

PUTTING THE CASE AGAINST GUN CONTROL: REFLECTIONS ON AN OUTRAGEOUSLY EFFECTIVE TELEVISION PERFORMANCE — MAY 2ND 1996



SEAN GABB

Last May 2nd, a Thursday, I was invited to Scotland to sit on the panel in *Words with Wark*, a television discussion show which replaces *Question Time* there once every month. The researchers, it seems, had been unable to find anyone in the country to denounce gun control, and so had to make do with an English accent. Having found me, though, they did their best to keep me happy. I was offered a taxi from South East London to Heathrow, which I only turned down because public transport is faster during the day. I was given a business class seat on a flight to Glasgow — cost £120 — and a first class railway sleeper back down to Euston — cost £85. Then there was a stretched Rover to Ayr Town Hall, where the programme was to be recorded. Adding my fee — which I could probably have doubled had I been inclined — I may have cost them more than the average MP. Nice work when you can get it.

MAKING MEN EQUAL

On the panel with me was the Editor of *The Sunday Mail*, and a journalist whose name I never caught but who looked just like someone I knew and loathed at university, and Guy Savage, representing the Shooters' Rights Association. These first two were there to argue for a ban on the private ownership of guns, the third to claim that the Firearms Acts 1920 to 1988 strike a fair balance between competing interests, and that this should not be upset just because a pair of lunatics in Dunblane and Tasmania had decided to shoot lots of people. In the studio audience were four politicians — Sir Michael Hirst, the Chairman of the Scottish Conservative Party, Margaret Ewing, from the Scottish Nationalists, and two others whose names I again missed but which are not worth looking up. I have no idea how many people watch *Words with Wark*. But I imagine the BBC had given me a seven figure audience to regale with my opinions.

And my opinion is that gun control is wrong in any form. I believe that an adult should be able to walk into a gun shop and, without showing any permit or identification, be able to buy as many guns and as much ammunition as he can afford; and that he should be able to carry this round with him in public and use

it to defend his life and property. This is not a popular view, I grant. On the other hand, I doubt if many armed criminals would take more notice of a gun ban than they do of the present controls. And it is worth asking how many people Michael Ryan could have killed had anyone else in Hungerford High Street been carrying a gun. As the Americans say, "God made men equal, and Smith & Wesson make damn sure it stays that way."

SHOCKED SILENCE

I earned my fee by saying all this in the studio. I am sure I pleased the researchers. They spend much of their lives talking to people who say the most outrageous things on the telephone, but who then lose heart in the studio and agree with everyone else. The audience was another matter. Speaking on the Kilroy programme here in London, I could probably have made people bounce up and down on their seats with rage. Just as likely, there would have been a few Dunblane parents to sob pathetically into the cameras. Speaking in Ayr, the response I got was a shocked silence. I looked out into a sea of faces that reminded me of nothing so much as the Jewish audience in Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, during the opening number from *Springtime for Hitler*. At last, someone who claimed to be a minister of religion and a father of two denounced me for pulling God into politics — as if that were not what He is there for. Someone else who said he fought in Korea claimed I was so plainly unbalanced that I should never be let near a gun.

"THE PURPOSE OF GUNS IS TO KILL PEOPLE"

As soon as what passed for debate had started again, I took care to score a big "own" goal. An Olympic shooter spoke, followed by a clay pigeon shooter. They were not against a gun ban — so long as *their* guns were left out of it. No said I, this would never do. The purpose of guns was to kill people. The only matter of importance was to make sure they were used to kill the right people, namely burglars and street criminals. From the look on the Olympic man's face, he was thinking of quite another category of people to kill.

Twenty minutes pass very quickly in a television studio. I had barely warmed up before my panel was ejected, to make way for the politicians to come on and bore everyone stiff with rail privatisation and nursery vouchers.

Afterwards in the reception, I found myself shunned like the lepers of old. The locals turned their backs on me. Sir Michael Hirst looked straight through me as I sidled up to him with my glass of orange juice — so much for the party of individual freedom! Guy Savage muttered that my comments had been "unconstructive". On the ride back to Glasgow, he pointedly ignored me, talking to the driver instead about negative equity. This was a shame. On the ride over, he had been very friendly,



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

sharing with me his vast knowledge of the present law on guns, and even agreeing to address a Libertarian Alliance conference on the right to keep and bear arms. Realising that my presence was not desired, I pretended to sleep all the way back.

ARGUMENTS ARE WON BY BEING HONEST

On the whole, I did pretty well. One of the great falsehoods of modern life is that arguments are won by being “moderate” — by conceding the other side’s point and then haggling over the details. They are not. The gun lobby, for example, spent nearly half a million after Hungerford trying to stop the Firearms Bill that resulted from it. I imagine most of the cash went straight to a gang of sleazy PR hacks, who organised a few lunches with politicians too corrupt even to stay bought. What little found its way into the media was one long grovel, by clay pigeon and Olympic shooters begging for laws that would hurt only other gun owners. They rolled over and showed their bellies to Douglas Hurd. Not surprisingly, he gave them all a good, hard kicking.

Arguments are won by being honest — by saying what you believe as clearly as possible, as often as possible, and never mind how “unconstructive” it seems in the short term. Doing so has three effects. First, it shifts the middle ground in a debate. This is valuable in a country where being moderate is so in fashion. For this middle ground is not an independent point of view, but can be pulled sharply to and fro by what is happening at the extremes. Before about 1975, for example, the public spectrum on economic policy stretched between Soviet communism and social democracy. Accordingly the moderates were all pink socialists. Now there are libertarians demanding a total free market, the moderates have become blue social democrats. And, though important, the collapse of the Soviet Union was *not* entirely to blame for this — in those countries without a libertarian fringe, after all, the consensus is still decidedly pink. In my own case, had I not been in that studio, the spectrum would have stretched between a total ban and the *status quo*; and anyone trying to sound moderate would have had to favour many more controls. As it was, Mr Savage came across as the centrist — a fact recognised by the people who did not shun him as they did me, and a fact worth noting by the Shooters’ Rights Association if it ever wants to live up to its name.

THE MESSAGE WILL SPREAD

Second, it gets converts. Granted, my audience in the studio was full of glum blockheads. But there must have been dozens of people at home who were hearing what I said for the first time and who agreed with every word of it. Most of these will stay at home. Others — one or two, perhaps — will become committed libertarian activists. They will join the Libertarian Alliance. They will hand out its publications. They will write for it. They will appear in television studios, putting the libertarian case on whatever they have been called in to discuss. Moreover, even the blockheads have a function. If they can remember what I said in the studio — not hard, bearing in mind how clear I was — they will spread it by explaining to friends and relations how scandalised they were by it. Sooner or later, the message will reach someone who is not at all scandalised; and another convert will have been made. And that is how intellectual revolutions get under way. With his claim that Hungerford and Dunblane were “failures of policing”, and the like, I doubt if Mr Savage enthused anyone to go out and do something against the gun grabbers.

THE COMMON SENSE OF THE NEXT GENERATION

Third, it establishes a position. Unusual ideas are generally ignored at first. Then, if they continue being put, they are laughed at. Then they must be argued with. Occasionally, they become the common sense of the next generation. That is how it was with socialism in this country. More recently, it was like that with monetarism and council house sales. I do not know if my

dream of abolishing gun control will be so lucky. But, to be sure, no one will take notice of it unless someone goes to the trouble of clearly arguing for it.

Yes, I did pretty well in Scotland. I may do even better the next time I am allowed into a television or wireless studio.

Supplement — Saturday May 18th

I was allowed back yesterday morning. I cast the first version of the above onto the Internet on May 10th. The following morning, Jim Hawkins of BBC Radio Northampton replied by e-mail. He had read my pamphlet and liked it, and he wanted me to repeat it on his programme on Friday the 17th.

So there I sat for another hour yesterday morning, telling another million people why the gun control laws should be abolished. I was against Anne Pearson (at least, that is how her name sounded) of the Snowdrop Campaign — this being a group set up after Dunblane to press for a total ban on handguns. Though honest, she was not very bright, and I went through her like a hot knife through butter. When I accused her of wanting to live in a slave state, she answered: “Yes, I do.” When I further accused her of trusting no one else with guns because she felt unable to trust herself with one, she started to panic. When I repeated my wish that someone else in Hungerford had been armed, she referred to my appearance on *Words with Wark*, saying only that I had worried her then, and I worried her now.

I said much else, ranging from the Jews in Nazi Germany (“What if they had been able to shoot back?”), to Waco (“men, women and children murdered by the American Government”). In short, I indeed did even better this time than last — and if anyone doubts this, I have a tape to prove it.

Enough of boasting, however. The reason for this supplement is to emphasise that extremism does work. Consider:

First, it was extremism that got me on *Words with Wark*, and an extremist report of what I did there that got me on the Jim Hawkins show. It annoys me that I can never make the national press — versions of my pamphlet, for example, came straight back to me from *The Spectator* and *The Sunday Telegraph*, as if wafted on cries of horror. Nevertheless, the electronic media can hardly get enough of me and Brian Mickelthwait and rest of us. Whether or not we can ever win it, we lack no opportunity for putting the libertarian case.

Second, it is extremism that makes us so effective in debate. The gun grabbers and other enemies of freedom have so far had an easy ride in the media. They have only had to argue with cowards and fools who, worried not to upset anyone, have failed to make most of the good points. They have never known principled uncompromising opposition. Faced with it, they behave like rabbits faced with a new strain of myxomatosis: they have no defences. If Mrs Pearson was out of her depth with me, so at present are all of her colleagues. They have ready answers to the whinings of the clay pigeon lobby, but none to anyone who asserts a right of self defence against “burglars, armed robbers and other trash”.

Third, extremism really does shift the middle ground. In the main pamphlet above, I was unable to give examples from my own experience. Since yesterday morning, I can. Someone from a shooting club called in, and said: “I want to take a middle view between the speakers.” He then argued against any change in the gun laws. Without me there, he could never have got away with that. He would have been denounced as a potential Thomas Hamilton, trying to save his penis extension. Half an hour of me, and Mrs Pearson nearly embraced him. Guy Savage and the Shooters’ Rights Association — again, please note.

In a few minutes, I will send this revised pamphlet to Brian, for publishing by the Libertarian Alliance. Before he even sees it, though, it will be all over the Internet — there to be read by anyone else who happens to have a studio to fill.