



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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WEAPONS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (9.20 p.m.): My opinions on the firearm laws are no secret. Long before this debate even started I always thought that the outlawing of firearms—or the outlawing of any implement, for that matter—is basically a fruitless exercise because there are a lot of things in this society that are illegal, yet they are easily obtained.

Drugs are one example. We can outlaw drugs till the cows come home. As far as I am aware, drugs have always been illegal and they have always been a menace to society. We can outlaw firearms but we cannot make them go away. In Indonesia it is illegal to own a gun, yet they are freely available in most parts of that country. People are not just prohibited from owning certain types, it is illegal to own a firearm, yet they are still available.

I own quite a few firearms. Most of the people I know own at least one, maybe two, whether it be a shotgun for cleaning snakes out of the backyard or whether it be a .22 for taking out chicken hawks or something like that. Most people in the area that I come from need firearms.

I agree that there is no place for guns in the city. People living in the middle of Brisbane have very little need for a firearm unless of course they are a member of a gun club or a sporting shooters organisation and shoot as a past-time, sport, hobby or recreation. I have always thought that more reasonable firearm laws would take into consideration where people live, not just what they do or what their occupation is and all that sort of stuff. Realistically, those who live west of the Great Dividing Range or up in the far-north need protection from certain wildlife, whether it be a large boar, a large crocodile at a creek crossing or a shark. With regard to sharks, we have to remember that certain spear guns come under the Act as well.

In the spirit of what the member for Rockhampton said, I agree that any referendum in this country on the ownership of firearms would see the firearm owners defeated resoundingly. I have never argued that point. That is one of the most valid points that has ever been raised in this debate. I am not seeking a referendum on the subject because I know city people—and we are a largely urban population—would vote it down. But the point of this debate tonight is the amendments contained in the Bill presented by the member for Thuringowa have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with winding back firearms. It is not winding back anything; it is not changing anything. All it is doing is making a bit of a rational change to the manner in which we do the business of firearm licensing between the States, particularly as it relates to those who may wish to extend their stay while they participate in some sort of shooting activity.

One of the most important groups of people that this will affect, as the member for Barambah alluded to, is members of the armed services. I know for a fact that this was often a question asked when I was a soldier posted in and out of different States, whether it was from Queensland to the ACT or from the ACT back to Queensland. We have to remember that, as far as the military is concerned, Queensland is a large posting place for the armed services. Townsville is one of the largest bases that the Army maintains in this country. The RAAF bases at Garbutt and Amberley come a close second and third. Those places are home to a lot of people who come from States like Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. Of course, as we know, there are firearm licensing differences between those States. When soldiers are posted they can take their possessions with them. I know that a lot of soldiers pursue shooting as a hobby. As the member for Mundingburra comes from that area, she might also agree that a lot of the sporting shooters associations have their membership predominantly

based in the armed services. The armed services also conduct civilian range shoots and so on to promote the concept of shooting as a recreation and a legitimate sport.

Lavarack Barracks is the base for the ODF. The Operational Deployment Force can source troops from all over the country to be at ready notice for a period of months as part of its ready deployment force. As we have seen with Timor, it brought troops from all around the country; it brought troops from cavalry regiments from Darwin and Puckapunyal near Melbourne. It brought MPs from all over the country as well to be readily deployed to Timor.

Mrs Pratt: A battalion of MPs?

Mr NELSON: That is a reference to military police. The point that I have tried to make is that these people would have been based in Townsville for only a certain amount of time. Let us say that was for six months on a rotational posting. They would have been eligible to bring their possessions with them to Townsville. I put to honourable members that if I was one of those soldiers one of the possessions that I would have brought would have been one of my firearms, maybe more.

Again, the need for the secure storage of firearms means that people cannot just leave them lying around the country. If a soldier gets posted away for six months he cannot say to his wife or friends, "Here are the keys to my gun safe. Can you watch the rifles for me and give them a clean every couple of weeks?" He has to take them with him; he has no choice.

I put it to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that these days people have no choice other than to take their firearms with them if they really want to follow the law to the letter. So therefore they are stuck. They are in the position of having to carry their guns with them. When they get to Townsville they find that they have to go through all this rigmarole of going through the licensing procedure again after a period of time. Generally it is a mess. In his speech the member for Rockhampton agreed that it was an unacceptable position.

The Bill that the member for Thuringowa has introduced goes some of the way to rectifying this mess. It does not change the eligibility of somebody to get a gun, it does not change the type of gun they can own, it does not change the way they can use it or what category of firearm they can own. All it changes is the fact that once they have proven that they are a person who can have a firearm under a scheme in a State—and let us face it—

Mr Feldman: Responsible firearms owners.

Mr NELSON: Yes, they must be a responsible firearm owner. Let us face it, these days no matter what State we are in the laws are stringent. It is no easier to get a firearms licence in Tasmania than it is to get one in Queensland. It is basically the same.

So the point of the matter is that when these people are coming to Queensland—not just military personnel, but all sorts of other people—they should not have to go through that mess and rigmarole again, especially where they may not become a full-time resident of Queensland; they might only have a six months, a year or maybe a two-year posting here and then they might be sent off again. They might do a shuffle of States; they might move from Tasmania to Queensland and then back to Western Australia. Anyone who comes from Townsville would know that that is a soldier's life—to be posted from one end of the country to the next at a moment's notice. It is part of the trade. So these people are stuck in a position in which they will have to be continuously out there changing their licences and causing themselves a whole heap of grief when there is really no need to go through that. It is really and truly a waste of time, effort and money.

It is my sincere belief that the member for Thuringowa has researched his Bill very well. Obviously he knows what he is talking about and the Bill has my full support.

In summary, I would like to say that there was a lot of hysteria which led to the passing of these firearm laws. The hysteria was whipped up following the tragedy at Port Arthur, and other tragedies. The leaders of our country used a huge stick in an attempt to wipe out something that cannot be wiped out, namely, the illegal use of firearms. One can no more wipe out the illegal use of firearms than one can stamp out the illegal use of drugs.

It is pointless to say to a person who is a registered firearm owner, "We are going to restrict your use of firearms so that we can stop criminals using firearms." That is a waste of time. Other members and I have said that before in this House.

I have never understood why the laws came about in the way they did. However, being law-abiding citizens, we must accept the decisions made by our politicians even if they are ludicrous in the extreme. Firearm owners have complied with the laws, even to their detriment. I guarantee that not one single criminal has abided by the firearm laws. That has been evidenced by the spate of shootings that occurred after the firearm laws were passed.

We have heard of police stations being machine-gunned in New South Wales. I guarantee that the weapon that was used in that case not registered. Recently in Queensland we had instances where police officers were shot at, or shot, by people who were using weapons that were illegal and that do

not come within the Act because the people who own those sorts of weapons would never have complied with the firearm laws in the first place. The firearm laws have targeted people who are innocent and who have done nothing wrong.

I am a member of the National Rifle Association, which is a United States organisation involved with firearm advocacy in various parts of the world. The association's esteemed president, Charlton Heston, made a very important point, namely, that many more people are killed by cars than are killed by guns. Yet we do not ban cars.

When I last checked on the numbers—which is a few months ago—I found that hundreds of people had been killed in Queensland as a result of motor vehicle accidents.

Mrs Pratt: Drowning.

Mr NELSON: If we included all the categories, such as drownings, deaths in fires and air accidents we would end up with a phenomenal number. However, we will concentrate on vehicles because that is a very good parallel. A vehicle is a machine; a firearm is a machine. Hundreds of people have been killed either by people irresponsibly driving cars or as a result of road accidents.

At the time when I was undertaking my research I discovered that only two people had been killed by firearms. At the present time I believe the number would probably be only four people killed by firearms for the whole of this year. Any fair-minded person would consider that that is an anomaly. It is strange.

It is much easier to get away in a car after killing someone. It is a lot harder to shoot someone than it is to run them over with a motor vehicle—especially if firearms are stored in a responsible manner. My firearms were stored in a responsible manner even before the firearms laws were passed. Most owners of firearms would store their weapons in a responsible manner.

As I said, the member for Thuringowa has introduced a sensible Bill. He has also given notice of an amendment which will allow people to go on with their lives whilst still complying with what I consider to be unfair and overzealous laws. However, they are the laws of the land. Even if this legislation were passed, those laws would still be complied with in their full entirety. There is no change in the strictness of the firearms laws.

This is simply an amendment which makes the implementation of those laws easier and more palatable to people who have to work within the framework of the firearms laws. Most members of this House would have no idea of what I am speaking about because probably most members do not own firearms. They are difficult laws to comply with because they are manifestly unfair and unjust. If I introduced a law tomorrow to ban the use of cars because they are murderous instruments and they cause so many deaths in society, there would be outrage.

A couple of days ago in this House an honourable member referred to Emily's List and the role of females in society. One of the largest advocacy groups for the ownership of firearms in the United States is the Women's Electoral Lobby. Why is that? In some parts of America women live in a relatively unsafe society.

Take the case of a young lady who was walking along the street at night, and a group of three or four young men think they are going to make their feelings felt with this young lady. There is nothing more levelling than a .357 magnum. With a .357 magnum in her possession, that lady would be more than equal to her attackers. Women who have been saved from attack by the ownership of firearms are strong advocates for the retention of firearms. It does not take a man to pull a trigger. Anyone can pull a trigger. The ownership of firearms is an important asset in women's self-defence.

We have had "take back the night" rallies and such things in Australia. Such rallies in America are attended by women's advocacy groups. A firearm in a woman's possession is a great leveller because, no matter how many men there are, none of them can beat a .357 magnum shoved in their face.

I support the Bill. It saddens me that the Bill will not be supported tonight. I am heartened to learn that the Bill will be supported on this side of the House. Perhaps I was a little unfair this afternoon and maybe elements of the coalition are listening. I give credit where credit is due. I did not believe that the Liberal Party would support this Bill.

Mrs Sheldon: You should never prejudge anyone.

Mr NELSON: That is correct. I am very pleased to see that we have support from the Liberal Party. Perhaps I was a wee bit too harsh this afternoon. As I said, it is a shame that this Bill will not be passed by the House. It is sensible legislation. All legislation that is introduced by the member for Thuringowa is always sensible. The previous legislation that was introduced into the Parliament by the member for Thuringowa has borne fruit. We now have an organ donor register in this country. That is due to the work of the member for Thuringowa and his numerous cohorts. The legislation has my full support.