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“Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States”

Full Text of the Keynote Address by

Michael North, Ph.D.

Presented at the Americans Against Gun Violence Annual Dinner
In Sacramento, California, October 21, 2023

With an introduction by Americans Against Gun Violence President
Dr. Bill Durston

Dr. Durston: During the many years that I've been working in the field of gun violence prevention, I've never met anyone who's suffered a greater personal loss than Dr. Michael North or who's subsequently done more to ensure that no one else in his country – and in particular, no child, no parent, and no teacher – will ever have to suffer another tragedy like the Dunblane Primary School massacre.

Two and a half years after he lost his wife, Barbara, to breast cancer, Dr. North lost their only child, Sophie, at the age of five in the 1996 mass shooting at the elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland, in which 15 of Sophie's classmates and their teacher were also killed and ten other children and three other teachers were wounded. Great Britain already had a complete ban on civilian ownership of all automatic and semi-automatic long guns, including so-called “assault rifles,” but the Dunblane massacre was committed by a man who legally owned the handguns he used to commit his horrific crime.

Subsequent to the Dunblane Primary School mass shooting, Dr. North helped lead the successful campaign to completely ban civilian ownership of handguns in Great Britain. There hasn't been another school shooting since the handgun ban went into effect, and the rate of gun-related homicides in Britain is currently 1/100th the rate in the United States.

It was an honor for us to be able to bring Dr. North to the United States to be our keynote speaker at our annual dinner on October 21, 2023. The message that Dr. North delivered is one that all Americans who have attained the age of reason should carefully consider and urgently act upon. Here is the full text of Dr. North's

keynote address.

Dr. North: Good evening. First of all, I'd like to say how pleased I am to be here. I'd hoped to be giving this speech three years ago but Covid put paid to that, so I'm delighted to have been able to make the trip this year. Thank you so much Bill for organising my visit and giving me this opportunity to talk to you all about gun control in Britain and my involvement in it.

As many of you will probably have read, I lost my daughter in a school shooting in Dunblane, Scotland, in March 1996. Ever since then I've been involved in campaigning on gun control issues in the UK. There've also been a number of occasions when, through media appearances and interviews, discussions with gun control advocates and conversations with the families of shooting victims, I've been able to describe to others outside the UK what happened and, significantly, what was achieved following the Dunblane shootings. Many people have been keen to see what lessons they might learn from our experiences.

In 1996 I was a widowed father with one child, my beautiful five-year-old daughter Sophie. I was an academic at the University of Stirling, located a few miles from where I lived in Dunblane. My expertise was in the areas of biochemistry and microbiology, and in spite of a keen interest in politics and current affairs I'd never campaigned on anything. I knew nothing about guns. All that changed the day a gunman with a grudge against the local community walked into Sophie's school and killed sixteen 5- and 6-year-olds, together with their teacher, and seriously injured many other victims. The man was armed with four handguns, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, all of which he held legally. He used just one gun, a pistol, to fire 105 bullets during a three to four-minute deadly spree. Finally, he killed himself with a shot from a revolver.

For the majority of the British population there was just shock and revulsion and a sense that something had to be done to minimise the risk of anything like this ever happening again. Nevertheless, there were also those whose initial reaction, almost a knee-jerk, was to say that nothing should change. Many in the governing party as well as loud voices from the gun lobby were adamant that something as horrific as the mass murder of infant children at their school was insufficient reason to change or even review the gun laws. "There should be no bowing to public pressure". I'm pleased to say that, despite these views, a determined campaign ensured that changes were made. Within two years of Dunblane the private ownership of handguns was prohibited in Great Britain.

Before I describe in a little more detail how this came about and the impact the ban has had, I'd like to outline the situation as it was in the UK back then. Firearms legislation was determined by the UK parliament, though the laws applying to Northern Ireland differ in some respects from those for Great Britain (that is England, Scotland and Wales), and I'll really only be referring to Great Britain in this speech. Anyone who wanted to own a handgun, a rifle or a shotgun had to apply for and hold a firearms certificate (a licence). With handguns and rifles they

needed an appropriate reason for possessing each individual weapon. The main, and in most cases the only reason for permitting a handgun was for target shooting. It is worth emphasising that self-protection is not accepted as a valid reason for owning a gun in Britain. The Dunblane perpetrator had held firearms certificates for nearly 20 years, was a member of gun clubs and so was allowed to own a number of handguns for target shooting. He was able to keep them and all his ammunition at home.

Following an earlier mass shooting in the town of Hungerford in England in 1987, in which sixteen people had been killed, a ban on self-loading and pump-action rifles and shotguns (including what Americans often refer to as assault weapons) had already been introduced. Half the Hungerford victims had been killed with a semi-automatic rifle. But the other half were shot dead with a handgun, yet nothing at all was done to tighten the legislation in relation to the ownership of these deadly weapons. At the time Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party was in power. The Conservatives had, and indeed still have, close links to the hunting and shooting fraternity and many members of Thatcher's cabinet were themselves shooters. It seemed likely that the Government had been unduly influenced by the gun lobby and, in spite of advice to the contrary, had watered down the measures it was prepared to take following what was then Britain's worst gun massacre. The Conservative Party, now with John Major as Prime Minister, was still in power nine years later at the time of the Dunblane tragedy.

During the 1990s, gun crime had been on the rise in Britain. At the same time, however, the gun lobby was busily promoting shooting with handguns as the fastest growing sport. Many were becoming concerned that Britain was developing an "American-Style Gun Culture". But nothing changed. And then in 1996 Dunblane happened.

The response to the death of our children across the country, indeed from around the world, was unprecedented. But the outpouring of grief and sympathy didn't stop at thoughts and prayers. In Britain it was accompanied by numerous voices advocating a tightening of gun laws. The arguments centred around why such lethal objects as handguns, concealable, rapid-firing and only allowed for use for a pastime, were so easily obtainable. It was questioned why any member of the public need own one. My own reaction had been almost immediate. I had no doubts that ease of gun ownership was at the heart of what had happened, and within days I issued a press statement which concluded with the words "No more guns and certainly no more worship of guns".

Much of the British press supported a change. One Scottish tabloid newspaper, the *Sunday Mail*, launched a petition calling for a handgun ban which gained over 400,000 signatures within four weeks (this in a country with a population of just over 5 million, and use of the internet was in its infancy and, of course, this was a pre-social media era, and so to support a petition each individual had to locate an actual form and sign it in person). In the meantime, another petition, the Dunblane Snowdrop Petition, named after the only flower in bloom in Scotland at the time of

the shooting, was started in and around Dunblane by some local mothers. Its impact was huge, and in time it would raise well over 700,000 signatures from across the UK before being handed into parliament at Westminster three months later.

The Government had responded within days of the shooting by setting up a Public Inquiry, chaired by an eminent judge, Lord Douglas Cullen. Cullen would seek answers to questions, firstly, concerning the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the shootings and, secondly, about what he should recommend with a view to safeguarding the public against the misuse of firearms. Such a thorough examination of the circumstances relating to a major incident might seem the most appropriate response a government might take, and the setting up of a Public Inquiry can be an effective way of placating the public's immediate demand for something to be done. However, there is a view that such inquiries can be a means by which those in power ensure that decisions on the relevant issues are postponed, perhaps put off indefinitely. There is no doubt from papers released many years later that some cabinet ministers hoped this would happen after Dunblane. But somewhat surprisingly our Public Inquiry went ahead almost immediately and began taking evidence within weeks, making it far more likely that the issues would still be alive by the time it concluded.

For three months or so there was a limit to how much we, as families of the victims, could be directly involved in the campaigns that others had begun. Our lawyers had advised us to restrict commenting in public until all the inquiry evidence had been heard. But there were still some photo opportunities which gave us the chance to convey our view that handguns should be banned, and it was certain that the media would be waiting for us to speak once the inquiry was over. But we were able to use that period, largely away from the public gaze, to collect our thoughts and clarify our arguments, knowing all the while that the Snowdrop mothers and others would continue to raise the profile of the campaign. During this time each of the victims' families, and two teachers who'd been badly injured, had been reaching the same conclusion, that we wanted handguns banned. Through listening to the evidence at the Inquiry we'd received a rapid education about guns and learnt a lot about the people who like, indeed love, to own and use them. That knowledge firmed up our position.

The families, now a close-knit group, had been meeting together frequently, largely to support one another and discuss our approach to the Public Inquiry. Somewhat ponderously at first we became united behind the campaigns. I was an active member of the families' group, but I'd also established close links to both the *Sunday Mail* petition and the Snowdrop Petition which had already allowed me, along with others, to meet with senior politicians including prime minister Major, the home secretary (his department the Home Office was responsible for firearms legislation) and the Scottish secretary, the two senior government ministers who would be guiding the government's eventual response. We'd also had the opportunity to meet with Tony Blair, then leader of the opposition Labour Party and the relevant shadow ministers in his team.

Behind the scenes I was also helping to set up a new organisation, the Gun Control Network (GCN). GCN would not only become an integral part of the ongoing campaign but had the aim of being there in the long term, an organisation that would continue to argue for tight gun controls whatever the outcome and success of the current campaign. There'd been no previous organisation to promote gun control in Britain, and it was now essential that something was put in place to counter the arguments of the gun lobby and reduce and hopefully remove the bias in the views being heard by our lawmakers. Previously, the shooters and the gun industry had been allowed almost exclusive influence over government policy - they resented other voices being heard. Their view appeared to be "If you don't manufacture, buy, sell or use a gun you don't merit any say in how they're controlled". To them, only those pulling the trigger had the right to influence gun legislation. Those whose lives had been impacted by gun violence were deemed to be too ignorant to have a say. The bias had fatally compromised public safety.

Once heard the voices of the Dunblane families had an immediate impact, boosting the campaign already started through the petitions. The backing we received from across the country showed that the majority of the population were in favour of a ban on handguns. However, we knew we would have to make sure the issue was kept alive for as long as necessary. Our opponents were hoping that memories would quickly fade, that the politicians and public would tire of hearing about guns before anything meaningful could be done, thus allowing the *status quo* favouring the gun owners to be maintained. The families were well aware that our very personal connection to the tragedy meant that the media would be keen to talk to us and publish our thoughts and wishes, at least for the time being. And because we'd be listened to, we were in a unique position to channel public opinion, to be a focus for the campaign and to continue gaining access to the politicians who might change the law. I spent a long time deciding how much of my own personal story I was prepared to put in the public domain to help promote the campaign. I'd never been especially outgoing, but decided I had to sacrifice some privacy in order to do as much as possible. A tough decision, but one I never came to regret once I realised the impact we could make.

Our campaign depended almost entirely on the willingness of volunteers to do whatever they could. Everyone involved had, like me, been a complete novice at campaigning, and as I've mentioned there was no pre-existing gun control organisation. There was little if any fundraising and the minimum of bureaucracy, although the campaign did benefit from help from some national newspapers and *pro bono* support offered by advertising agencies. GCN had a single benefactor who made a one off donation at the time which covered our initial administrative costs (he has since continued to support us financially, but he is one of only two major donors during the organisation's 27 year history). For the most part the success of the campaign was dependent on the coming together of three different but overlapping groupings, the families of the victims and survivors, those involved with the Snowdrop Petition and members of the Gun Control Network, all working together with a single sharp focus, to get handguns banned. Because of my

involvement with all of the groups I like to think that I played a significant part in our ability to maintain that clear focus throughout, ensuring that we were largely speaking with one voice. It was essential to avoid any attempts by others to 'divide and rule'.

In the end the ban was achieved in two phases. The first began in October 1996 when the Conservative government, in spite of strong opposition from within their own party, responded to the Public Inquiry report by proposing a partial ban, prohibiting high calibre handguns whilst still permitting .22 calibre weapons of the type used in Olympic Games shooting events. The campaigns had ensured that the Government knew throughout that it was under severe pressure from the public to do something significant. Given the close links between Conservative politicians and the shooting lobby their proposal for a ban on at least the higher calibre handguns was in many ways more than some of us might have anticipated. Nevertheless, we viewed the partial nature of the ban as an unnecessary compromise and immediately re-emphasised that only a complete ban was acceptable. In fact, the Government's compromise position satisfied very few - there was, of course, condemnation from the other side, the gun lobby opposing a ban of any kind.

A period of intense lobbying followed. We worked hard attempting to persuade government ministers and Conservative members of parliament to go one step further. At the same time through media interviews, articles and opinion pieces we kept reminding the public and politicians about why we were still pushing for a complete ban. In the end we didn't change the Government's mind and only partial success was achieved. Despite strong opposition from many members of their own party who'd sided with the shooters, the Conservatives did gain sufficient support to eventually pass the Firearms Amendment Bill in February 1997 resulting in a ban on the private ownership of the most powerful handguns, including those used at Dunblane. There would be a hand in period, and gun owners would be compensated for the weapons and equipment they surrendered. There would be no grandfather clause to allow those who already owned these guns to keep them and the result would be fewer guns in circulation. That had also been the case when assault weapons were banned after the Hungerford massacre and has also been the policy adopted by other countries such as Australia and New Zealand after gun atrocities there.

At the time of Dunblane the Conservative Government was already thought of as weak, and by the time the legislation for the partial ban was passed it was widely considered to be on its last legs. A general election was due shortly and the opposition Labour party would likely be gaining power very soon. We campaigners had, therefore, also concentrated on persuading the Labour leadership to adopt a complete handgun ban as their policy. And they had done so. In May 1997, new prime minister Tony Blair invited a group of the Dunblane families to London to tell us in person that one of the first measures his new government would take would be to introduce a second Firearms Amendment Bill banning all remaining handguns. That bill was duly passed a few months later. By

March 1998, two years after Dunblane, civilian ownership of handguns was prohibited in Great Britain. Gun owners were again compensated and their weapons surrendered and destroyed.

So how successful was the ban? What has been the impact?

It would have been naïve to believe that a ban on one type of weapon would immediately eliminate all gun crime. We never claimed it would. This was all about significantly reducing the risk of gun violence, and that is certainly what has happened. Following an initial period during which gun crime in England was still on the rise (though I'm pleased to say that in Scotland it decreased immediately) there was a significant and sustained fall. The levels of gun violence have since remained low, especially in comparison with other Western industrialised nations. And there has never been another school shooting.

This low level of gun violence is reflected in the gun homicide rate. Any gun death is one too many, but in the past ten months there have been just 9 fatal shootings in London, a city of 9 million, and only 25 gun homicides in total in the whole of Great Britain. Similar annual numbers have been recorded for well over ten years. Our population is about a fifth that of the USA, so the 2022-23 figure would be equivalent to approximately 125 gun homicides per annum here. The actual US figure is 100 times higher than this.

The gun lobby, which pretends that legal and illegal gun ownership are entirely mutually exclusive, claimed that a handgun ban would have no impact on gun crime. It would only penalise the law-abiding owners and have no effect on the criminal use of handguns. The gun homicide figures certainly don't bear this out, neither do the UK's National Ballistic Intelligence Service reports which show there have been far fewer illegal handguns in circulation in recent years, all of which has helped keep gun crime at a low level. This is certainly not the picture of a country in the grip of gun violence such as the one the NRA has been itching to portray as proof that controls over guns can never work in any country. And ever since, the NRA and others in the American gun lobby have continued to make false claims about the extent of gun crime and other forms of crime in Britain - these remain so far from the truth.

It's significant that the campaigning following Dunblane led not only to the handgun ban and thus made a huge contribution to British public safety, but it also changed the atmosphere in which firearms issues would be discussed in Britain. In complete contrast to 1996, the views of gun control advocates are now actively sought by the authorities and generally listened to, if not always accepted. In the years after the handgun ban the Gun Control Network used this new atmosphere to work hard to ensure that concerted gun lobby attempts to reverse the handgun ban came to nothing, not least when the shooters used the inclusion of shooting competitions at the Olympic Games and other major sporting events, and the need for British teams to compete and win medals, as a wedge to 'restore their sport'. The availability of imitation handguns also became an issue. Some gun owners were attracted to them and the increasing numbers posed a danger not only

because of the equivalent threat such realistic-looking weapons can pose but also because some models could be readily converted to fire live ammunition. GCN was now in a position to press hard for further controls and succeeded in getting the government to introduce additional legislation, subsequently passed by parliament, which restricted their availability. Our organisation continues to highlight ongoing problems with gun ownership in Britain and to push for further tightening of legislation and appropriate implementation of current laws whenever public safety is being put at risk.

It is shocking that it took a school shooting before the dangers posed by the easy availability of handguns were fully recognised in Britain. But at least after that one dreadful event the British people did respond and showed that the country was willing and able to take a huge step forward in favour of protecting the public. We realised that the way to keep our children, indeed all the population safer was to limit the availability of guns. With fewer guns my country was a safer place.

I'd now like to expand on some points about our campaign and the issues that underlay it.

The handgun ban didn't just happen. Britain's tough gun laws had to be fought for. As I've already described many politicians within the governing party would have been content to leave things exactly as they were. The ban was hard won against concerted and often vitriolic opposition from a well-funded and vocal gun lobby who had close ties to some of those lawmakers and could gain sympathy from others. The shooting organisations rallied their membership, using them to exaggerate the level of opposition to any change and to attack the campaigners. Even though many of those involved in shooting activities involving shotguns and rifles, such as game bird shooting and deer stalking had harboured previous reservations about the actions and attitudes of handgunners, whom they regarded as giving shooting a bad name, these "traditional sportsmen" nevertheless rallied behind their fellow shooters in opposition to the handgun ban. A solidarity of gun ownership prevailed.

It was very noticeable that the British gun lobby used the same rhetoric and arguments as their counterparts in the USA, and there's little doubt there was significant influence and encouragement to them from America. Those who were opposed to the handgun ban in Britain parroted the familiar lines that "guns don't kill people, people kill people", and that gun owners were the most law-abiding citizens, a claim that was always difficult to reconcile with the fact that most mass shootings in Britain and elsewhere have been committed by someone like the Dunblane perpetrator who having obtained their weapons legally went on to commit a dreadful unlawful act. Reflecting the language from American gun lobbyists, we were repeatedly being told that an event like Dunblane was a one-off which could never be prevented, that all other agencies were at fault, that a ban would penalise the law-abiding for the actions of a single lunatic gun owner and, without a hint of irony, that a mass shooting had nothing to do with guns. Claims were made that as a result of a ban gun dealers would be made to suffer more

than the victims' families and that gun owners would be deprived of something just as precious as what the families had lost. There were attempts by shooters to infiltrate Gun Control Network, fortunately thwarted. False rumours were spread about the campaigners and their motives, there were organised complaints made to regulators about our campaigns' billboards and a movie theatre advert (all of which were rejected), malicious phone calls, hoax bombs and death threats. There is no doubt some were co-ordinated attempts to thwart the wishes of the majority of British people and we were determined to carry on regardless of such threats.

Returning to the success of our campaign, it's worth reiterating that there has never been another school shooting in Britain in the 27 years since Dunblane. Whilst there had been some issues with how the police handled aspects of the situation, including the licensing process, and with school security, these were not in our opinion the underlying cause. Even after what had happened, we had no desire for Britain's schools to become fortresses. The idea of having armed guards and 'lockdown drills' never crossed our minds, the thought that any British student might have to be exposed to these throughout their school life would have appalled us. The more I learn about lockdown drills in American schools, especially from what I read in the first-hand accounts from students who entered this year's Americans Against Gun Violence high school essay contest, the more upset I am by the thought that as a direct consequence of the dreadful prevalence of gun violence in your country, your children have to endure the constant trauma of lockdown drills in a place that should be all about learning and developing. Why?

It was no surprise to us when our opponents suggested that our involvement was simply an emotional knee-jerk and accused us of wanting to ban guns purely as an act of revenge. But such a horrific incident required, nay demanded a courageous and substantial response, and to sustain public interest and ensure success it was inevitable that we had to play a part in that process. I know it's a cliché that's been said so often, but we wanted to act to minimise the risk of it happening again to any other families. It was essential to make a significant change. It had to be much more than just tinkering. A bit of tinkering might give us a modicum of satisfaction that we had at least tried but what would be the point if it didn't really change anything. So we weren't willing to accept any compromise. We'd learned how the gun enthusiasts exploit loopholes, try to bend legislation to accommodate their wishes. Only a complete ban on handguns was going to work as a long-term solution. We were not prepared to accept the Conservative government's halfway house measure, a partial handgun ban, nor Lord Cullen's recommendations in his public inquiry report of additional security precautions such as keeping parts of the gun in separate places. Both would leave too many dangers in place. Against opponents who were themselves unwilling to compromise we too would not give way. Even Lord Cullen had acknowledged the likely refusal of the gun lobby to accept any changes and suggested that were his proposed measures not adopted then a ban was the only option.

The families of the Dunblane victims have watched in horror whenever school shootings have occurred in your country. At first, we had hoped that America might learn enough from the lessons of Dunblane, and we wished for and tried to encourage some meaningful response to each awful event. Yet we remain horrified that mass shootings happen again and again. In the immediate aftermath of the Sandy Hook shootings, I was invited to speak at the conference on Reducing Gun Violence in America, held at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. Whilst I felt I was listened to politely there was a sense, shared by the other invited speakers from outside the USA, that the measures being recommended were so limited. We have waited in vain for your elected representatives to respond adequately each and every time there is a school shooting, any mass shooting or indeed any time the dreadful daily gun death toll in the USA is reported.

I should now say something briefly about the 1689 English Declaration of Rights. There was an assertion in the US Supreme Court's Heller decision, one which has been repeated elsewhere, that the Second Amendment 'codified' into the US Constitution a broad right to individual gun ownership inherited from this English Declaration of Rights. Although many in the British gun lobby liked to claim they had a **right** to own handguns, none of them in fact made any mention of the Declaration of Rights, even though it has never been repealed. They didn't mention it during the Dunblane Public Inquiry to support their case for the private ownership of handguns, indeed from my recollection the only reference to it was in a single piece of written evidence, which I believe originated from the Institute of Legislative Action, an arm of the NRA. There was no mention at all of the English Declaration of Rights in Lord Cullen's report from the Public Inquiry, which provided a thorough discussion of the laws covering firearms ownership in Britain, nor was it raised at all in any of the subsequent parliamentary debates during the passage of the two Firearms Amendment bills, not even in any of the numerous speeches by those Members of Parliament who opposed any change to the law. Furthermore, my friend Bob Marshall-Andrews, who himself was a Member of Parliament at the time of the second bill as well as being a senior lawyer, describes the assertion that the English Declaration of Rights actually confers a broad right to individual gun ownership as 'preposterous'. It does not do so.

On reflection three factors, I believe, aided us in our success. The first was to have that clear and substantial goal of a complete ban on handguns and for all the campaigners to focus on this. Second, as I've just outlined, we would not accept any compromise that still allowed handguns to be owned and used, tinkering with safety measures or age limits would not eliminate the risk. Thirdly, we resisted attempts to be deflected by or get drawn into arguments about side issues raised after school shootings like mental health or the popularity of video games. It should go without saying that the one factor common to all shootings is that the perpetrator has been able to arm themselves with a gun. It is crystal clear from international comparisons that the fewer guns there are in a country the lower the level of gun violence. Make guns much less obtainable and you will reduce gun violence. That's what we wanted to focus on, a measure that guaranteed fewer dangerous guns in our society.

I'll finish by reflecting on something Bill has said to me on a number of occasions, that "Britain and other countries have shown through their actions, and not just their words, that they love their children more than their guns". We and the rest of Britain responded to Dunblane in a way which showed beyond doubt how much more we love our children more than we love guns. I sincerely hope that sometime soon Americans find a way to take the boldest possible measures so that this can be said of your country too. Your children deserve nothing less.

Thank you.