

**Plenary Contribution to IPPNW Conference “Aiming for Prevention: International Medical Conference on Small Arms, Gun Violence, and Injury.”  
Helsinki, Finland, 28-30 September 2001**

*Dr. Mick North, Gun Control Network, United Kingdom*

**“After Dunblane: Gun Control In The United Kingdom 1996-2001”**

My involvement in gun control began one cold day in March 1996 in the small Scottish town of Dunblane. I want to provide an overview of how the gun control movement has developed in the five years since then, what has been achieved and what we are doing now. But first I have to go back to that March day, to Dunblane Primary School and to Primary Class 1/13.

On the morning of March 13th 1996 the class, most of whom were aged 5 and in their first year at school, were preparing for a lesson in the School’s gymnasium. At 9.30 am a local man, Thomas Hamilton, entered the premises armed with four handguns and over seven hundred rounds of ammunition. In a three minute shooting spree he fired one hundred and five rounds at the class. He then killed himself.

The carnage was horrendous. Over half the class, sixteen children and their teacher were murdered. Among those killed was my only daughter Sophie. Only two children escaped injury and three other teachers were wounded, two seriously.

The country, indeed much of the world, was shocked. Britain was supposed to have tight gun laws, but in spite of another horrific massacre occurring in Hungerford, England, nine years earlier, it was still possible for individuals such as Hamilton to own legally a number of handguns and thousands of rounds of ammunition. A number of groups of people responded to the massacre by calling for a tightening of the gun laws, and in particular for a ban on the private ownership of handguns.

Inevitably, journalists were among the first to comment. The vast majority of national papers, from broadsheet to tabloid, both English and Scottish, called for new legislation. A number wanted a ban on handguns. Some, such as the Scottish tabloid the Sunday Mail, launched their own campaigns. The media, particularly the newspapers, were not only informing the public but in the strong editorials were also articulating the views of a majority of the country. Later they were able to goad politicians into action.

The media can play a vital part in campaigning, but are unlikely to achieve much without sustained public support. Without additional and novel elements to the campaign stories some newspaper editors appear to have a finite interest and grow tired of the issues, while others blur the issues by focusing too much on personal stories. But personal stories are important if interest is to be maintained and that is one reason why the involvement of the families of the victims was a key element in the gun control campaign. Many of us sacrificed some our own privacy to further the cause of gun control.

In general the relationship between the Dunblane families and the media was a productive one. For example, within six weeks the Sunday Mail had raised over four hundred thousand signatures on a petition to ban handguns. A group of Dunblane families was invited to hand the petition to the Home Secretary. This provided the families with an opportunity to meet and discuss the issues with senior politicians including the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, and to gain further publicity for an issue on which all of the families were united.

The families were able to describe exactly what had actually happened and the devastation it had

caused, giving the media some of the personal stories for which they, and indeed some of the public, so often craved. All this helped to sustain interest in the campaign. The Dunblane families had attended a Public Inquiry from which we'd gained considerable insight into the issues. As a result it could never be argued, as our opponents attempted to do, that we had no understanding of the subject. Neither could it be said that we were not responding rationally, we had had to organise our responses for the Inquiry

However, during its initial phases the families could provide only limited input into the campaign. The trauma of the tragedy had limited both the emotional and physical energy available. Working as a group helped in this respect, but it needed others to help set up the organisations that were able to build up the momentum of the campaign. There had been no gun control group in the UK prior to Dunblane, and so views that opposed those of the gun lobby had previously gone largely unheard and frequently unheeded. Dunblane changed that, and two organisations emerged that radically changed the situation.

The Snowdrop Petition was set up by a group of people from the area around Dunblane who were not directly involved with the massacre. None had any prior experience of campaigning but all were driven by a desire to ensure that something was done. They quickly became the public faces of the campaign to ban handguns. I was involved with them at their launch. Everything they did was in close consultation with the Dunblane families. A petition of over seven hundred thousand signatures was eventually handed into parliament. They continued to lobby and participate in media discussions and interviews. In October the opposition Labour Party, on the brink of supporting a total ban on handguns, invited Ann Pearston of the Snowdrop Campaign to address their autumn conference.

Snowdrop's campaign was limited to achieving a handgun ban. Some of us were concerned that there were other longer-term issues to be addressed, and that a permanent gun control organisation was needed. Gill Marshall-Andrews contacted a number of people who were alarmed at the seemingly ever-increasing availability and use of guns. The group, made up of academics, lawyers and parents of victims of the Hungerford and Dunblane massacres, evolved to become Gun Control Network. Our strategy has included informing the public on gun-related issues through press releases and media interviews, arranging regular discussions with politicians including government ministers, providing evidence to a parliamentary committee, organising exhibitions and promoting research and education.

During the handgun campaign close links were maintained between those involved, the families, the Snowdrop campaigners and Gun Control Network. The groups often worked together, especially during parliamentary lobbying, and there was overlap in the personnel. After the publication of the report from the Public Inquiry the then Conservative Government proposed a ban on higher calibre handguns but not on .22s. This legislation was passed in March 1997. When the Labour government was elected in May 1997 it immediately introduced legislation to implement a complete ban. All handguns were to be surrendered by the end of February 1998. A complete ban on handguns had been achieved in under two years. The gun lobby's influence would never be the same.

What role now for UK gun control groups? The Snowdrop Campaign wound up in 1997, but Gun Control Network continues. A permanent voice for gun control is needed not only to oppose any moves to reverse the new legislation but also to campaign for the tightening of loopholes in existing laws. One particular concern is the increased availability of look-alike (replica) weapons. In collaboration with the Metropolitan Police, we held an exhibition in the Houses of Parliament earlier this year to highlight the dangers posed by these 'guns'.

GCN has promoted the interaction between gun control groups from different countries. By sharing information and experiences we are each better able to tackle our own domestic problems.

Together we can act as a powerful group within the wider community that is campaigning to reduce the spread of small arms worldwide. It is impossible to dismiss the role that domestic gun laws can play in small arms proliferation. Lax domestic laws make it all too easy for guns to leak from the legal to the illegal market. GCN members have been proud to be involved in the discussions at the UN and in IANSA.

Too often we are spurred into action only after a tragic event, in my case a devastating personal tragedy on that cold March day in 1996. In everything I've done since the Dunblane massacre one of my main aims has been to try and ensure that lessons are learned. It is not only the children and their teacher who should never be forgotten. The contribution of a political climate which allowed gun ownership to compromise public safety should not be forgotten either.

Mick North  
Perthshire, Scotland  
25th September 2001

Question and response session:

Question: First, I want to thank you all about these interesting things you told us. First of all, coming to Dunblane, did you have any idea before this situation that Mr. Hamilton had a mental problems, and perhaps that he was a pedophile also?

Mick North: There were indications that he was a strange person, but within the legislation that was then available, the police argued that they had to give him a license. He did not have a history of mental illness. He had never been diagnosed as having a mental illness. He had a personality disorder, but there wouldn't have been anything within the legislation, at least according to the police, that they felt could stop him from having a license. Some of us would say that in this particular instance there was a certain degree of laxity in their interpretation of the law. But the law still made it possible for him to have a gun. And having listened to a lot of evidence at the public inquiry from people in the medical profession and psychiatrists, it seems quite clear that none of them would have liked the idea of being able to say about anybody "this person is fit to have a gun." So I don't think there would have been any way that had it been possible to characterize him in a particular way and say "no you can't have a gun," that there wouldn't be other people out there who didn't show quite the same signs. The killer at Hungerford had not really shown any signs of any personality disorder at all before he killed 15 or 16 people.