

Customs Broker invites Customs/ABF to lift their game: the growing problem of illegal firearms in Australia

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AUSTRALIA has a growing illegal firearms problem.

This problem, and its associated significant rise in gun crimes, has meant the Australian Government is again considering how to get many of these illegal guns off our streets; this time it is to be a national firearms amnesty.

Once it's finalised, this gun amnesty will mark 20 years since Australia's first official effort to reduce the number of illegal guns in circulation. In 1996 the John Howard Government, following the tragic Port Arthur massacre, which saw 35 innocent people killed, launched a guns buy-back scheme.

The scheme saw the Australian Government at the time buy back more than 643,000 firearms at market value. Many thousands of people also voluntarily surrendered their firearms, so all up more than 700,000 guns were removed from the community.

In 2016, illegal guns and gun crimes are yet again such a significant problem that the Australian Government must consider another attempt to reduce the number of guns in Australia.

In Victoria, gun crime is becoming so common that Melbourne police are attending one shooting per week on average.

But with the tightened gun-ownership laws in place, which the Howard Government also introduced in 1996, how are Australians taking illegals guns into their possession?

This is a question a 2015 Senate Inquiry and many other stakeholders have not yet been able to answer.

Following the inquiry, Nationals Senator Bridget Mackenzie stated that most gun crimes were being committed by illegal firearms, and she alleged these weapons were reaching Australia via illegal imports.

I agree with Senator McKenzie that most guns used to commit crimes don't come from licensed owners, and I have also pondered on a graph

supplied by the Australian Crime Commission, which shows a huge "unknown" sector of the source of guns seized by Australian Police.

Putting the two together, I think we know illegal guns are being used to commit crimes, rather than guns in the possession of licensed owners, and we also have a significant portion of guns of which we don't know their source.

It has been stated that Senator McKenzie's claims are baseless – but if the source of so many illegal weapons is unknown, how can her claims be attacked as baseless when the truth is the authorities don't honestly know how the illegal guns are reaching the community?

The person who is found with the gun may not know how the gun originally made its way into Australia, and if they did, they're highly unlikely to be honest about its source whether they know it or not – they're the owner of an illegal weapon after all and they're in the process of being arrested for a crime.

One million legal firearms have been imported into Australia in the past 20 years.

When you break down this figure it equates to 961 legal firearms reaching Australia every week!

Some, if not a lot of legal firearms, are stolen from legitimate owners, therefore becoming illegal because they are not in the possession of a licensed owner.

But there is also another area that none of the authorities truly know the extent of at the moment, and that is: how many guns are being illegally imported into Australia?

And this is the case because the relevant authorities, namely the ABF, don't scan enough imports into Australia to know.

In last year's Senate Inquiry into managing gun related violence in Australia, the ABF (then the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service) told the inquiry it was impossible to know how many illegal firearms were imported into Australia because

it is an illicit market. Customs also told the inquiry that in 2013-14, it had found 1,737 undeclared firearms, parts or accessories, of which 80 were guns.

However, due to the worldwide, growing marketplace of buying guns, firearms and accessories online, it is also probable that a significant percentage of Australia's growing number of illegal guns is reaching here via illegal imports. How else would illegal guns bought online get here? And if this is the case, the ABF is quite right; they don't know what they don't know.

At this time, the ABF does not even inspect 4% to 5% of all shipments to Australia, claiming this is the case due to sheer volume.

It is widely reported that individuals can illegally buy guns online from sites such as The Armoury, an offshoot of the online drug marketplace, Silk Road, and have them couriered around the world.

Today, many gun parts are plastic or the purchased guns are sent in parts spread across numerous packages, so these small, seemingly innocuous parcels are not picked up by Customs.

And because the longer a gun is in circulation the harder it is to trace its source, when an illegal firearm is seized it can be hard to accurately trace its source, as I've already mentioned.

In 2012, a report into locating the source of 2,750 seized illegal handguns found that only a small percentage could be accurately sourced, reflecting this fact. With this in mind, much more could be done at the border to monitor for the importation of illegal firearms.

The ABF recently stated that there would likely be significant redundancies to cut-costs.

One solution to this problem is that the proposed redundant ABF staff could be redeployed at express courier locations, such as Fedex, DHL, UPS, and TNT to x-ray all small parcel shipments.

I can hear it already, the cries from the ABF and the express forwarders about the sheer volume of parcels that would need to be scanned, but we are talking about accurately identifying a truly life-threatening community issue of just how a growing number of illegal guns are reaching Australia.

As well as this, the ABF could also roll out more of its computerised x-ray technology so that all Full Container Loads (FCL's) are scanned before they leave the wharf.

Even though many gun parts are now plastic, the barrels aren't, so x-ray would pick up any gun barrels hidden in containers.

I can hear the ABF protest again about how much this would slow down importation timelines, but I make the point again, we are talking about the importation of a weapon that kills people – more and more Australian people every week according to reports.

If the ABF implements these measures, and (to my surprise) they find that the true number of guns and

gun parts being illegally imported into Australia actually reflects the figure they claim in 2013-14 then at least they can stand up in a Senate Inquiry and state that they do know the true rate of illicit gun imports into Australia.

Because, frankly, a response of we don't know what we don't know isn't a good enough response from anyone at the best of times, let alone the Australian Border Force.

This is a private opinion and does not necessarily reflect the views of Lloyd's List Australia.

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