

MEMORANDUM

For: Rep. Donald M. Payne, Jr.
From: R. Kyle Alagood, Communications Director
Date: Feb. 20, 2018
Re: Brief Overview of Australia’s Gun Buyback Program

As a follow-up to our conversation yesterday regarding your request that we look into Australia’s gun buyback program, the following brief overview and discussion introduces the Australian gun buyback program and its effects. I am happy to complete any additional research or to discuss ideas for moving forward with gun-safety measures in Congress and the court of public opinion.

Background. Australia and the United States share many cultural and legal characteristics as a result of each country’s history as a British colony. Like the United States, Australia has a long history of firearm use for hunting and sport, but there is no equivalent of a Second Amendment in Australia.¹ What changed? A series of firearms conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s raised awareness of gun violence in Australia. Then on April 28, 1996, a 28-year-old man used a semi-automatic rifle to murder 35 people and injure 28 others at a café in a tourist town.² John Howard was Australia’s new Prime Minister, the leader of a center-right coalition. Howard says that he “knew that I had to use the authority of my office to curb the possession and use of the type of weapons that killed 35 innocent people.”³ Under Australia’s federal system, the national government had no power over guns, except relating to imports. It was up to each state, many of them rural and pro-gun, to agree to reforms. Howard negotiated with leaders of Australia’s various states to agree to nationwide gun laws, known as the National Firearms Act.⁴

The National Firearms Act. Despite massive opposition, the National Firearms Act (the Act) took only months to draft and enact. Among the Act’s provisions are the following:

1. The Act banned automatic and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns.
2. To get the newly prohibited firearms off the streets, the Act provided that each state would take away the firearms but pay a fair price to gun owners. If an illegally owned gun was turned in, states granted amnesty but did not compensate the owners. Around

¹ Katie Beck, Are Australia’s Gun Laws the Solution for the US, *BBC News* (Oct. 4, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-35048251>.

² Krishnadev Calamur, Australia’s Lessons on Gun Control, *The Atlantic* (Oct. 2, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/australia-gun-control/541710/>.

³ John Howard, op-ed, I Went After Guns. Obama Can, Too, *New York Times* (Jan. 6, 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/17/opinion/australia-banned-assault-weapons-america-can-too.html>.

⁴ Zack Beauchamp, Australia Confiscated 650,000 Guns. Murders and Suicides Plummeted., *Vox.com* (Feb. 14, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/27/9212725/australia-buyback>.

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650,000 legally owned guns were bought back and destroyed by state governments.⁵
The gun-buyback program required Australia to raise taxes.⁶

3. The Act required people to apply for and receive a permit for the acquisition of every firearm.
4. The Act implemented a 28-day waiting period before a permit could be issued.⁷ (Note: Many U.S. states require a multi-day “cooling off” period before issuing a wedding license but not for the purchase of a firearm.)
5. Australia created a nationwide firearms registration system, required that firearms sales be conducted only at licensed firearms dealers, set rules for recording firearms transactions, and gave police a right to inspect firearms transactions.
6. The Act required Australians show a “genuine reason” to own a firearm and ensured that “personal protection” would not be regarded as a “genuine reason.”
7. Permit applicants were required to meet the Act’s uniform standards for security and storage of firearms, plus the state’s licensing authorities would have to inspect the applicant’s storage facilities before issuing a firearm license.

After 1996 there were further shooting incidents, which led to additional action by Australian federal and state governments, including the National Handgun Agreement (2002), National Handgun Buyback Act (2003), and National Firearms Trafficking Policy Agreement (2002).

Results. The United States is in a world of its own when it comes to guns—we have 5 percent of the world’s people and 50 percent of its guns.⁸ The U.S.A. has more civilian guns than any other country in the world. We have far more gun deaths than any other high-income, developed nation. The U.S.A. has nearly 6 times the gun homicide rate as Canada and 16 times the rate of Germany.⁹

- In the decade after Australia’s National Firearms Act was passed, gun-related homicides dropped by 59 percent in that country and gun-related suicides dropped by 65 percent.¹⁰
- Australia’s gun-buyback program has saved at least 200 lives each year.¹¹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Austin Ramzy, Michelle Innis & Patrick Boehler, How a Conservative-Led Australia Ended Mass Killings, *New York Times* (Dec. 4, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/world/australia/australia-gun-ban-shooting.html>.

⁷ Library of Congress, Firearms-Control Legislation and Policy: Australia, <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/firearms-control/australia.php>.

⁸ Elspeth Reeve, Some Uncomfortable Numbers About Guns in America (Dec. 17, 2012), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/12/guns-in-america-statistics/320409/>.

⁹ German Lopez, The Research Is Clear: Gun Control Saves Lives (Oct. 4, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/10/4/16418754/gun-control-washington-post>.

¹⁰ Uri Friedman, America’s Gun Culture’s Fiercest Foreign Critic, *The Atlantic* (Dec. 5, 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/australia-tim-fischer-us-guns/418698/>.

¹¹ Ramzy, Innis & Boehler, note 6 above.

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- According to the best available scientific research, more firearms means more firearm deaths. In 2016, scientists published in *Epidemiologic Reviews* a review of more than 130 studies from 10 countries on gun control. According to their study, “the simultaneous implementation of laws targeting multiple firearms restrictions is associated with reductions in firearm deaths. Laws restricting the purchase of (e.g., background checks) and access to (e.g., safer storage) firearms are also associated with lower rates of intimate partner homicides and firearm unintentional deaths in children, respectively.”¹²

¹² Julian Santaella-Tenorio, et al., What Do We Know About the Association Between Firearm Legislation and Firearm-Related Injuries?, *Epidemiologic Reviews* (Feb. 10, 2016), <https://academic.oup.com/epirev/article/38/1/140/2754868>.