
OPINION

The rhetoric of arms in the Australian colonies

Reverend Newett said Tasmanians had a right to own guns and that while the Port Arthur massacre had provoked immediate action, problems such as abortion and AIDS were ignored.

'Who's banning the sex guns of the homosexual lobby groups?' Mr Newett asked.

*The Saturday Mercury, p.9
15 June 1996*

Australians appear to have a distinct penchant for the second-hand. Anti-queer law reform groups in Tasmania have for some years been parading about the public stage in the theoretical hand-me-downs of our Big Brother the United States, one prime example being the counselling-and-conversion-therapy strategy characteristic of the US Exodus program which came to be deployed by our very own For a Caring Tasmania. Now the gun lobby, too, appears content to array itself in the US's drab 'colours'.

Since the horrific events at Port Arthur we have seen a rapid proliferation of classic discursive strategies of the US right, such as the vehement assertion of a putative (I reflect with sullen pleasure that at least in this country they cannot claim it to be 'constitutional') right to bear arms. A supposed rationale for such a right is the defence of the individual against despotic government, and the defence of the Family from, inter alia, rampant Crime, such as the 'home invasions' which were so topical a short time ago.

On the basis of the foregoing the naïve observer might be forgiven for believing we presently exist in some sort of post-apocalyptic war-zone. There is no doubt that the rhetoric of the gun-bearing right in this country betrays a feeling of being under siege — betrayed by a conservative federal government, the Family disintegrating about its ears, and, at least in the view of Reverend Newett, the homosexuals firing their 'sex guns' (a delightfully phallic metaphor, I rather think) left, right and centre.

Why is it that US political rhetoric is so popular in Australia? Why do we appear destined/doomed to ape the discourse of our American cousins? And further,

why do these transplants appear so depressingly successful? How is it, to come to the point, that an argument for gun ownership which is so local, so specific to the legal and historical context of the United States, can flourish so successfully in foreign soil?

Without any extended reflection, three possibilities leap to mind. One, perhaps we are simply witnessing (what are hopefully the last) vestiges of the much-maligned 'cultural cringe', that is, 'all good culture comes from Europe' has become 'all good theory comes from North America'. Two, perhaps it simply reflects the insidious /all-pervasive influence of US culture. We are increasingly a Global Village and its name is Microsoft/ Foxtel/ [insert megacorp of your choice here]. Or the third possibility — perhaps these transplants are not in fact successful. After all, it appears, despite the protestations of the gun lobby, that a fairly stringent regime of firearms regulation is in the offing. I wonder whether the far right occupies the public's attention not so much because their rhetoric of rights makes any sense in an Australian context, not because it rings true in the average Australian ear — as I have suggested, I rather think it does not — but simply because the media, expressing its characteristic love of the odd-ball, gives them 'equal time', that is, time disproportionate to their appeal. This does public debate no service; nor does it aid the cause of those moderates such as farmer groups who counsel caution in our legislative response to the massacre.

I wonder whether it is not time that Australia came of age and public discourse in this country finally gave away trying to equate the Eureka Stockade with the American War of Independence. Guns are not core cultural constructs here. It is to be hoped that they shall never become such. The impending legislation is one step in this direction.

Myke Dobber

Myke Dobber is a tutor at the Law School, University of Tasmania, and is currently pursuing postgraduate study in the areas of feminist and queer theory.