

Simon Chapman, Over Our Dead Bodies: Port Arthur and Australia's Fight For Gun Control, Pluto Press, Annandale (1998)
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Gun control is an emotive issue; probably few people are neutral on the matter. At the same time, few are well informed about the nature of gun control in Australia, the process of change and the impacts or likely impacts of the various gun control options. Anyone seeking to modify gun control measures by changing legislation and its enforcement, either to strengthen or weaken the controls, inevitably confronts some of the most powerful forces in our society. Chapman's book is the story of the battles and, indeed, the all-out wars, in which he and the other National Coalition for Gun Control leaders were engaged both before and after the tragic shootings at Port Arthur, Tasmania, on 28 April 1996, when 35 people were killed and many more wounded in body and spirit.

Simon Chapman is an Associate Professor in Public Health and Community Medicine at the University of Sydney. He has an international reputation for his fine achievements as an advocate against the tobacco industry.

Over Our Dead Bodies was written, Chapman tells us, 'to capture the nature of the public discourse on gun control that the Port Arthur killings unleashed and which framed the way that the issue came to be defined by ordinary people throughout the country and by the politicians who were now forced to act' (p ix). He mentions two key audiences for the book. First and foremost is members of the general Australian public who were appalled at the killings, who want to understand more about the forces involved in creating or impeding the new Australian gun controls introduced as a result of Port Arthur, and who were part of what Chapman sees as the national mass movement that made the changes possible. Chapman 'wanted to pay a sort of homage to this support' (p vii). The second audience Chapman mentions is people working to promote gun control in other countries. He hopes that the book will serve as a handbook for these activists or, at least, provide information from which they can learn lessons applicable in their own environments. The author could have cited, as a third target audience, activists in fields other than gun control keen to understand the strategies and tactics of planned social change illustrated in the book.

Over Our Dead Bodies has seven chapters. Following a preface in which he acknowledges the key personnel in the National Coalition for Gun Control and a brief introduction, Chapter 1 covers the Port Arthur massacre: what happened and the immediate responses of politicians, activists on both sides of the gun control debate, and governments, using media presentations as the key source material. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the research data supporting gun control as a public health intervention, drawing on both Australian and international sources. Covering homicide and suicide, and emphasising family violence, this tightly written chapter provides a succinct overview. The presentation, as the chapter title ('The Case for Fewer Guns') suggests, is one sided: Chapman does not present and seek to demolish the arguments of researchers such as Kleck and Lott whose findings point the other way. Chapter 3 describes the advocacy process in Australia prior to the April 1996 killings, and Chapter 4 describes and discusses the legislative reforms introduced nationally following the Prime Minister's intervention. Chapman systematically presents the arguments justifying the individual elements of the package, using the

technique of presenting the gun lobby's argument against particular reforms and demonstrating how the gun control lobby responded to them with data and argument.

Chapter 5 analyses the various components of the gun lobby in Australia and refers to its links to the National Rifle Association in the USA. Fascinating insights into the key organisations are presented. Chapman demonstrates how the gun control advocates used the statements of some of the most extreme spokespeople on the opposite side against themselves. Cartoons published in Australian newspapers are reproduced here and throughout the book to illustrate key points.

In Chapter 6 the author presents the arguments used by the gun lobby in the immediate post Port Arthur period seeking to prevent the imposition of new controls, (such as 'gun violence is committed by criminals or madmen') and demonstrates how these were refuted, again using media presentations as the key sources. In the final chapter, 'The Future Tasks for Gun Control', Chapman describes how some backsliding from the agreed-upon reforms has already occurred and argues that the next tasks for gun control advocates are to get firearms out of suburban homes and into community armouries (a proposal constantly ridiculed by firearm owners and their organisations) and the necessity (as he sees it) for a ban on semi-automatic handguns, a popular weapon at shooting ranges.

The book is structured around public statements, as reported in the mass media (primarily national and Sydney-based), by advocates on both sides of the debate, by politicians and by ordinary members of the public. This makes for easy and enjoyable reading and demonstrates, chapter by chapter, how skilled public health advocates plan for and use the media to influence public and political opinion. Detailed sources – both the literature and media reports – are provided. Some researchers, however, may be disappointed that Chapman has not given us a methodological appendix describing the research techniques employed (e.g. how the media data were collected, collated and analysed in the preparation of the book), and the implications of the methods used for the validity of the conclusions drawn. The reluctance (or inability?) of many researchers to describe their methods is a continuing concern in qualitative social science research.

Over Our Dead Bodies is a personal story of the work of the activists. Their energy, dedication to the cause and skill are very apparent. Not everyone, though, will enjoy this book! For example, Keith Tidswell, the Executive Editor of the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia's *Australian Shooters Journal*, takes the view that the book 'brings nothing new to the debate, the tone is inflated and the arguments predictable and weary' (*Australian Shooters Journal* March 1999, p 4); while John Tingle MLC and The Shooters Party state that the book maps 'the anti-gun mob's' future plans and 'reveals they still understand virtually nothing about the firearm situation' (*The Shooters Party Inside News*, Issue 2, February 1998, p 3). The serious, well-grounded arguments presented by Chapman in *Over Our Dead Bodies* are in marked contrast to the emotive, often fact-free hyperbole of much of the gun lobby's writing.

I liked this book. Being a person who works in both criminology and public health I was struck (yet again) by the differences between the two professions when it comes to creating social change. Although prominent exceptions exist, many criminologists and criminal justice system researchers seem content to complete a study and publish the results, letting others make use of them if they will. What a contrast to public health, where many academics like Chapman combine their academic work with a commitment to turning its results into new policies and practices through processes of advocacy, one of the central components of the New Public Health. The book shows that this entails the development and application of a whole new set of knowledge and skills. It also means harnessing

resources far beyond those of the individual researcher. The case study of public health advocacy presented in this book could be a model to some of us in the criminal justice field of how to move beyond research and scholarship, into advocacy for change.

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