

Special Edition: Federal Election 2004

ASJ

AUSTRALIAN SHOOTERS JOURNAL

The political voice of the SSAA



Roll of the dice. What are shooters to expect from Election 2004?

2004 Vol. 6 Issue 3

Members-only insert to the Australian Shooter

Website: www.ssaa.org.au



In this issue

ASJ

The political voice
of the SSAA

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CONTRIBUTIONS: Freelance contributions are welcome. We do, however, recommend that potential authors contact Assistant Editor Christine Brown prior to story drafting. Color slides and manuscripts may be sent to the address shown above.

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THE AUSTRALIAN SHOOTERS JOURNAL is published quarterly and is printed by Webstar, Silverwater, NSW.

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As the election approaches

What might shooters expect into the future?

by SSAA Researcher Paul Peake

A federal election will soon be upon us and political hopefuls across the country will no doubt be promising to move heaven and earth as they attempt to secure votes. Irrespective of the outcome, the question from the shooter's standpoint is what might we expect into the future? On the 21st of June 2004, the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia Inc. put ten simple questions to all sitting members of the House of Representatives and every Senator due for re-election at the forthcoming poll. By the beginning of September only 16 of the more than 180 politicians approached had bothered to respond and their answers (or the lack thereof) say much about our current crop of political representatives and their attitude towards law-abiding gun owners. See the following page for a copy of the Association's questionnaire and an overview of the various responses received. Although we received no response from the Prime Minister we did receive a letter from Mark Latham's office, a copy of which is reproduced below.

Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia ALP Policy Response to Questionnaire 25 June 2004

1. Do you believe people should be allowed to own firearms?

Labor supports the right of licensed shooters to own registered firearms. Sport shooting is a lawful sport and Labor does not want to see legitimate shooters driven out of their sport.

2. Which of the following do you consider to be legitimate reasons for owning a firearm? Target shooting; Hunting; Collecting; Primary production; Self-defence.

Labor recognises the right of legitimate recreational shooters to take part in their chosen sport, and other licensed firearm owners to continue to legally possess their firearms. Labor will work with sporting shooters and other licensed firearm owners to ensure that firearm laws do not unnecessarily encroach on their right to legally possess firearms and will provide these people with clarity in respect to their rights and responsibilities. The whole community and licensed firearm owners will benefit from a well thought out, conclusive firearm registry and properly enforced firearm laws, and for that reason will continue to work co-operatively to ensure the Australian people have the firearm laws that they demand.

3. Do you think gun-control laws should be based on fact rather than emotion?

Labor believes firearm laws should be in the national interest.

4. Do you support the recent ban on certain types of handguns?

Labor supports the current gun laws and the gun buy-back scheme.

5. Do you think laws which focus on licensed firearm owners have any impact on crime?



Compliance with an effective regulatory regime protect legitimate licensed shooters from the prospect of being sued for failure to comply with nebulous common law standards, and contribute to the safe storage and usage of firearms.

6. Should hunters be given increased access to government land in order to control feral pests?

Commonwealth Crown land should always be accessed and used in a manner consistent with the law. Any changes to that law should be made in the national interest.

7. Do you think that funds used for gun buy-back programs would be better spent in other areas such as policing, health and education?

Labor supports the current gun laws and the buy-back scheme.

8. Would you support a cost/benefit study of firearm laws in Australia?

Labor supports research into the firearm laws that helps ensure that the law in this area is in the national interest.

9. Are you aware of the firearm laws in your particular state or territory?

Yes.

10. Do you know any firearm owners in your electorate?

N/A.

Office of Mark Latham MP
Federal Labor Leader
25 June 2004



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Dear Respondent,

The Sporting Shooters Association of Australia Inc. is the largest organization representing firearms owners in Australia. The Association has in excess of 100,000 members and promotes a broad range of firearms sports at the local, state, national and international level. The following questionnaire is designed to help SSAA members make informed decisions about political candidates and their views on private firearms ownership. Thank you for taking the time to complete the form below. Your responses will be published in the Association's national magazine the *Australian Shooters Journal*.

Yours sincerely,

Bill Shelton
National President
Sporting Shooters Association of Australia Inc.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Party: _____ Electorate: _____

1. Do you believe people should be allowed to own firearms? Yes No
2. Which of the following do you consider to be legitimate reasons for owning a firearm?
Target shooting Hunting Collecting Primary production Self-defence
3. Do you think gun-control laws should be based on fact rather than emotion? Yes No
4. Do you support the recent ban on certain types of handguns? Yes No
5. Do you think laws which focus on licensed firearm owners have any impact on crime? Yes No
6. Should hunters be given increased access to government land in order to control feral pests? Yes No
7. Do you think that funds used for gun 'buy-back' programs could be better spent in other areas such as policing, health and education? Yes No
8. Would you support a cost/benefit study of firearms laws in Australia? Yes No
9. Are you aware of the firearms laws in your particular state or territory? Yes No
10. Do you know any firearm owners in your electorate? Yes No

PLEASE RETURN COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE TO BOX D154 GPO PERTH WA 6840

+ Shooting Sports + Gun Safety and Youth Training + Conservation + Ethical Hunting + Responsible Shooting + Shooter Protection

Only eight of the 16 politicians who responded took the time to fill in the questionnaire. These were the patron of the SSAA's Conservation and Pest Management section, Northern Territory *Country Liberal Party* Senator Nigel Scullion; Queensland *Independent* for the seat of Kennedy Bob Katter; New South Wales *Independent* for the seat of New England Tony Windsor; Queensland *One Nation* Senator Len Harris; *Liberal* for the Western Australian seat of Canning Don Randall (who does not support hunting as a legitimate reason for owning a firearm); *Liberal* for the Victorian seat of Wannon David Hawker; *Liberal* Senator for the Australian Capital Territory Gary Humphries and

Liberal for the Queensland seat of Moncrieff Steven Ciobo. No doubt many shooters are asking themselves who best to vote for at the forthcoming election.

The fact is when it comes to firearms neither of the major parties are particularly attractive.

The Liberals under John Howard (along with their National Party allies) have overseen two hugely expensive and grossly unfair confiscation schemes which were supported by the Labor opposition. Both the Australian Democrats and the Greens are completely anti-gun and if ever given an opportunity would destroy private firearms ownership in Australia.

What might shooters expect into the future?

The Democrats and gun control

The following is an extract from the Australian Democrats' website in the wake of John Howard's 1996 confiscation scheme:

Law and Justice Gun Control, *The Democrats support a national approach to gun control.*

The Democrats do not believe that Australia's current gun laws go nearly far enough. We are still strongly committed to handing the power over gun control laws over to the Commonwealth via a referendum of the people of Australia and we would like to see all firearms in houses in urban areas banned.

www.democrats.org.au/issue/ljguns.htm

Outspoken maverick stands for parliament

by SSAA Researcher Paul Peake

The past eight years have been tumultuous for the shooting sports in Australia. In 1996, Prime Minister John Howard coerced the states and territories into accepting his \$500 million firearm confiscation scheme, together with a raft of hastily drafted anti-gun legislation and a ban on certain types of rifles and shotguns. More recently, handgun owners have had to endure yet another pointless and expensive 'buy-back' - this time aimed at short-barrelled pistols and revolvers. With a few notable exceptions, since 1996 the silence from most politicians has been deafening. One of the handful prepared to speak up for shooters' rights when the debate was at its hottest however, was the ex-Member for Kalgoorlie, Graeme Campbell.

As the 1996 confiscation program got underway, while most politicians were either ducking for cover or taking as many free shots at firearm owners as they could, Campbell was prepared to have his opposition to the scheme put squarely on the public record. In between lobbying his parliamentary colleagues to reject the plan, he was a common sight at firearm owners' meetings around the country. An ex-professional shooter, Campbell brought first-hand experience and a unique perspective to what little debate, public or parliamentary, there was and he remained a passionate, high-profile advocate for the cause throughout some of its darkest days. Unfortunately, in a contest which saw his supporter-base split, Campbell lost his Kalgoorlie seat in 1998. Undeterred, he has continued to lobby on behalf of shooters since moving out of politics.

All that could be about to change, however. In June, Campbell announced his intention to stand as an Independent for the seat of Kalgoorlie at the forthcoming Federal election. The move is good news for shooters - outspoken, pro-gun politicians are thin on the ground in Canberra and the more there are the harder it is for government to push its anti-gun agenda without being called to account where it really matters - in the parliament.

With the world's largest electorate to cover, Graeme Campbell could no doubt use all the support he can get. Shooters in the seat of Kalgoorlie interested in helping out can get in touch with Graeme's campaign office on 08 9021 4613. ●

As if that was not bad enough, Australian Democrats leader Andrew Bartlett recently tabled a national animal welfare Bill in the Senate which could effectively override state and territory legislation. Dot-point (ii) under Section (3) titled "Purposes of Act" makes it very clear what the Bill, which proposes the establishment of a "National Animal Welfare Authority", is intended to do –

ii) prohibit the killing and capture of wild animals for the purpose of entertainment or sport;

Suffice to say that any hunter contemplating voting for the Australian Democrats might want to think again. Likewise, tighter gun laws and restrictions on hunting are warmly supported by The Greens under Senator Bob Brown.

All is not doom and gloom however. There are a number of independent and minor party candidates (and even a few within the two major parties) who have consistently argued against ill-conceived gun laws. It is important that shooters maintain a voice in Canberra by getting behind those politicians and political hopefuls who support a fair and reasonable approach to gun-control. Gun owners in New South Wales have seen the advantages of having the Shooters Party, led by John Tingle, in the state's Legislative Council. The Party has had a significant influence on a range of important gun-control issues and while it will not be standing candidates in the upcoming Federal election, the lessons are nevertheless clear.

So what can shooters do?

Start by making an appointment to see your local Federal representative and any alternative candidates for their seat. Outline your concerns and expectations, gauge their responses and then consider which one might best represent your interests. The sad fact is private firearms ownership in Australia has become highly politicised with successive state and Federal governments seeking mileage at the ballot box at the expense of law-abiding gun owners. Frankly, any shooter who is not thinking carefully about where best to put their vote is not doing their bit.

Playing Politics

Major Australian political parties and their firearms policies



**Robert McClelland,
Shadow Minister for
Homeland Security.**



**Senator Chris Ellison,
Government Minister
for Justice and Customs**



**Senator Brian Greig,
Australian Democrats'
Spokesperson for Attorney-
General and Justice.**



**John Anderson,
Deputy Prime
Minister and Leader
of the Nationals.**



by Yolanda Corduff

With the federal election rapidly approaching, ASJ decided to take a look at what Australia's main political parties had to say about the politics of shooting and where they stand on gun issues. We spoke to Liberal Senator Chris Ellison, Minister for Justice and Customs; John Anderson, Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of The Nationals; Robert McClelland, Shadow Minister for Homeland Security; and Senator Brian Greig, Australian Democrats' spokesperson for Attorney-General and Justice. Their frank and candid comments make compelling reading for sporting shooters who want their votes to count when it comes to future firearms policies. The Greens declined our request for an interview on firearms issue - read what you like into that refusal.

Editor's Note: Yolanda Corduff's article is a fascinating insight into the thoughts and beliefs that drive our political parties in their firearms policies. Many of the 'facts and figures' quoted by the parties can be easily challenged or are just plain wrong, however to put a SSAA footnote on each of the politician's answers would turn this article into a book on its own. An example would be Democrat Senator Greig's assertion that his party would broaden the current ban on "automatic and semi-automatic firearms", so that only those firearms used in Commonwealth and Olympic Games events remain legal. This one answer illustrates to us the utter nonsense some of our politicians spout. Last time we looked 'automatic' firearms, machine-guns, have never been available to the sporting shooter and semi-automatic firearms are used in the Olympics and Commonwealth Games.



John Anderson, The Nationals. Pic by Patrick Hamilton, Newspix.

Q: Can you briefly tell us why you decided to enter politics?

Ellison: Since my student days, I have always had an interest in politics. I entered politics to make a positive impact on the daily lives of Australians and ensure Australia retains its position and reputation as a great place to live and raise a family.

Anderson: I entered politics to help Australians who live outside the metropolitan centres of our nation and ensure that the needs and aspirations of regional Australia are represented in, and catered for, by the Australian Government.

McClelland: I entered politics to work for the people of my electorate.

Greig: I have a passion for human rights and social justice. This began when I was at university and carried over into my election to local government. These things in turn attracted me to the Democrats and its foundations of fairness and tolerance. I am very concerned about the prevalence of guns in our society and the regularity of violent crimes, including domestic violence, involving firearms.

Q: Could you please describe your party's current policy regarding the ownership of registered firearms by licensed shooters?

Ellison: Shooting is a legitimate sport pursued by a broad range of people in our community and we support their continued involvement - provided they meet relevant licensing, registration and storage requirements. As the Minister responsible, I set up the Sporting Shooters and Firearms Advisory Council. For the first time, shooters have a direct line of communication to the Australian Government. The Australian Government has responsibility for controlling the importation of firearms, their parts, accessories and ammunition. The states and territories control licensing, acquisition, possession, use, transfer, storage and manufacture of firearms. In an attempt to increase public safety and prevent the diversion of legally-owned firearms to the illegal market, there have been limits placed on the types of firearms owned by licensed shooters. In 1996 and 1998, for example, in the wake of the tragic Port Arthur incident, changes

were instituted across Australia to further control access to shotguns and self-loading rifles. In 2002, after the Monash University shooting in Melbourne, access to certain types of handguns (particularly readily concealable handguns) was also tightened along with the licensing regime. It is important to note that these national measures have been undertaken as part of a package of reforms that have been implemented since 1996 - to ensure better controlled access to firearms - while taking into account the genuine needs of shooters.

Anderson: Shooting is a challenging and rewarding sport pursued by a broad range of people in our community and we support their continued involvement - provided they meet relevant licensing, registration and storage requirements. I am a keen sporting and recreational shooter and represented my school and university in competitions. We have supported the government in setting up the Sporting Shooters and Firearms Advisory Council and the package of reforms that have been implemented since 1996, referred to by Ellison.

McClelland: Labor supports the right of licensed shooters to own registered firearms. Sport-shooting is a lawful sport and Labor does not want to see legitimate shooters driven out of their sport.

Greig: The Australian Democrats do not currently have a balloted policy regarding firearms, however our platform on firearms can be summarised as follows. The Democrats advocate a comprehensive approach to firearm regulation, the primary objective of which is to reduce the number of crimes involving firearms. This will involve reducing the number of firearms in the Australian community, but particularly in the hands of unlicensed owners. We are aware that the majority of crimes involving firearms are committed by individuals who are not licensed gun owners. However, it is also true that some crimes are committed by licensed gun owners, for example, the Monash shootings in 2002. Moreover, evidence shows that the majority of firearms on the black market are originally those stolen from legitimate owners. For these reasons, the Democrats advocate a general reduction in the number of firearms within Australia, but with a particular emphasis on illegal guns. We realise this may infringe on the freedom of legitimate gun owners to practise their sport or collect firearms, however, we believe that public safety must be the first priority. The Democrats plan involves tight customs and import laws, a rigorous licensing regime, comprehensive policing of firearm storage requirements and broadening the current ban on automatic and semi-automatic firearms, so that only those firearms used in Commonwealth and Olympic Games events remain legal.

Q: How well do you think Australia's current firearm laws are working, in terms of reducing firearm-related crimes?

Ellison/Anderson: The Australian Government and The Nationals have always placed a high priority on cracking down on illegal firearms used by criminals. When the Australian Crime Commission was set up last year, its first task was to investigate

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Senator Chris Ellison, The Liberal Party. Pic by Ray Strange, Newspix.

this issue through the establishment of a multi-jurisdictional taskforce to examine the scope and nature of firearm trafficking. We have also tightened border controls to target the illegal importation of guns. For example, we have introduced two cross-border firearm trafficking offences that carry a substantial maximum penalty of ten years' imprisonment and/or a fine of \$275,000. We have strengthened border protection measures by introducing state-of-the-art x-ray facilities and improved intelligence gathering. Statistics collated by the Australian Institute of Criminology indicate that the incidence of firearms-related crime in Australia is decreasing. For example:

- Firearm murder has decreased from 99 victims and 31.7 per cent of all homicides in 1996 to 42 victims in 2002 and 13.2 per cent of all homicides;
- Robbery with a firearm has decreased from 1585 victims and 9.7 per cent of all robberies in 1996 to 1168 victims in 2002 and 5.6 per cent of all robberies (the lowest rate during the past nine years);
- In 1996 there were 521 firearm-related deaths, compared to 333 such deaths in 2001, and
- Attempted murder with a firearm has decreased from 104 victims and 31 per cent of all attempted murders in 1996 to 87 victims and 22 per cent in 2002.

McClelland: Labor believes that the gun buy-back scheme has contributed to a decrease in gun crime in Australia in recent years. There is still more work to be done to get unregistered guns off our streets. In particular, Labor is concerned about the importation of unregistered firearms and firearm parts. Labor believes an Australian coastguard is needed to shut the gate that has been left open for people smugglers and gun and drug runners.

Greig: In our view, Australia's current firearm laws do not go far enough and are poorly targeted. They represent a fundamentally flawed approach to firearm regulation. For example, while placing strict requirements on licensed firearm owners in relation to

storage, compliance with these requirements is not adequately policed. In addition, by banning firearms on the basis of their barrel length, the government has created a system in which confusion reigns. This is particularly because there is no agreed method for measuring barrel length and because the National Firearms Registry does not record specific models in relation to their barrel length.

Q: What would you say have been the main benefits of the uniform gun laws for the average Australian?

Ellison/Anderson: Australia has moved gradually towards more consistent and uniform firearm laws since 1996. The benefits of this move towards uniformity have included improved consistency in qualifications for possession of a firearm between the states and a significant improvement in national information on firearms ownership and transfers. Uniform laws will enable easier compliance of licensing, registration, acquisition, storage and transfer requirements by shooters moving or competing interstate.

McClelland: Uniform gun laws assist the state police and Commonwealth law enforcement agencies to more effectively enforce Australia's gun laws. Obviously, if this gets unregistered guns off our streets and ensures only licensed shooters possess firearms, then this is a good thing for the whole community. Unregistered firearms are a significant factor contributing to the perpetration of firearm crimes in Australia. These laws will only punish those who operate outside the law, not licensed shooters who own registered guns.

Greig: When there are fewer guns in the community, there is less potential for the commission of crimes involving guns. Even where there has been an increase in the number of firearm-related crimes, there is every possibility that without such laws, the number of firearm-related crimes would have been even higher. If the uniform gun laws have prevented even a handful of deaths, then they have been beneficial to the Australian community.

Q: What do you think have been the main drawbacks for the average Australian?

Ellison/Anderson: While some shooters may have been disappointed by the introduction of tighter national controls on access to certain firearms, these measures were necessary to ensure the increased safety of all Australians.

McClelland: People who abide by the law have nothing to fear from Australia's gun laws. These laws may impose greater safety checks and other measures on those people who wish to legally possess a firearm, but Labor believes that these measures are warranted and that ultimately the whole community benefits from these heightened safety checks. Compliance with an effective regulatory regime will also protect legitimate licensed shooters from the prospect of being sued for failure to comply with nebulous common law standards.

Greig: There are a lot of sporting shooters within the Australian community whose leisure activities have been affected by



Senator Brian Greig, The Australian Democrats. Pic by Michael Jones, Newspix.

firearm restrictions. It's unfortunate that the legitimate sporting and leisure activities of a section of the community have been restricted, however the policy justification for such restrictions is compelling - the safety of the Australian community must be the primary consideration.

Q: Do you believe that the uniform gun laws need to be reviewed, changed or should remain the same and why?

Ellison/Anderson: The core principles of firearms regulation are now broadly uniform across Australia, but greater uniformity between the jurisdictions in their regulation of firearms is desirable. The current firearm laws (which comply with the resolutions agreed upon in the 1996 National Firearm Agreement) and subsequent developments (including the recent Council of Australian Government's handgun reforms) provide a comprehensive and nationally consistent approach to improving the safety and security of our community and ensuring that firearms owners and users have a genuine reason to access a firearm. However, as with all policy, the government remains open to suggestions from the community on potential improvements. I work closely with police ministers in the states and territories and the firearms industry is regularly consulted through the Sporting Shooters and Firearms Advisory Council that I established in 2002.

McClelland: As long as there are unregistered guns in Australia, there is room for improvement in Australia's gun laws. This determination to eradicate the danger posed by unregistered firearms must be balanced with the need to recognise that recreational shooting is a legitimate sport and the shooters who operate within the laws deserve to have their rights respected. In government, Labor will work with all the parties interested in gun laws in Australia to ensure we have the firearms laws needed to protect Australia and recognise the rights of legitimate sport shooters.

Greig: The Democrats do believe that the uniform gun laws need to be reviewed and changed. The practical implementation of these laws has highlighted a number of issues, such as the confusion associated with identifying handguns according to their barrel length. These issues should be addressed by legislative amendment. Moreover, the Democrats favour a widening of the ban, so that only those models that are used in Olympic and Commonwealth Game events are permitted.

Q: Australians were understandably shocked by the events of the Port Arthur murders in 1996 and keen to support law reform that might prevent the occurrence of similar shootings. However, the subsequent (now current) firearm laws were developed and passed in a very short space of time. Do you

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believe that enough thought went into it and community consultation occurred, to ensure the uniform gun laws and buy-back scheme would have the desired results (that is, a safer Australia for all)?

Ellison/Anderson: The current firearm laws in Australia are based predominantly on the resolutions agreed upon by Australian police ministers and compiled in the National Firearms Agreement (NFA). The NFA was a carefully considered agreement that improved firearms laws in Australia to benefit the community. The government has continued to work closely with representatives of the sporting shooter community since 1996, most recently through the establishment of the Sporting Shooters and Firearms Advisory Council and this consultation will continue in the future.

McClelland: Labor supports the current gun laws and the gun buy-back scheme.

Greig: The Democrats believe that the government's response to both Port Arthur and the Monash shootings in 2002 represented expensive political stunts, neither of which were adequately thought through. Given the massive investment of taxpayers' money on both occasions, the government should have devoted more time to community consultation. We do not believe that the laws achieved what they set out to achieve, namely, to make the Australian community substantially safer. For example, the handgun buy-back is set to cost the Australian community \$69 million, yet at best it will only remove one in five handguns from the community. The irony of this scheme was that it was instituted in response to the Monash shootings, yet the very models of firearms that were used in those shootings remain legal. This reveals the buy-back scheme for what it really was - a very expensive publicity stunt with little real effect.

Q: Would you call the 1996 firearms laws and buy-back scheme a success, bearing in mind that according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the murder/attempted murder (with a firearm) rates are now higher than they were prior to 1996?

Ellison/Anderson: The 1996 National Firearms Agreement has succeeded in reducing the number of firearms in the community. There were in excess of 660,000 firearms surrendered under the 1996 National Firearms Buy-back Program instituted under the National Firearms Agreement.

McClelland: Yes, in terms of reducing the number of unlicensed guns in the community. It is far too simplistic to reach a conclusion on the basis of a statistical figure without examining other factors - including the factual circumstances relating to each gun killing.

Greig: No, the Democrats do not believe that the 1996 firearms laws and buy-back scheme have been a success. However, as I have said above, the fact that firearm-related crime rates have risen should not be the sole indicator of the failure of the laws. There is every possibility that, in the absence of such laws, the number of crimes involving firearms could have been much higher. In the Democrats' view, neither the 1996 legislation nor the more recent handgun legislation were sufficiently



Labor Opposition Leader Mark Latham, left, with Robert McClelland, Shadow Minister for Homeland Security.

comprehensive. Given the amount of taxpayers' money invested into each of these schemes, the Democrats believe they should have extended further and been backed-up by comprehensive policing of safe storage requirements.

Q: According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, suicide rates using firearms have decreased in recent years but overall suicide rates have actually increased, meaning that other methods for committing suicide have replaced the use of firearms. Do you think the 1996 firearms laws should have made more of an impact on suicides rates, rather than simply changing the methods used for suicide?

Ellison: While it is correct that suicide rates using firearms have decreased in recent years - with the Australian Institute of Criminology's figures supporting this conclusion - it is a continuing concern for any government that suicide rates within the general community have apparently increased. The statistics provided by the AIC would suggest that the reduced access to firearms from national gun reforms has contributed to the decrease in firearm-related suicide.

Anderson: While the Australian Institute of Criminology's figures support the conclusion that suicide rates using firearms have decreased in recent years - our figures show that overall suicide rates have also decreased during the period from 1997 to 2002, with total suicides decreasing from 2720 to 2320. Obviously there is still more to be done and The Nationals appreciate the importance of this issue, especially for those groups most at risk - males from regional and rural areas. The Nationals are proud to be part of a government that funds the National Suicide Prevention Strategy and all the good work it contributes to, such as Lifeline, Reach Out, the Kids Help Line and Community LIFE.

McClelland: Suicide is a serious problem in Australia that demands a serious 'whole of government' response. Most families have unfortunately been affected in some way by a suicide. Suicide is very concerning and suicide rates should not be used as a political football in the firearm law debate. The causes of suicide are a far more complex issue than whether the gun buy-

back scheme has operated effectively and neither argument is well-served by attempting simplistic linkages.

Greig: The Democrats believe that the accessibility of firearms in some homes may increase the risk of suicide for individuals who have suicidal tendencies. In other words, a suicidal person with access to a firearm may be more likely to commit suicide than if they did not have access to a firearm. However, the prevention of suicide extends beyond the issue of firearm regulation. In endeavouring to reduce the suicide rate in Australia, we must look more broadly at the factors that lead to individuals contemplating suicide in the first place.

Q: Since 1996, considerable police resources have gone towards increasing scrutiny on legal firearm owners and reducing the number of licensed firearms owners and registered firearms in the community. Do you now believe this has been the best use of police resources in relation to firearms (rather than, say, focusing this attention on criminal gun activity instead)?

Ellison/Anderson: State and territory governments have responsibility for implementing and enforcing firearm laws. We cannot comment on the amount of police resources that state and territories have allocated to enforce the licensing and registration requirements and resources to deal with the criminal misuse of firearms. It is vital to ensure that legally held firearms are not diverted into the black market. For example, we know from research conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology that on average 4000 firearms are stolen each year in Australia, which makes the safe and secure storage of legally held firearms and the enforcement of such requirements imperative.

McClelland: The Australian Federal Police and the Australian Crime Commission are working hard to locate and confiscate unregistered firearms and prosecute unlicensed holders of firearms. Labor supports this effort and believes that the whole community will benefit from the enforcement of firearm laws.

Greig: There is no evidence to suggest that the police have allocated resources to the scrutiny of licensed firearm owners at the expense of focussing on criminal gun activity, as is implied by the question. The Democrats believe that it is important to allocate resources to both of these endeavours, as both are important.

Q: According to research by the Australian Institute of Criminology, in more than 90 per cent of firearm-related homicides, the offenders are not licensed and the weapons are

not registered. What policies will your party pursue in order to reduce the number of firearms in the hands of criminals, rather than those owned by licensed firearms owners?

Ellison/Anderson: The Australian Government/The Nationals recognise that no single measure or package of reforms can prevent firearm crime or improve community safety overnight. That's why we will continue to pursue a range of measures to control firearms and their criminal misuse. The reforms we have implemented in 1996 and 2002 have reduced the number of firearms within the Australian community. The primary source of illegal weapons is diversion from legal sources - such as theft from licensed firearms owners and dealers. Reducing the number of firearms within the community and strengthening the storage requirements will assist in preventing the diversion of legal handguns to the illegal market. Beyond pursuing the tightening of licensing and access to firearms within the general community, we have implemented a number of measures targeted at the criminal misuse of firearms. For example, as mentioned earlier, we have introduced the two cross-border firearms trafficking offences and strengthened border protection measures. Also one of the Australian Crime Commission's first initiatives was the establishment of a multi-jurisdictional taskforce to examine the scope and nature of firearms trafficking.



McClelland: Labor is very concerned about the importation of unregistered firearms and firearms parts and believes more must be done to foil these gun smuggling operations. Stopping these guns before they make it to Australia should be the Federal Government's first priority. That's why Labor will activate an Australian coastguard, with the equipment and training necessary to locate, board and arrest gun smugglers before they reach Australia. Under the Howard government, Australia has been left without a civilian maritime law enforcement authority capable of interdicting and arresting gun smugglers in Australia's maritime regions. Australia also needs a single Department of Homeland Security to coordinate the agencies responsible for the security measures associated with incoming air and sea cargo. By splitting responsibility for the intelligence gathering, investigation and interdiction of unregistered firearms crossing our borders, the Howard Government has undermined Australia's ability to stem the flow of illegal firearms into Australia.

Greig: The Democrats believe in a three-pronged approach to reducing the number of firearms in the hands of criminals. Firstly, we advocate a reduction of the number of guns in the community, generally. This is because evidence shows that the majority of guns in the hands of criminals were originally stolen from legitimate owners. Secondly, we believe there's a need for

PLAYING POLITICS



Anderson: "Shooting is a challenging and rewarding sport pursued by a broad range of people in our community and we support their continued involvement..."

comprehensive policing of secure storage requirements to prevent the theft of legal firearms. Thirdly, we advocate strong customs and import laws to prevent the illegal importation of firearms into Australia.

Q: Australia has won many gold medals in Olympic shooting competitions, however, under the existing firearm legislation, it's very difficult for new shooters to enter the sport, particularly at a young enough age to become Olympic-standard shooters. What would you be prepared to do to ensure that a new generation of sporting shooters continue the tradition of becoming Olympic winners?

Ellison/Anderson: The Australian Government/The Nationals fully support the legitimate use of firearms by genuine sporting shooters, such as aspiring Olympians, and has been mindful of the interests of the sports shooting community in its approach to firearms reforms. The government has consulted at length with the sports shooting community to ensure that any reforms allow genuine sports shooters to continue to participate in their chosen sport. The government established the Sporting Shooters and Firearms Advisory Council as the Australian Government's primary advisory body on firearm matters. This Council provided very valuable advice to us during the development of the handgun reforms agreed to by the Council of Australian Governments on December 6, 2002. The views of the Council will be sought on any proposals to reform firearm laws that might have an impact on sporting shooters.

McClelland: Labor supports the right of licensed shooters to own registered firearms. Sport shooting is a lawful sport and Labor does not want to see legitimate shooters driven out of their sport.

Greig: The Democrats believe that the primary consideration in relation to the regulation of firearms must always be the safety of the community and that, as a consequence, this may limit the ability of individuals to use guns for sport. We do not believe that minors should be able to obtain firearms licences.

Q. Is there anything further you would like to add or to say specifically to the sporting shooters of Australia?

Ellison: In developing the reforms, the Australian Government and COAG acknowledged that the sports shooting community is generally responsible and law-abiding. We consulted extensively with sports shooting organisations to ensure the reforms were balanced; allowing genuine sporting shooters to continue to participate in their chosen sport and ensuring the Australian community remains safe and secure. From my own point of view, I have publicly acknowledged that the sports shooting community has made a constructive and responsible contribution to the recent debate. The government continues to listen to the concerns of sporting shooters and the level of consultation within the Sporting Shooters and Firearms Advisory Council, which I established before the Monash incident, has been very productive and informative. The Council includes a number of peak sporting shooter organisations, including the SSAA, Pistol Australia, the Australian Shooting Association, the National Dealers and Traders Council, the Australian Clay Target Association, the Historical Arms Collectors Council, Field and Game Federation, Target Rifle Australia, the National Rifle Association and the NT Shooters Council, along with key government agencies. This Council will continue to provide a means of accessing advice from the broadest range of firearm interests in the community, including sporting shooters, firearms dealers and occupational users of firearms - such as the security industry and film armourers.

Anderson: I echo the sentiment above and would like to add that the sports shooting community is generally responsible and law-abiding. As a keen sporting and recreational shooter myself, I know this as well as anyone.

McClelland: Labor recognises the right of legitimate recreational shooters to take part in their chosen sport. Labor will work with sporting shooters to ensure that firearm laws do not unnecessarily encroach on their right to legally possess firearms and will provide sporting shooters with clarity in respect to their rights and responsibilities. The whole community, including sporting shooters, will benefit from a well-thought-out, conclusive firearm registry and properly enforced firearm laws and for that reason will continue to work cooperatively to ensure the Australian people have the firearm laws that they demand.

Greig: Last year, I received a letter from a sporting shooter who asked me why the Democrats supported firearm policies that punished innocent licensed owners. I responded by explaining that the Democrats view the issue of firearms control as one of prevention, not punishment. Restricting access to firearms is not a matter of punishing the innocent but of preventing further crimes involving such weapons. We understand that this will infringe on the ability of law-abiding Australians to practise their sport or collect firearms, however, we believe that public safety must be the first priority. The number of guns in the community concerns us because we know that all too often lawfully-owned guns end up in the wrong hands. Guns are, after all, weapons of death. They are designed to kill. Owning a gun is not a right - it is a privilege. This may not be a very popular position to advocate (particularly in a publication for sporting shooters!), however, it is an issue that our party feels very strongly about and we do not resile from it. ●



Australian and New Zealand firearms user groups speak at the UN Seminar in Fiji

Representatives from both the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia (SSAA) and the New Zealand Council of Licensed Firearms Owners (COLFO) attended the United Nations Regional Seminar on Small Arms and Light Weapons in Fiji on 18-19 August 2004. This seminar was co-sponsored by the Governments of Australia and Japan, in conjunction with the United Nations. Senior police, military officers, and government attorneys were in attendance, along with delegates from AusAid and non-government organisations. These included Mr Philip Alpers, who was representing the University of Sydney Community Health Program. SSAA National Senior Vice President, Mr Robert Green, in a joint effort with Mr John Howat from COLFO, moved forward the recent memorandum of understanding signed by both organisations.

The background to this seminar is related to the ongoing interest the United Na-

tions (UN) has in the international trade in small arms, particularly when these small arms are redirected to areas of conflict. UN member Japan touts Australian firearm legislation as being among the 'most advanced' in the world. It is of concern, however, that the UN could believe our legislation is the ideal model for Pacific nations with very different respective histories and cultures.

In summarising the meeting, Mr Robert Green said it provided an opportunity to learn more about government concerns of firearm use in the region. We gained a better understanding of people who knew little about sporting firearms, and we were able to promote understanding of the role sporting shooters play in endorsing and encouraging responsible firearms use. Mr Green said that he received several comments that many delegates were pleased to see representatives from sporting shooting organisations present because it provided the opportunity to reach a more balanced viewpoint.

In discussing the current level of firearms violence in Papua New Guinea, Mr Green emphasised that SSAA endorses strategies that bring to justice those who traffic in illicit small arms. SSAA also noted that delegates felt that there appears to be very little evidence of illegal trafficking of illicit firearms from Australia into Papua New Guinea (PNG), where gun violence is becoming an everyday occurrence. Thursday Island, which forms part of the dogleg between the two countries, has 21 Australian government agencies operating in the region, including those using a new radar surveillance system. Such a high presence is based not only on concerns about the smuggling of firearms, but also to address the possibility of an increase in drug trafficking, particularly in cannabis flowing from traffickers based in PNG to Australia. Many at the meeting felt that the most difficult problem facing PNG in regard to illicit firearms trafficking focused on the long, inaccessible land border between PNG and

UN SEMINAR IN FIJI

Indonesia. This attitude reflects an understanding among the delegates of the issues concerning the difficulty in enforcing firearms laws in remote, inaccessible regions with inadequate resources.

Jerry Singirok, retired Papua New Guinea Army Chief, now researching the effects of illicit firearms in PNG, recently presented a paper at the Australian National University entitled "The Use Of Illegal Guns And Security Implications In Papua New Guinea". Mr Singirok reported that there are sporting shooter clubs in PNG that use guns of various types for recreational purposes. He also pointed out "While there are no immediate reports of misuse in this sector, they represent a minority group that needs

to be catered for in terms of recreation. However, the issue of registration, physical security and training are equally important because without proper control and security such use could be double-edged."

It is Mr Singirok's opinion that the existing firearms laws in PNG are adequate and Aid agencies, particularly AusAid, should be used as the vehicle to strengthen existing institutions. These institutions include

the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, where there is a need to invest in armoury and firearm registry management as well as to further enhance law enforcement investigative skills. Mr Singirok believes it is equally important to further develop institutions such as the Attorney-General, Public Prosecutor and even the Local Court magistrate if the existing firearm legislation is to

be enforced. It is clear that without ensuring these institutions function efficiently, the existing legislation cannot protect the community. Such difficulties are common concerns across the Pacific islands.

The observations on the difficulties in implementing exist-

ing firearms laws made by Mr Singirok are compounded by observations made by other researchers, such as David Capie. Dr Capie, research fellow and the co-director of the Armed Groups Project in the Centre for International Relations at the University of British Columbia, paints a grim picture of the breakdown of law and order in parts of the Pacific, but he also believes that in Pacific societies "just a few dozen weapons"

have made an enormous impact and that the solutions are local. Based on these observations, Mr Howat said that New Zealand firearm-users were pleased to learn that the proposed South Pacific Weapons Control Bill was not designed to be imposed en masse on the region's firearms community, but was intended to be used as a guide with countries using those parts that best suited their situations. Mr Howat said "There is no doubt that the Governments and people of the South Pacific need help in managing firearm safety and maintenance training and COLFO has offered to help with these and other technical issues." According to John Howat, "both the Sporting Shooters' and COLFO presence was very well received and have left an impression with bureaucrats that the responsible firearm users of Australia and New Zealand have a positive contribution to make to any government initiative".

The SSAA have offered to assist COLFO, the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council and the New Zealand Police with the introduction of firearm safety and training courses into the South Pacific region. The New Zealand model of firearm regulation emphasises the licensing of the individual firearms owner based on their community background, i.e., police checks and references, and safety training, but not through the expensive registration of long arms. It is obvious that this

Senior Vice President of the SSAA, Bob Green addresses the conference.

SSAA endorses strategies that bring to justice those who traffic in illicit small arms.



approach is working in New Zealand, which has an extremely high density of firearms ownership and an enviable record in firearm safety and low rate of firearm crime. This management approach may well be suited to the Pacific nations, where the resources to implement and administer expensive, centralised registration of individual firearms would be almost impossible.

It is obvious that the focus for the Pacific must be the enforcement of existing legislation and the strengthening of inadequate regional law enforcement and court infrastructure. Additionally, any change to legislation must be in such a form that it promotes responsible firearm ownership and creates partnerships with law enforcement. Reflecting upon the New Zealand experience of firearm control, John Howat presented a strong statement of support for the different cultures and needs of the indigenous Islanders:

"There was a defining moment in New Zealand's successful gun laws, and it happened in 1983 when our Government was replacing the registration of rifles with the licence system that applied to shotguns. A number of knowledgeable people were gathered in a lecture room at the Police College and we were discussing the rules for future firearms licence applications. We thought up all sorts of tough requirements. Each of us thought of ways to make it hard to get a li-



cence and we had almost finished when the Police Arms Officer who was sitting beside me stood up to speak.

"He was a Maori from a small county town, a little bit grey, and he didn't have a lot of words - but his words had a lot of meaning.

"Your ideas about tough gun licences are noble. In my town there are a lot of good people who could never jump through those hoops. Some can't read and some have no idea of sitting tests. They are good people, they are safe people; they are used to fire-

arms and hunting. They won't have your new licence, but they will still have their guns. Is that your idea? Is that what you want from this law?"

"On the strength of that man's wisdom the NZ Police changed the system and made the application a learning process. It has worked because it puts emphasis on the three legs that sustain effective gun laws. Those legs are:

- Enacting laws that have the respect of responsible firearms users.
- Licensing responsible people who understand and support those laws.
- Requiring adequate safe storage for firearms that are not in use."

No-one can argue with the wisdom of those three premises for effective and respected gun laws.



Many young sportsmen and women enjoy competition shooting in Papua New Guinea.



Acknowledgement: SSAA Inc. would like to thank both The Hon Alexander Downer, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and members of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for their assistance in enabling the SSAA Senior Vice President to present a paper at this meeting.

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New book puts spotlight on American shooters

by Abby Wolfe

Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures is a new book written by academic Abigail Kohn, who recently returned to the US after spending three years in Australia exploring the differences between Australian gun owners and their American counterparts.

However, her current book focuses exclusively on what guns symbolise to American shooters, what guns mean to them and why they like shooting. The book also explores how guns relate to the personal and national identities of US shooters.

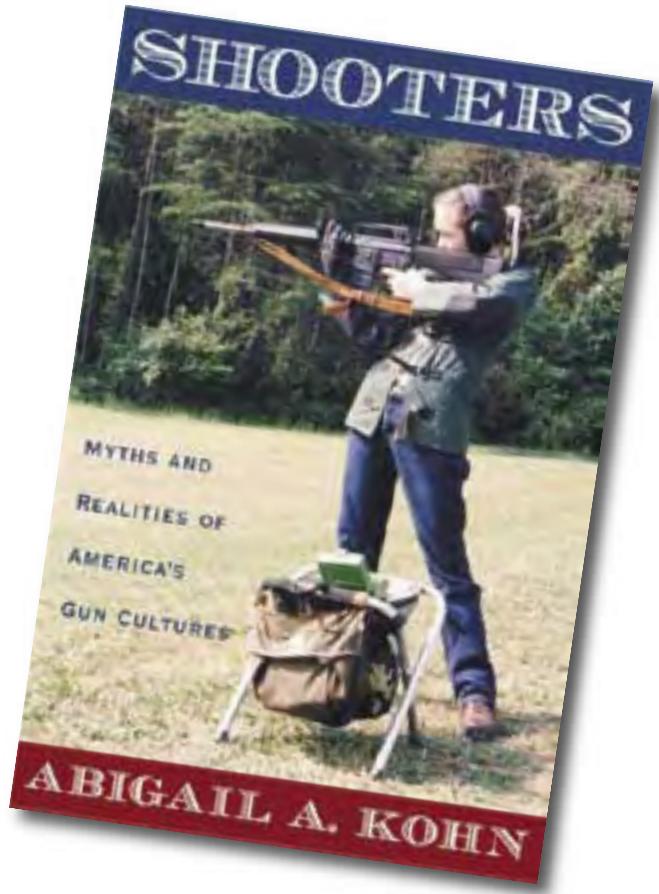
"The basic argument of my book is that for American gun enthusiasts, gun ownership signified being a good American," explains Kohn. "They believe owning guns makes them good citizens because they see gun ownership as a moral issue. They believe they're following the second amendment of the constitution, the right to bear arms, and that in doing so they're standing up to bullies, having a strong moral character and believing in 'core American values', such as independence, liberty, freedom and responsibility to your family, your community and your nation. For American gun enthusiasts, these values are embodied in the task of gun ownership."

Though her book focuses on gun enthusiasts, Kohn has some idea what the gun control/anti-gun lobby believes and she admits they see gun ownership as the exact opposite.

"The anti-gun lobby views guns as inherently dangerous, a public health hazard and that gun owners are irresponsible," she says. "In fact the gun control lobby and those who are anti-gun believe there's no possible way to own a gun responsibly so anyone who owns a gun is inherently irresponsible."

Kohn's book provides readers with an insider's view of gun ownership in America and her research includes extensive interviews with gun owners. Kohn also attended gun shows, shooting events, competitions, visited gun stores and even hung out with police renewing their shooting licenses. She also read articles in the newspapers about gun ownership and gun crime, sought the views of other academics and went to both pro-gun and anti-gun marches. The research helped her understand how the US culture as a whole might feel about guns and has made her a leading expert in issues of gun ownership.

Consequently, the Australian media has contacted Kohn on a



number of occasions in recent years, for comments about gun issues, however, it hasn't always led to interviews as Kohn explains.

"My area of interest is gun ownership in Australia and how these people are real sports enthusiasts," she says. "When I explain this to the media, invariably because they want comments about how guns relate to crime, I don't get a call back."

"There seems to be more interest in the media to focus on gun crime and how guns are used in acts of violence. There's not nearly as much interest in the thousands of people who own guns because they're collectors, because their family owned guns for generations or for sport and recreation in this country, and in the US."

"So for the millions of Australians and Americans who don't know much about the issue except what they read in the paper, they don't hear about responsible people who enjoy gun ownership for shooting and for recreation. They hear about how guns relate to crime and so there's an association between guns and crimes that has overwhelmed the public consciousness, unfortunately."

Kohn's book, *Shooters*, certainly provides a more balanced perspective on gun ownership. Let's hope the book is picked up by mainstream audiences, currently so misinformed on these issues, as well as gun enthusiasts. ●