

Gun law critics need more firepower

Which is to blame for murders and mass killings: guns or the people who use them?

This is the question underlying the controversy over gun laws in Victoria and NSW. The arguments on both sides contain an element of truth.

The supporters of gun laws blame the guns. If firearms were less freely available, they argue, people would be less likely to grab one in the heat of the moment and kill someone.

The opponents of gun laws blame people. Guns sitting in closets do not kill. As the gun lobby says, guns don't kill people, people kill people.

These opponents point out that in some countries, such as Switzerland, firearms are widely available but are seldom used for murder.

The opponents of gun laws also raise their objections. They note that people can be murdered by drowning them in bathtubs, but no

one advocates bathtub laws.

They argue that criminals will still be able to obtain guns. They also argue that gun laws are a restriction on civil liberties.

Some insight into the controversy can be gained by looking at other technologies besides guns.

Consider, for example, the knife. A knife can be used to butter a piece of bread, to cut grass, or to stab someone.

Because knives can be used for a wide variety of purposes, it is hard to argue that they should be heavily regulated. For this reason, opponents of gun laws like to use the example of the knife.

On the other hand, consider the grenade. This is basically a military weapon which is not very useful for civilian purposes.

Grenades do not kill by themselves. They require people to use them.

But it would be a dangerous society indeed where people walked around with grenades in their handbags just in case of attack. Sup-

Briefings

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porters of gun laws like such examples.

The point of these examples is that technologies are not perfectly neutral. Even if they can be used for a variety of purposes, they cannot be used for just anything.

It is not so easy to kill someone with a butter knife. It is easier with a hunting knife, easier yet with a rifle, and easier still with a machine gun. For mass killing, nuclear weapons are the most effective.

But whether any of these weapons are actually used

for killing depends on a range of factors, from the psychology of the individual to the system of political control — including laws about use of weapons.

Thus, both sides in the gun law debate have latched on to arguments holding part of the truth.

The opponents are right that guns do not kill by themselves. The proponents are right that the ready availability of guns, other things being equal, make killing easier for some people.

The opponents of gun

laws are on the defensive. Why? Because people want a solution to the problem of outrageous killings.

The opponents are correct when they argue that guns are only part of the problem, perhaps even just a small part. But they have taken a purely negative stance, simply opposing gun laws.

The opponents of gun laws would be much more convincing if they came up with their own positive proposals on how to reduce violence in Australian society.

They might argue that education in non-violent living is required. They might argue that action be taken against poverty and destitution in order to provide hope and reduce the despair that sometimes leads to violence.

Or they might argue that greater efforts be made towards equality for women, so that women are less financially dependent on staying with violent men.

But the opponents of gun laws have not been conspicuous in movements which are trying to challenge the roots of violence. Unless this changes, they are likely to be seen as reactive defenders of special privilege.