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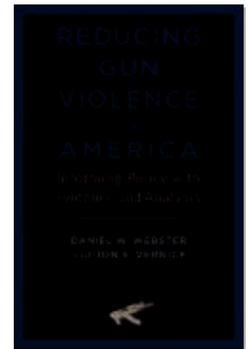
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Gun Control in Great Britain after the Dunblane Shootings

Michael J. North

Dunblane

On March 13, 1996, a man with a grudge against the local community walked into Dunblane Primary School in central Scotland. He was armed with two semi-automatic pistols and two revolvers and carrying hundreds of rounds of ammunition loaded into high-capacity magazines, all legally held. Within minutes Thomas Hamilton had shot and fatally wounded one teacher and sixteen 5- and 6-year-old children. Another ten children and three teachers were injured. All of his victims were shot with a 9-mm semi-automatic pistol. Hamilton then killed himself with one of his revolvers.

Gun homicide is rare in Great Britain. The deaths at Dunblane accounted for nearly a quarter of the country's gun victims in 1996. The public outrage at this scale of violence by a legally armed gunman translated into a campaign for tighter gun control, and within two years all handguns had been prohibited.

Michael J. North, PhD, was a biochemistry academic at the University of Stirling in Scotland when in March 1996 his only daughter was killed in a mass shooting at Dunblane Primary School. Following that event he became an advocate for gun control.

This essay outlines events which led to the landmark legislative changes and summarizes their impact. Only the key elements are included and more details can be found in North (2000). Inevitably, this is an insider's account and a more thorough analysis of the issues is provided by Squires (2000).

Firearms Legislation

Firearms legislation is determined by the UK parliament, though the laws applying in Northern Ireland differ in some respects from those for Great Britain (England, Wales and Scotland), the focus of this essay.

British law permits the private ownership of guns for which an appropriate reason can be demonstrated (e.g., target shooting, hunting, vermin control), but the reasons exclude self-protection (except rarely in Northern Ireland). Under the Firearms Act (1968) handgun and rifle owners were required to hold a firearm certificate (license) issued by the local police force. Justification for the ownership of each individual weapon was needed (a different system applies to shotguns). A person had to show suitability to be entrusted with a firearm with the application counter-signed by a responsible person who knew the applicant. Hamilton held firearms certificates for nearly 20 years and owned a number of handguns, all for target shooting at an approved gun club, the "good reason" for ownership of most of the legally held handguns in Great Britain.

Applications for firearm certificates were rarely unsuccessful, with only 1% being refused. Nor were many certificates revoked. Hamilton's ownership of guns had been called into question, but the senior officer responsible for firearms licensing dismissed the concerns. He later admitted to have been worried that if his certificate had been revoked, Hamilton would have successfully appealed. Hamilton therefore retained his certificate and was able to buy and keep dangerous weapons.

Some other types of firearms were prohibited. In 1988 many self-loading and pump-action rifles and shotguns had been banned in the aftermath of a mass shooting in August 1987 in Hungerford, Berkshire, where another legal gun owner killed sixteen people, half of whom were shot with a semi-automatic rifle. However, the Conservative Party government failed to tighten controls over handguns even though the other victims were killed with a pistol. It did set up a Firearms Consultative Committee to advise the Home Secretary

(The United Kingdom's equivalent of the United States Attorney General), but the membership was biased in favor of those with interests in shooting. Victims' voices were absent and the Committee became a means by which the gun lobby could influence Home Office policy and its implementation. Traditionally the Conservative Party had close links with the shooting community and there were accusations that the post-Hungerford response had been watered down because of vested interests.

Immediate Response to Dunblane

The Conservatives were still in power in 1996, and the Government faced awkward questions about why it had not dealt with handguns after Hungerford. Michael Forsyth, the local Member of Parliament (MP) in Dunblane, was Secretary of State for Scotland, a connection which undoubtedly gave weight to the case for tighter gun control within government. One of his first moves was to set up a Public Inquiry chaired by a senior judge, Lord Cullen, which "sought to answer questions about the circumstances that led up to and surrounded the shootings and make recommendations with a view to safeguarding the public against the misuse of firearms and other dangers" (Cullen 1996).

In the United Kingdom, Public Inquiries are held after major disasters to shed light on the causes and to offer recommendations on the lessons that can be learned. The forthcoming Inquiry provided breathing space for the Government which could delay announcing its position. On legal advice, other interested parties also had to wait until after the Inquiry's hearings were over before commenting. In retrospect, this proved to be a good thing for the victims' families, giving time for their thoughts to be collected. However, aided by continuous media coverage a widespread debate on gun control had already begun. Campaigns for a ban on handguns were initiated.

At Parliament, backbench MPs on the Home Affairs Committee held an inquiry into the possession of handguns, but evidence was heard predominantly from those with shooting interests with no input from victims. The MPs' report exposed a political split, the Conservative majority proposing that no significant new controls were necessary, and the Labour minority advocating a ban. The Government had hoped to keep politics out of the debate but the report reinforced a widely held perception that the Conservatives gave too much weight to the views of the shooters.

The ongoing national debate ensured that by the time the Cullen Report was published most groups and political parties had already established their positions, making it unlikely that anything Lord Cullen recommended would make a difference.

Campaign for a Handgun Ban

During the early 1990s there was a perception, supported by official crime data, that handgun crime was on the increase leading to anxieties about an “American-style” gun culture taking hold, something that had little appeal to the British. There was speculation about the provenance of guns used in crime and varying estimates of the numbers of illegal weapons. Firearms enthusiasts argued that the crime problem was entirely the result of unlicensed guns. To them, and indeed many policy makers, legal guns posed no problems. Hungerford, and then Dunblane, were reminders this was not the case.

Gun ownership is low in Great Britain, with most of the population unfamiliar with what weapons can be owned legally. There was widespread shock, including among politicians, at the amount of firepower that Hamilton had available to him. Shooting with handguns in gun clubs had been on the rise and increasingly involved weapons more powerful than those used for traditional Olympics-style target shooting. In his report Cullen commented on the growth of activities like combat shooting and said that its trappings “caused others to feel uneasy about what appears to be the use of guns as symbols of personal power” (Cullen 1996).

Campaigns in support of a handgun ban began almost immediately, reflecting a majority public view confirmed in opinion polls, that handguns were too dangerous for private possession because they were easily concealable, rapidly fired, not justifiable for shooting game and criminals’ weapon of choice. Most of those who became active campaigners had little, if any, prior knowledge of guns. Gun enthusiasts argued that this precluded them from influencing policy and that only those with a working knowledge of guns were qualified to discuss firearms legislation. Advocates for gun control were said to be too emotional and seeking an ill-informed knee-jerk response. For many, including the Dunblane victims’ families the Inquiry hearings were, however, providing a crash course in gun-related issues.

The prime motivation of the campaigners was to minimize the risk of another shooting like Dunblane. Most thought that a minority sport (target

shooting with handguns) was insufficient justification for compromising public safety through the private ownership of dangerous weapons. Hamilton's own history with guns suggested it was impossible to design a licensing system which would ensure handguns were never owned by those who would potentially misuse them. Psychological testing, something favored by the shooting organizations to eliminate potential "madmen," was said by the British Medical Association to have no predictive measure. Campaigners concluded that in the interest of public safety it was better to keep handguns out of all private hands.

Most national newspapers immediately called on the Government to introduce tighter gun controls, and media support during the various campaigns ensured a continuous source of pressure on politicians. Individual campaigns arose spontaneously and independently around the country. Two petitions in particular gained national prominence, one launched by a Scottish tabloid newspaper, the *Sunday Mail*, and the Dunblane Snowdrop Petition, organized by parents of young families living in Central Scotland. Each called for a handgun ban and was eventually supported by hundreds of thousands of signatures before being handed into Parliament. The Snowdrop Campaign gained considerable media coverage. Gun Control Network (GCN), whose aim was to provide a permanent voice for gun control beyond the current campaign, was also set up and its founding members included parents of victims of both the Hungerford and Dunblane shootings together with lawyers and academics. The campaigns ran on limited budgets, occasionally accepting *pro bono* help from PR companies, but relying mostly on the efforts of volunteers. They never came to depend on large organizations or high-profile celebrities.

Although unable to be directly involved during the initial stages, many of the Dunblane families became active participants once the Inquiry hearings were over. Each family made its own decision to join in, but without exception all came to support the aim of a handgun ban. The families' involvement in the Snowdrop Campaign and GCN ensured the various activities were coordinated. The families boosted the public profile of the campaign, which came to be portrayed, misleadingly, as entirely their own. It was critical that the issue was kept alive and, more than anyone else, the families could do this by talking to the media about themselves and their children as well as the handgun ban. They were able to gain access to politicians, and parliamentary lobbying would become a key activity.

Inevitably the shooting organizations were opposed to any change to the gun laws. They believed many were being punished for the actions of one man. They

said Dunblane could be dismissed as another “one-off” event and were adamant that tighter controls would not stop it happening again. Pro-gun representatives gave evidence to the Public Inquiry and participated in media debates but probably believed their previous close political contacts would ensure that little would be changed. They told the Government not to react to special pleading of the Dunblane families, that a handgun ban would have no impact on gun crime, and that a “madman” cannot be stopped. The groups opposed to the ban failed to win over the general public or much of the media. Their rallies were only modestly attended, and when their tactics became more aggressive the media were quick to expose their personal attacks on gun control campaigners. The gun lobby could still rely on some support among parliamentarians, but the influence they had was limited. Some in the shooting community had, prior to Dunblane, been concerned by trends in handgun shooting that might be giving shooting the “wrong image,” but all the groups stood firm against any legislative changes. Their intransigence made it inevitable that those seeking a tightening of controls would harden their position since any compromise over gun safety measures appeared impossible.

As the Cullen Report was awaited the political parties had been assessing the arguments and monitoring public opinion. The Government waited until the Report’s publication, but the main opposition parties all announced that they were favoring a total ban.

Legislative Changes

The Cullen Report was published in October 1996, six months after the shootings. Although he did not recommend an outright ban on handguns, Cullen did recommend restrictions on how handguns were kept, suggesting measures such as disablement of guns when not in use and locked barrel blocks. However, he went on to add that “if such a system is not adopted the Government should consider restricting the availability of self-loading pistols and revolvers of any caliber by banning of the possession of such handguns by individual owners” (Cullen 1996).

At the time the Government was weak; its party divided on a number of issues, and had a very small parliamentary majority. Facing an imminent general election, Conservative MPs were sensitive to the public mood, which had been reflected in the campaigns, but they also had traditional links to the shooting community. The Government opted for a compromise. Choosing

to go further than Cullen's recommendations, ministers proposed a partial ban—prohibiting all large-caliber handguns, though smaller guns (.22s) used by target shooters for events like the Olympic Games were still permitted with tighter restrictions. The compromise satisfied neither the campaigners nor the gun lobby, and within Parliament the Government faced opposition from both sides of the argument. Some MPs, mostly in the Government's own party, opposed any kind of ban whilst the main opposition parties wanted a total ban.

Through press conferences, interviews and lobbying, the Dunblane families immediately attempted to persuade more MPs to support a bill for a complete ban, highlighting the fact that .22 handguns could be just as lethal as other calibers. However, the Government retained sufficient support for the partial ban, and despite dissatisfaction from both sides of the debate a bill was passed to ban just the higher caliber handguns.

Three months after the bill had been enacted the Labour party won a general election with a huge majority. A number of the new Labour ministers had had the opportunity during the previous year to meet with the Dunblane families and listen to their views. As a result Labour had made a commitment in its election manifesto to prohibit the remaining small caliber handguns. A new law was duly passed and by February 1998 all handguns had become prohibited weapons. Handgun owners received compensation for the weapons they were required to surrender.

While there has since been a sustained attempt on the part of some shooting organizations to reverse the handgun ban this has been largely unsuccessful. The only concession was to allow an elite group of Olympic pistol shooters to practice on British soil during a limited period before the 2012 London Games.

In Great Britain the gun issue was not clouded by arguments over self-defense and the right to bear arms. Cullen's report had unambiguously rejected guns for self-defense. The United Kingdom's dominant view that guns were part of the problem, not part of the solution, remained intact and the eventual handgun ban was very much in keeping with this viewpoint (Squires 2000).

Impact and Legacy

The precise impact of the handgun ban on the complex pattern of gun crime would be impossible to quantify. The gun lobby, rightly pointing out that

criminals were unlikely to surrender illegal handguns, claimed a handgun ban could have no effect on criminal activity. It was inevitable that it would take some time to reduce the pool of illegal handguns after the ban, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence, for example from the National Ballistics Intelligence Service (Nabis), that there are now fewer guns on the street. In England and Wales gun crime did continue to rise during the period immediately following the ban, but after reaching a peak in 2003 and 2004 the total number of firearm offenses has fallen in every subsequent year (Lau 2012). In Scotland gun crime has decreased in almost every year since 1998 and is now less than a third of the 1996 level (Anon. 2012). Gun homicides are even rarer. In 2012 there were only six gun homicides in London reported in the media and a total of 32 across Great Britain. This is not the picture of a country in the grip of gun violence, and the risk for most of the British population remains extremely low. If there had been a drift towards an “American-style” gun culture in the 1990s the handgun ban stopped it.

Some concerns do remain, not least the difficulty some policy makers still have in recognizing any problems with other legal guns. There has been no other mass shooting involving handguns, but Britain did suffer another tragedy in 2010 when a man killed 12 people in Cumbria before killing himself. Derrick Bird’s weapons, a shotgun and a rifle, were legally owned, raising questions about remaining inadequacies in Great Britain’s gun laws.

Dunblane led to the birth of a gun control movement in Great Britain. Gun control advocates and campaign groups representing victims are now accepted as important participants in discussions on firearms, something which has ensured a far more balanced approach. GCN has been invited to give evidence to a number of Parliamentary Select Committees, has had regular meetings with ministers and shadow ministers and pressed for the introduction of further legislation which, since the handgun ban, has tightened controls over imitation firearms and airguns.

The handgun ban in Britain created interest around the world. It has been cited as an example of what can and should be done to stem gun violence elsewhere. The international gun lobby has sought to discredit the ban with distorted claims about its impact, especially on the level and type of violent crime in Britain. But for most of the British population it remains a positive step which has helped maintain a society that wishes to be as free as possible from the threat of gun violence.

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