

# ***Over Our Dead Bodies: Port Arthur and Australia's Fight for Gun Control***

by Dr. Simon Chapman, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1998, x, 218 pp including index.

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The author is an Associate Professor in the Department of Public Health and Community Medicine at Sydney University, though of equal relevance in terms of the views expressed in this book, he is also a member of the 'National Coalition for Gun Control'.

In his book Chapman seeks to do two things: to provide a 'behind-the-scenes' history of the events which led from Port Arthur to the enactment of uniform gun legislation and to provide something like a tactical manual for other groups in other parts of the world who may need to address the same issue.

The book fails on both grounds.

On the first because it is too imbued with an unremitting triumphalism and self-congratulation that rapidly seems obnoxious and the 'history' is largely a selective collection of newspaper editorials, media 'sound-bites', tendentious cartoons and first person narrative ('we left the building so jubilant . . .').

It fails on the second ground because the assumption that the author has something of value to say to other international groups is substantially fallacious. The new uniform gun laws were introduced as a direct consequence of the Port Arthur tragedy, the public abhorrence of that act, the media frenzy that ensued and the fact that the proposals which underlay the new laws had been floating around Canberra for over a decade before these events.

Despite what the author may choose to believe, the N.C.G.C., which appears to consist of a very small group of activists (Chapman mentions four names but appears coy about disclosing actual membership numbers), was largely irrelevant to the outcome.

However, apart from its sometimes breathless quality, which is probably a function of the author-as-activist, the book possesses more serious flaws.

Predictably, it seeks to maintain the stereotype of shooters as 'embittered, belligerent men' and groups of shooters as signifying 'a subterranean, angry and potentially dangerous side of Australian life', while ignoring the fact that the class, which is so off-handedly condemned, comprises doctors, lawyers, judges, architects and accountants- in fact, as a class, it would almost certainly represent a better cross-section of the Australian community than the N.C.G.C., whoever, in fact, they are.

Given the above descriptions it is surprising that such an angry and belligerent group managed to perpetuate not one act of violence during the entire vitriolic campaign. Dr. Chapman fails to even notice the irony.

Although he does at least acknowledge the difficulty of analysing gun statistics across cultures this does not stop him totally ignoring cultural differences when it suits his argument or for that matter contradicting himself on other matters. For example, he is, obviously, sympathetic to the idea that Australia should 'not go down the American path', and was, and is, prepared to use this culturally inappropriate example for domestic political purposes. However, when the example becomes embarrassing, he can describe this US example as 'nonsense perpetuated by people overwhelmed by unrealistic fears imported from America.' One might ask, which is it?

Apart from a selection of statistics (which appear to be awfully 'thin' ground upon which to base a \$350 million buy-back program) the author's central point remains his 'intuitive' understanding that more guns in a community equals more gun-related deaths in that community. Reality, unfortunately, is more complicated, with significant research indicating that there may be no such direct, causal relationship.

Equally absent is any understanding of the significance of the historical process by which 'customary rights' became defined as 'qualified rights' and then, eventually, as 'privileges'. Dr Chapman would, no doubt, consider such a process as 'progress'; Jefferson, Madison and Locke would define it in other terms.

In the final portion of his book, the author outlines his program for the future which, despite some interim machinations, such as the storage of all 'urban' firearms in central armories ('for a fee'), is to remove all firearms from the civilian population. This will reserve a monopoly on the use of such force to the State (in which Dr Chapman has absolute trust) or to armed criminals. One wonders what will happen to the concept of reasonable proportionality under criminal law when only offenders will be armed.

Australia has not, with the possible exceptions of the Vietnam War and the anti-conscription campaigns, had a history of serious, intelligent debate over contentious social issues. Unfortunately, Dr. Chapman's book merely continues this unfortunate tradition.