

Game on: relaxed rules to allow teenage shooters a free licence to kill

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Opinion - Jo Wilkinson

The state is introducing new hunting laws by stealth, rewarding its supporters.

SOMETIMES you can just be very lucky with politics. Take the gun industry, for example. After a devastating blow from John Howard's gun controls following the Port Arthur massacre, the industry has waited 16 years until opportunities arose to fight back. Bizarrely, 2012 is the year of resurgence for Australia's shooters, while also being another year of gun massacres overseas.

Ted Baillieu needed the support of shooters to win government in 2010. Recently, the New South Wales government, which lacks a majority in the upper house, needed the votes of two Shooters Party MPs to sell its electricity generators. In both states, deals were done. In NSW, Premier Barry O'Farrell broke an election promise, which means shooters can now hunt in a selection of national parks.

In the last few days of 2011, while most Victorians were on holiday, the Baillieu government announced a new agency, Game Victoria, within the Department of Primary Industry (DPI) to deliver on an election promise to "give Victoria's hunting community a stronger voice and better enable the promotion and growth of the game sector". That promise had been kept well below the radar in metro electorates.

Hunting in Victoria is illegal under the Wildlife Act 1975, unless permitted by regulations. The hunting regulations were due to expire last year, but a 12-month extension kept them alive until Game Victoria was ready to give hunters their voice. Fourteen hunting organisations were consulted earlier this year in developing the proposed new

regulations. The process of public consultation is almost finished, except most of the public don't know they are being consulted, or what the consultation is about.

Under the proposals hunting in Victoria will be promoted by relaxing some previous controls. Juniors aged 12 to 17 will no longer have to pay to get a game hunting licence. The Waterfowl Identification Test and the test for hunting deer with hounds, can be waived for juniors holding a provisional one year licence to allow them to hunt, though they will have to be "directly supervised" by a fully licensed hunter. Overseas visitors will not have to pass the tests either, and will also have to be supervised. But what teenager is ever under direct supervision, especially when in the bush with guns, mates and perhaps a bit of alcohol? What hunting tour guide will admonish his armed, paying guest for inhumane or illegal behaviour?

A new, free licence will enable corporate events that provide a week of recreational shooting on a bird farm. The sale of taxidermied ducks and deer will become legal. The list of permissible hunting areas has been enlarged. The size of deer hunting teams will be increased to allow the addition of juniors, and the size of dog teams will be increased to allow for training young dogs. The allowed types of gun dog will be extended.

Red deer will be hunted year round, regardless of whether a female is in foal, or with foal.

Opinion is sought on limited reintroduction of toxic lead shot, previously banned in the US and Australia. Another issue is the potential banning of protesters from all areas where hunting occurs. No mention is made of why protesters gather during duck hunting - to rescue or to euthanise wounded ducks. Perversely, duck protesters are the category most pursued by hunting enforcement officers, perhaps because protesters are easy to find. The DPI public discussion paper admits that "game hunting is often undertaken in areas that are not easily observed ...". Game licence fees have remained fairly stable for more than a decade, suggesting that compliance efforts may have been squeezed of resources.

There are 98 pages in the public discussion paper, too many for the average person or community-funded organisation to examine and analyse during the four-week consultation period. DPI did not issue any press release about the public consultation process, and the public consultation process is not easy to find on its website. Yet 99.3 per cent of Victorians don't hold licences to kill game. (Incredibly, the word "killing" is not used in the discussion paper; it refers instead to the "harvesting" of animals.)

It's hard to escape the conclusion Game Victoria is keeping its deliberations as far from public scrutiny as possible. The Olympics, and now the refugee debate, have distracted from the imminent changes to Victoria's hunting laws and the quiet resurgence of gun culture in this state. The new regulations will be in place by September 12 and will last for 10 years.

The gun industry is expected to prosper. As the discussion paper puts it: "Many industries will benefit from game hunting, including those associated with the manufacture, maintenance, importation and retail sales of firearms [and] ammunition ..."

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Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/politics/game-on-relaxed-rules-to-allow-teenage-shooters-a-free-licence-to-kill-20120816-24bf3.html#ixzz23kT3iuML>