Australians Swift and Decisive on Gun Violence

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SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA—It was inconceivable that it could happen in Tasmania, of all places: the worst gun rampage by a single individual ever witnessed by the world. Using an automatic weapon, one man killed 35 people within a few hours on a gorgeous autumn afternoon in July 1996 at one of the nation's oldest historical sites.

Australia is influenced heavily by American news and culture. A strong subcurrent of concern has flowed for years about whether this country is too dominated by American values, placing Australian society at risk of being corroded by the pathologies that are seen to afflict contemporary urban life in the United States.

Even though guns have been fully a part of Australia since white settlement began, their use in the commission of crime is rare. In 1995, the state of Tasmania suffered only two deaths by shooting.

In a singular act of courage and perseverance, the Australian government—backed by overwhelming public opinion—rejected gun violence. Within two days of the Port Arthur massacre, Prime Minister John Howard called for a ban on all automatic and semi-automatic weapons. Ten days later, the nation's police ministers agreed to the ban, which is now law. More than a million weapons (in a nation of 18 million people) were affected by the ban. Over the past year, bounties of over $400 million were paid to collect 900,000 guns. The gun buy-back has been paid for by raising the Medicare (national health insurance) levy by 0.2%. It is thought that hundreds of thousands of automatic and semi-automatic guns still remain at large, even though their possession is illegal.

The Port Arthur slaying affected the psyche of Australians in a manner similar to the way the Oklahoma City bombing affected Americans. Life is simply not the same after the tragedy; an innocence has been lost.

But not in vain. It seems to me that in America, so many problems—crime, drugs, illiteracy, health care—are increasingly insoluble, notwithstanding the best efforts of so many. It was therefore especially heartening that a conservative political leader could take on the gun lobby without flinching and, by the simple force of conviction that these weapons are anathema to a civil society, bring the machinery of government to bear to do good.

Prime Minister John Howard is no liberal. His stance was no less remarkable than if Bob Dole had called for such a ban from the Oval Office. As in the United States, leaders can be rewarded when they act decisively out of conviction, cutting across public expectation. Politicians don't have to accept anemic and ambiguous political outcomes. In this case, a tough law was enacted.

The shooters, as gun owners are known in Australia, did not roll over in defeat. Some advocated civil disobedience—not turning in their weapons—and gun supporters will field candidates for elected office.

Two key elements of the Australian political system permit government to act coherently to respond to crisis. First, it is a Westminster system: when a party decides policy on an issue, that judgment is binding on all its members in Parliament. There is real angst over the gun ban among the Howard government's lawmakers from rural areas. But unlike the endless freelancing and retail coalition-building that is endemic up and down Pennsylvania Avenue, the politicians are locked and will vote "aye." The gun ban took a few weeks to enact. The terrorism bill after Oklahoma City took a year to emerge, weakened, from the U.S. Congress.

Second, Australia has a system of compulsory voting. When polls find 82% of the country as being vehemently in favor of banning these weapons, there are almost no political repercussions to fear from the shooters. If everyone has to vote, no interest can out-organize the public's interest.

After every tragedy, over every bier, from Oklahoma to Port Arthur, we collectively and solemnly resolve to do better. Australia has. May it inspire those in Washington who also want to act to stop the carnage in our streets. ■

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