



THE AGE

EDITORIAL OPINION

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Biting the bullet

AUSTRALIA's gun laws have always been much stricter than the United States', and it is no coincidence that the per capita incidence of gun deaths here is many times less than there, where the National Rifle Association is one of the country's most powerful lobby groups. Nevertheless, even one gun death is one too many, and the fact remains that there are far too many guns in private hands in this country as well as in America. Australia's gun lobby is not nearly as powerful as its US counterpart, but it is vocal and well-organised enough to allow the president of the Sporting Shooters Association, Mr Ted Drane, to boast that Australia will never have national gun registration laws because that would mean "too many people (politicians) would lose their seats if they did in places like Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania".

Victoria's gun laws are the toughest in Australia, thanks mainly to the previous two Labor Governments, but they have been made weaker by the fact that people refused permission to buy a gun here may get one in another state. Australia's police ministers, meeting in Hobart last Friday, were able to agree on some national gun-control standards including, importantly, a national standard for licensing firearm owners. Before granting licences police will in future have greater access to information on mental health records or domestic violence restraint orders to allow them to identify people who should not own guns. Other reforms are greater controls on mail-order gun sales and national

standards for secure storage of weapons and safety training.

While it is an important step towards uniformity, the agreement leaves unresolved the question of the registration of all guns. No amount of safety training will deter a deranged individual with a gun who is intent on harming others (or himself). The agreement may stop unsuitable people from obtaining guns in the future, but it does nothing about the thousands of unregistered guns already in the hands of people unfit to own them. Despite a no-questions-asked amnesty, only an estimated 27 per cent of the 2.75 million guns in Victoria are registered.

The Victorian Police Minister, Mr McNamara, says it is important that firearms be kept out of the hands of "hoons and lunatics". We would go further and say that no guns should be permitted to be privately owned in metropolitan areas. It is too easy to claim the healthy activity of sport as a reason to own guns. While not all sporting shooters are "hoons and lunatics", the word "sport" implies a contest in which both sides have a chance of winning. Unless ducks and kangaroos are also armed, it is no sport.

The new gun-control code will be put to the next Police Ministers Council in November. It should be ratified by all states, but it is only a first step towards proper national gun controls. National gun registration is essential, with tough penalties for possessing an unregistered firearm. That might mean that the demands of the shooters' lobby must be ignored. If all politicians cared as much about public safety as they did about keeping their seats, the gun lobby would have nowhere to go.