



Speech by

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POLICE POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES AND ANOTHER ACT AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MICKEL (Logan—ALP) (12.13 p.m.): Honourable members will recall the need to bring in tougher gun laws as a result of the Port Arthur tragedy in 1996 in an attempt to strike a new balance in gun laws. The then objective was to provide greater protection to the community, and therefore gun laws across the nation were reformed to provide inter-jurisdictional consistency in key areas. I commend the Prime Minister for the leadership he showed on that occasion, because he stared down the extremist groups in our society who would have had us believe that guns form a necessary part of the Australian culture. Guns are not part of our culture and never have been.

It is also worth remembering Pauline Hanson's comments that her party had had nothing to do with statements that what happened at Port Arthur was a convenient excuse for governments to take action on gun control. Honourable members might well recall that, recently, Mrs Hanson disowned that proposition. But those of us who were in this House on 30 July 1998 will recall the words of the then member for Burdekin, who said—

The great doublecross of them all was Prime Minister Howard's knee-jerk reaction on the firearm laws allegedly because of Port Arthur. We now know that Port Arthur had nothing to do with it. That was only the excuse to slug Australians with extremist laws long hidden away in the files, laws hidden away in the dark bogholes of Canberra, awaiting the day Australian law makers could be scared into passing laws hatched in a far away foreign capital to better fit Australians into their glorified international mould.

That statement, made by the then One Nation member for Burdekin, has never been disowned by Mrs Hanson, even though the then member for Burdekin subsequently disowned the One Nation Party. Those comments, deranged as they were, contradict Mrs Hanson.

Today, legislation has to be amended because dealers and armourers in Queensland have taken advantage of loopholes in the act to remove hand guns from normal registration control. This was done by modifying hand guns to render them nominally permanently inoperable but in such condition that they could easily be restored to a fully operable condition. It is unfortunate that the actions of a small number of individuals have proved the need to return to regulation of permanently inoperable hand guns. Under Queensland law, hand guns certified as permanently inoperable do not have to be registered or licensed and their transfer is not controlled through processes such as a permit to acquire. Effectively, permanently inoperable hand guns drop out of the system which tracks a weapon's ownership from one person to the next. Consequently, it is alleged that armourers or dealers treated the guns so that the effects were reversible, incorrectly declared them to be permanently inoperable, removed them from the state firearms register and sold them at high prices. The question before us is: should we be concerned about the control of hand guns?

Irrespective of the frequency with which firearms are used as lethal weapons, it appears that a hand gun is the most common firearm misused. The gun lobby claims that guns do not kill people but that people kill people. Guns certainly make killing a lot easier. International statistics speak for themselves. In 1996, hand guns were used to murder two people in New Zealand, 15 in Japan, 30 in Great Britain, 106 in Canada and 9,390 in the United States. A 1997 study found that the firearm-related death rate among American children under 15 years of age was nearly 16 times higher than among children in 25 other industrialised countries combined. There are about 35,000 firearm deaths, including homicides, suicides and accidents, in America every year. According to the FBI, nearly one

out of every three reported murders, robberies and aggravated assaults involves firearms—about half a million incidents every year.

In American states where guns are prevalent, such as Arkansas in the south and other states in the south-west, gun-related violence is highest. Comparative studies highlight this to an even greater extent. Take the study into the city of Seattle in the northern part of America as compared with the city of Vancouver in Canada. Both cities had identical rates of burglary, assault and robbery without a gun. However, once the rate of assault with a firearm was added, the rate in Seattle was seven times higher than in Vancouver. When it came to the examination of homicide with a hand gun, the rate in Seattle was 4.8 times higher.

Consistent studies throughout the 1990s have revealed that countries with high gun ownership tend to have higher rates of fatal gun violence than those with lower gun ownership. In Australia, 81 per cent of all Australian gun deaths during that period were suicides. Public gun massacres capture the media attention, but suicides are the hidden social ill. According to psychologists, suicide attempts are not planned well in advance. Many suicide attempts are relatively impulsive acts precipitated by a bout of depression. Suicide attempts usually arise from temporary despair. With guns and the easy availability of guns, such suicide attempts will inevitably result in death. A 1999 study showed that suicide prevention efforts should be stepped up among men in their 20s and 30s, because new figures show that suicide rates in men aged 25 to 34 exceed those of younger men and, even worse, are on the rise. The number of suicides in this age group has doubled since the 1970s and, unlike youth suicide rates, shows no signs of levelling out, according to researchers. What the studies confirm is that the ones who are most depressed are the ones who are least likely to disclose what they are depressed about.

Younger men are particularly prone to suicidal thinking because of perceived failures or achievement failures. It is that sense of failure that seems to be prevalent in that age group. It is an indictment on some aspects of modern society that there are some children and some youth who are driven to despair or feel so alienated that their only way to get back at that feeling of alienation, the only way to seek revenge, is through a killing. Teenagers, particularly boys, will enact violent fantasies. With the easy availability of a hand gun, that fantasy can become a reality in a flash.

Juvenile homicide is twice as common today as it was in the 1980s. It is not the brains kids are born with that have changed in half a generation; what has changed is the prevalence of violence. The easy access to guns and the glorification of revenge in real life and entertainment are high factors. To deny the role of these influences is like denying that air pollution can cause child asthma. As long as some children have a vulnerability to some things such as air pollution then they will have asthma. Similarly, as long as some children have a neurological vulnerability— and some always will—then turning a blind eye to things such as bad parenting, bullying and a gun culture will make other children see and withdraw and, ultimately, kill. It is to be hoped that, at least with this legislation, the government is doing everything it can to prevent easy access to operable hand guns.

The government has a very good track record, I believe, in trying to prevent bullying in the classroom—programs in Logan schools are particularly effective in this—but, equally, the government has a very proud record in introducing the Positive Parenting Program and trying to give parents, particularly the younger ones, in my electorate the extra assistance they need to be better parents.

With this legislation, the availability of hand guns will be reduced. It will reduce the likelihood of a hand gun incident breaking out in Queensland schools in a way that has been prevalent on television in American schools this year. Thankfully, we are intent on addressing the devil in the detail that that loophole exposed. It is to be hoped now that dealers and armourers can be brought back into line with the passage of this bill.
