

Firearms Community Development Committee Speech

Mr MARTIN (Elwick) - Mr President, the honourable member for Rosevears in his capacity as chairman of the committee has presented the report in a comprehensive manner. As honourable members know, I was one of two committee members - together with the member for Lyons in another place - who voted against the committee's recommendation 1 which relates to the proposed amendment to allow 14 to 18-year-olds to use firearms in the field under certain conditions.

I agree with the committee chairman that it was an extremely thorough process. The submissions were of a high standard. There was rigorous debate, especially on this one issue of recommendation 1. I certainly respect the views of all members of the committee.

I should say quite clearly that I support the remainder of the recommendations apart from recommendation 1, including recommendations 2, 3, 4 and 5 which impose rigorous conditions in the event of recommendation 1 being accepted. It has been suggested to me that I should have opposed them as well but I think that is a nonsense because if recommendation 1 is accepted and implemented then the tough conditions recommended by the committee imposed under recommendations 2, 3, 4 and 5 I think become absolutely essential.

Mr President, I do not intend to go into the detail of the arguments for and against and the merits either way of recommendation 1 as I think it has been covered. My position in relation to this issue is very straightforward and quite simplistic and I make no apologies for that.

Just to digress for a moment, I spent a fair bit of time on planes last week with the Affordable Housing Select Committee and, as you do, I read a book. I just happened to be reading Michael Ludeke's book *Ten Events Shaping Tasmania's History*, I think it is called, which was launched in Parliament House a couple of months ago. I think between Canberra and Sydney last week I read the chapter on the Port Arthur tragedy which was relevant to this debate because tragically it was the catalyst for the firearms legislation that we are seeking to amend in this case.

I suppose over the years I have reacted to the Port Arthur tragedy by choosing not to read the many books that have been written on the subject. I do not even read the newspaper articles. I suppose coming across this chapter in this book and reading it had a greater impact than it would have had otherwise and quite simply, it reinforced my opposition to this particular recommendation. Likewise the recent school tragedy in the United States also strengthened my conviction in this matter.

Mr President, I freely admit that at the start of the committee's deliberations on its referral from the minister it could probably be said that I had a strongly prejudicial view on the matter. My perspective on this issue, like all other issues we discuss in this Chamber, is coloured by my personal values on life which have been created, in my case, over nearly 50 years of my journey through life and by my personal experiences, the friends and colleagues that I come across and who have come into and out of my life, plus the environment in which I live and work, the books that I read, the music I listen to and so on.

In my case, I am very much a city boy and this issue, I suppose, has a little bit of a city versus country vibe about it.

Mrs Rattray-Wagner - Look out.

Mr MARTIN - I suppose if I had grown up in the country I might very well have had a different point of view but the reality is that I am a city boy and I suppose my starting point in this case -

Mrs Rattray-Wagner - And it shows.

Members laughing.

Mr MARTIN - Yes, and it is going to get worse. Being a city boy, I suppose for a starting point, is very simplistic especially for someone who has a very strong view about peace in the world. I suppose my simplistic position is that I wish there were no guns in the world simply because sometimes people decide to use them to kill other people.

Ms Forrest - Guns don't kill people, people do.

Mr MARTIN - I was about to say that I am aware that guns do not kill people; it is the people who choose to use them to kill people sometimes. But of course life is never that simple. I can certainly understand and respect the views of farmers and sporting gun owners and so on but, at the end of the day in the aftermath of the Port Arthur tragedy, the Commonwealth and every State agreed to the Firearms Act 1996. Resolution 4 of the nationwide agreement on firearms reached by the Australasian Police Ministers Council 1996 dealt with the basic licence requirements. Resolution 4A required that in addition to the demonstration of a genuine reason, a licence applicant should be required to be aged 18 years or over.

The basic philosophy agreed to by the Commonwealth and all other States at the time of the legislation was that no-one under the age of 18 should be allowed to shoot a gun. Despite the requirement of resolution 4A, that all applicants be at least 18 years of age, the reality is that all States and Territories have somewhat undermined this by allowing in varying degrees special licences or permits for persons under the age of 18. Assuming the intention of resolution 4A was to restrict the possession and use of firearms to adults, the under-age permit provisions are contrary to this intention. But every State and Territory has done it to some extent.

Basically, my starting point at the start of the committee's deliberations on this was that for me to agree to a proposed amendment which would in any way weaken the firearms legislation I would need an absolutely compelling, unequivocal argument for doing so to be presented to me. To cut a long story short, we have had thorough cases put forward by proponents of the change and by opponents of the change. As I said, I do not intend in this contribution today to analyse and dissect every argument. All I would say is that I have not been presented with a compelling argument which would change my basic philosophy of not weakening the 1996 act. I must say there has been compelling and indisputable evidence that since the legislation and the buyback scheme were introduced there have been fewer gun-related deaths and injuries in this country.

Basically I support the view put forward by Professor Kate Warner and I quote from the report:

'Of the aim is for kids to be schooled in the use of firearms, in terms of firearm safety and use of the firearm, I would have thought that use on the range would have been an ideal location for people to learn. In other words, why do we want to be encouraging kids under 18 to be shooting animals all in the name of safety? I would also like the Committee to ask itself why we should start the process of watering down the laws we have, in breach of the national agreement.'

I would also support the views put forward by Roland Browne. In fact that was Roland Browne I just quoted. He is the Chair of the National Coalition for Gun Control. I would also support the views of Professor Warner who said, and I quote:

'It is fairly clear that the restrictions on firearms in Australia have led to a decline in gun-related crime and also suicide and accidents. I think that seems to be reasonably well established ... I cannot see that liberalising a position in relation to young people with firearms could help us in any way to discourage firearm violence.'

We also had very strong evidence put forward by Dr Burton-Smith, a psychologist, who said, amongst other things, that:

'While a 12 year old might be physically as capable as a 16 year old or even an 18 year old in handling and firing a gun, his or her cognitive or emotional development might not be matched by the physical ability. You get big differences in kids of that age.'

As I said regarding the view put forward by the chairman, parents might very well be a good judge of the ability of the child and their emotional development but the only problem with that is that it depends a bit on the values and intelligence of the parent concerned, so we have a slight problem with that. Mr President, as I said, I could go through the whole report and digress and analyse each argument, but I do not think there is merit in doing that.

I will support the motion, which is to note the report. I think I agree with the chairman, that committee members put in a lot of time and effort. The submissions put forward on both sides were thorough. I support recommendations 2 to 10, but I oppose recommendation 1.