

The Port Arthur massacre led to a million guns destroyed. Now that a million more have been imported into Australia, policy is again at a crossroads, **Paul Hemsley** reports.

As the horrific imagery of increasingly frequent mass shootings in the United States grips those observing it with horror, the volatile issue of gun ownership in Australia and whether existing controls are sufficient or effective is once again in the crosshairs.

Gun culture in Australia is not nearly as prominent or pervasive as in the United States, but higher rates of gun crime here over the last two decades of the 20th century have fuelled the debate on firearms regulations and laws and whether or not these are effective.

The latest debate to surface is whether the Australian government's existing ban on semi-automatic weapons has to an extent been futile after a study from the University of Sydney found that gun owners, as a whole, have replaced the firearms they previously surrendered with new imports.

In the US, passions have never run so high in the argument between those who advocate tighter gun controls and those who demand the status quo of a legal right to carry firearms be maintained.

BITING THE BULLET

The crux of the debate has remained a right by citizens to bear arms as fundamental civilian entitlement that many Americans believe is enshrined within the Second Amendment of the US Constitution.

Yet in the midst of recent mass murders carried out by perpetrators wielding newer, more sophisticated, powerful and often smaller guns, the issue of how to best regulate civilian firepower is again under intense debate.

The issue came to a head in July 2012 when movie goers in Aurora, Colorado attending a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* were confronted by a heavily armed assailant who apparently broke in through the side entrance of the cinema.

Aside from the 12 people killed in the Aurora shooting rampage, reports put those physically wounded or injured at around 70 people.

Less than six months later, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut, 20 children were shot dead in a mass murder that turned even the strongest of stomachs and once again propelled gun control to the top of the national agenda.

Some now regard the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass murder as the likely breaking point for mainstream social tolerance of liberal gun laws.

The incident led to President Barack Obama's creation of a taskforce headed by Vice President Joe Biden to determine causes of gun violence in the US. This taskforce has faced ardent resistance from Congress and the nation's gun lobbies.

In January 2013, President Obama pushed Congress to



introduce tougher gun control legislation to ban "assault weapons" and require background checks on all gun owners.

It is a divisive, emotional and difficult issue for a nation that was founded by shooting its way out of the clutches of the invading British Empire and ensuring that the "right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed".

This Second Amendment has had many interpretations since its adoption in 1791 including whether the intention behind it was about collective rights or individual rights.

The Supreme Court has previously upheld the amendment as an individual right.

Any federal government attempt at "infringing" the individual rights of gun owners is routinely met with emphatic and well-organised resistance from the pro-gun lobby and its grass roots. Adding to the mix is the fact that guns in the US are not just a culture but large, entrenched, domestic industry that also feeds a substantial export market.

FAREWELL TO ARMS

It is an important counterpoint that Australians have never had such an individual right in plainly written form that ensures the freedom of gun ownership.

This goes back to cultural differences between the two nations: the notion of armed revolution is largely absent in the Australian historical narrative.

But there are also important similarities. It can be argued that the present gun policy debate in the US is comparable to events following the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania in April 1996.

Then, the recently elected John Howard Coalition government moved decisively to ban semi-automatic, military-style weapons similar to those used not only in the Tasmanian atrocity, but also the Strathfield mall massacre in Sydney in 1991 that killed seven people.

Those incidents were preceded by two separate mass shooting incidents in Melbourne, both in 1987, that killed seven people and nine people respectively and also used military-style guns.

Howard's ban on semi-automatic guns resulted in a buy-back scheme where gun owners surrendered their semi-automatic weapons in exchange for financial compensation and many Australians who owned such weapons obliged.

Since then Australia hasn't had a shooting massacre like Port Arthur. Even so, shootings between gangs and other criminal elements – of property as well as people – have stubbornly persisted.

In January 2013 Prime Minister Julia Gillard took some states to task and said

their governments needed to address the issue. In NSW, Premier Barry O'Farrell continues to take flak over his political alliance with the Shooters and Fishers Party that has allowed shooting in National Parks.

However Canberra is far from immune after substantial criminal infiltration and corruption was exposed at the Australian Customs Service, the federal agency whose job it is to intercept illegal weapons imports.

RESEARCHERS RELOAD

Research released by the University of Sydney in January 2013 has coincided with the recent gun control controversy in the US.

Head of the research from the University's School of Public Health, Adjunct Associate Professor Philip Alpers went to the Summit on Reducing Gun Violence in America in Baltimore, Maryland to give an Australian perspective about the issue.

The aim of presenting the Australian research to Mr Biden's task force was to influence American lawmakers and regulators about how gun control has worked in Australia.

The summit was organized by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and its patron, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

The two-day summit featured invited experts from the United States, Great Britain, Australia and Brazil.

The recommendations from the summit would be sent to Mr Biden's task force scheduled to report to the White House at the end of January 2013.

The research revealed that gun ownership has not dramatically changed since the 1996 buy-back scheme was created.

It accounts for legally obtained firearms in Australia through imports, although according to the Australian Institute of Criminology, the most likely source for firearms in the illicit market is theft.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Professor Alpers' research shows that Australians destroyed more than a million guns in response to the shooting massacre in Port Arthur but imports have restored the stockpile to the level it was at before the massacre in 1996.

Professor Alpers says when the first of several mass shootings took place since 1988, 38 state and federal gun amnesties ran for "well over" 3000 weeks.

"If we include all the gun owners who sent their weapons to the smelter without asking for money, the real total is a million firearms destroyed, or a third of the national private arsenal. That's many more than we usually talk about."

According to Professor Alpers, Australians had replenished the national stockpile of

private guns to pre-Port Arthur levels by mid-2012 by importing 1,055,082 guns.

This is an average of 43,961 each year since the destruction programs began.

The study says this total excludes 52,608 hand guns imported for law enforcement and other official use.

"In its scope and size, Australia's public health effort to reduce the risk of gun violence led the world," Professor Alpers says.

He says the risk of an Australian dying by gunshot fell by more than half after the melting down of a million guns.

"Only time will tell what effect this resurgence of firearm availability might have on the public health and safety of Australians," he says.

ILLEGAL IMPORTS

As the research from the University of Sydney has covered imports of legal weapons, the country's law enforcement officials have expressed their concern about the ramifications of illegal imports.

Police Federation of Australia (PFA) chief executive Mike Burgess says there are people who have legitimate right to a gun and who legally use them and legitimately use them.

"There's probably other people that don't, but provided they're adhering to what the current laws are, it's a matter for the legislators," Mr Burgess says.

Mr Burgess' concern is more about illegal firearms because the "whole issue is about making sure that people who have got firearms have got them legally, they're used and stored responsibly".

"Our major concern is those who have illegal firearms and are using them illegally," Mr Burgess says.

"We're not about coming down on some poor farmer or someone who has a legitimate right to legally own something."

The NSW Police Force acknowledges the University of Sydney's research by telling *Government News* that it is also concerned by the importation of illegal guns.

A NSW Police Force spokesperson says the police arrested a number of people for illegal gun importation and are still working to recover a number of handguns that "we are aware" have been illegally imported into NSW.

"In NSW, there are stringent laws in place that govern who may possess firearms, what sort of firearms they can possess and the storage of those firearms," the spokesperson says.

The spokesperson says the NSW Police Force is presently conducting a state-wide audit of all registered firearms and registered owners.

The NSW Police provided statistics showing that there are 162,640 registered gun owners in NSW and 785,993 registered firearms in NSW. **cn**