

## **What Was Australia's 1996 Gun Buyback Designed to Achieve?**

In 1996, Australia's Federal Parliament ratified the National Firearms Agreement (NFA). Among other measures, the NFA banned semi-automatic rifles, and semi-automatic and pump action shotguns. Over 600 000 firearms were surrendered to police for destruction, under a taxpayer-funded 'buyback' scheme at an estimated cost of more than AU\$500 million.

According to Australian Prime Minister John Howard, the scheme was designed to "...reduce the number of guns in the community and make Australia a safer place to live" [1]. The goal of improved safety was echoed by Attorney General Daryl Williams: "It [the buyback] offers all of us the real chance of a safer festive season and New Year" [2]. Gun prohibitionists supported this view, believing that Australia's gun laws "...may well deliver on [their] promise – a safer community" [3].

A decade later, an increasing body of research shows that the buyback had no significant impact on the pre-existing decline in firearm homicide [4][5]. The downward trend in murders committed using a firearm continued at the same pace after the legislative reforms as it had before, rather than accelerating (which would be expected if the laws had an effect).

Revising history in an effort to disguise the misdirection of public funds behind statements of success, anti-gun lobbyists now assert that the sole intent of the buyback was to prevent mass shootings. However, it is incorrect to claim that the purpose of the buyback was to prevent mass shootings when original documentation (noted above) demonstrates otherwise.

Furthermore, even if the premise that the buyback was designed to prevent mass shootings is accepted, there is no justification for claims of success. Mass murder in general is an extremely uncommon event in Australia, and mass shootings even rarer, thus rendering robust analysis problematic [6]. Consequently, there is no reliable

evidence to support speculation that the buyback has ‘caused’ the absence of a rare event [7].

Given that the steady decline in firearm homicide did not accelerate post-1996, with or without mass shootings included [8], it is increasingly untenable to argue that the costly buyback in any way met its stated goal of improving community safety. There is no evidence to support the premise that reducing the type or number of legally owned firearms made Australia safer.

In short, the bans and multi-million dollar buyback did not achieve what the Australian Prime Minister himself once claimed the whole scheme was designed to deliver; namely, improved community safety for the Australians who funded that scheme.

## **References**

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