lunacy.

In summary, I have very grave concerns about this Bill for a range of reasons, most particularly because of its impact on families, domestic violence, youth suicide and, in common with the member for Rockhampton, household accidents. The Bill will reverse the good work that has been done in gun control which has, on the whole, had bipartisan support from both sides of politics around this country and indeed from the Australian community. Again, many people say to me that, while they may not be Liberal voters, for their money John Howard's gun law reforms and his courage in standing up against some of the people in his own party and his own coalition on that issue is something for which he should be respected.

I think that the One Nation Party has misread the Australian electorate and the Queensland electorate on this issue. The Bill is a clear contradiction of One Nation's policies on families. It shows the inability of this party to rise above the ideological zealotry on gun ownership. Although its members say that they are pro-family, this Bill is the antithesis of family safety. The Bill, if passed, will increase the availability of guns in our community. There is no escaping that fact. Increased gun use will have a damaging impact on the safety of families. I applaud each and every member on both sides of this House throughout this debate who have had the courage to stand firm against what I believe to be a disgraceful and irresponsible Bill.
