

Over Our Dead Bodies: Port Arthur and Australia's Fight for Gun Control

by Simon Chapman, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1998, 218 pp; \$24.95, soft-cover.

Simon Chapman's catchy title, *Over Our Dead Bodies* could easily be the title of a mystery crime novel. However this book is not fiction, but instead an account of the struggles, setbacks and successes of the firearms control interest groups in Australia in the late 1990s in the wake of the Port Arthur massacre in 1996.

Chapman makes no secret of his ideological position within the debate. A long time supporter of gun control, he views the legislative changes involving more accountability and stricter controls as a victory for the moral majority. The author identifies the Port Arthur shootings as the catalyst that has allowed ground-breaking legislative changes to Australia's firearms laws.

Beginning with an emotive description of the Port Arthur incident and its aftermath, Chapman presents a range of arguments for reducing the number and type of guns available within Australia. These include: uniform registration of guns, bans on specific types of guns and a compensatory 'buy-back' scheme. He traces the campaign for gun control, details the legislative reforms that have occurred and then focuses on the issues raised by the gun lobby in Australia. Rebutting the arguments of the gun lobby, the author calls for vigilance from gun control groups, lest the gains that have been achieved in recent times are eroded through the opportunism of unscrupulous interest groups.

Over Our Dead Bodies usefully tracks the debates surrounding gun laws in Australia. It historically maps the dramatic differences in these laws between various States and Territories, explaining the rationale for the various laws. Engaging with suicide and domestic violence discourses Chapman enlists support for his stance on gun control. The author includes a detailed discussion of numerous weapons and their capabilities. He meticulously traces the 1990s firearms debate in Australia, drawing extensively on media reporting of the heated conflicts that occurred within the debate. Successfully capturing the magnitude of emotions in these exchanges Chapman uses them to support his position. Inclusion of personal stories in the text allows the reader to get a real sense of the types of discussions and

disagreements that occurred in the wake of the Port Arthur shootings. While this serves a useful purpose, there is a risk that the reader may become bogged down in sensationalism.

The author provides an interesting discussion of the use of guns in a number of countries. However his Table 2.1 of 'Homicide, suicide and household gun ownership in 18 countries' (p.45), does not strongly support his implied claim that internationally there is a direct correlation between availability of firearms and firearms homicide rates. Chapman claims to write for 'the converted'; those people who 'were appalled by the Port Arthur gun massacre' (p.vii) and for like minded international groups. However, the debate is approached in such a way that the thinking reader, even one who agrees with gun control, is likely to become somewhat irritated at Chapman's constant attack on the opposing ideological forces. Assuming the 'moral high-ground' Chapman adopts a writing style which delegitimises and trivialises the alternative perspective in a manner that the discerning reader may find patronising. Much of the material is interesting and provides the basis of some potentially convincing arguments for gun control. However, while the author is quick to point out the flaws in the gun lobby's statistics, he presents data of his own that is, at times, misleading. This practice detracts from the strength of his argument.

Despite the judgmental style in which this *Over Our Dead Bodies* is written, it holds a great deal of informative data. I would agree with Chapman that it is likely to appeal to international groups who share the ideological views of the author. However, this book is also likely to be of interest to a range of students involved in advocacy, public policy and ethics. The writing style adopted by Chapman invites meaningful academic debate on the role of morality and ethics in public policy and public health. The book, as well as providing a range of empirical data on gun use and control, has the capacity to promote thought-provoking debates about the possible existence of a universal morality.

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Sarantakos article continued from p.84

11. See Sarantakos, S., 'Nature of Same-sex Relationships and Legal Recognition', 1998a, submitted for publication; also Sarantakos, S., 'Legal Recognition of Same-sex Relationships: The Views of Gays and Lesbians', (1998b) 23(5) *Alternative Law Journal* 222.
12. This notion has been supported also by a number of overseas writers. See e.g. Posner, R., *Sex and Reason*, The President and Fellows of Harvard College, Cambridge, 1992; Eskridge, 1996, ref.1, above, p. 70.
13. See, for instance, Polikoff, N.D., 'We will Get what we Asked for: Why Legalizing Gay and Lesbian Marriage will not "Dismantle the Legal Structure of Gender in Every Marriage"', (1993) 79 *Virginia Law Review*; Eitelbrick, P.L., (1992) 'Since When Is Marriage a Path to Liberation?' in S. Sherman, (ed.), *Lesbian and Gay Marriage: Private Commitments, Public Ceremonies*, Philadelphia: Temple UP, pp.20-26.
14. Eskridge, Action for Gay Marriage, No one is Forcing Marriage on Anyone, 1997 published on the Internet by Action for Gay Marriage (<http://www.base2.co.nz/agm/lesbianconcerns.html>).
15. See Lesbian and Gay Legal Rights Services (LGLRS), 'The Bride Wore Pink: Legal Recognition of our Relationships', Discussion Paper, Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, Sydney, 1993, 1994.
16. See Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria, 'Same Sex Relationships and the Law', Discussion Paper, Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria, Melbourne, 1997.
17. The *Significant Personal Relationships Bill* introduced by Clover Moore to the NSW Parliament in June 1996, and the *De Facto Relationships (Amendment) Bill* introduced by Elizabeth Kirkby in June 1998, proposed to cover same-sex relationships do not speak of marriage. The Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria, in a recent summary of the responses to the Discussion Paper it issued in 1997, did not recommend marriage either. Similarly, in New Zealand, the *Succession Adjustment Bill* prepared by the Law Commission in 1997 proposed de facto relationship legislation as the option for legal recognition of same-sex relationships, not marriage.
18. See Weston, K., *Families we Choose. Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991.
19. See Mohr, R.D., 'What is Marriage Anyway?', 1997, published on the Internet by the Partners Task Force for Gay and Lesbian Couples (<http://www.buddybuddy.com/Mohr-2.html>).
20. See Rauchfleisch, U., 'Schwule, Lesben, Bisexuelle, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1996, p.36. Rauchfleisch, U. *Alternative Familienformen. Einehen, gleichgeschlechtliche Paare, Hausmänner, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1997.*
21. See Morgenthaler, F., *Homosexualität. Heterosexualität. Perversion*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt/M, 1987.
22. See Demian, 'Legal Marriage: The First Impediment', 1997, published on the Internet by the Partners Task Force for Gay and Lesbian Couples (<http://www.buddybuddy.com/demian-2.html>).
23. See Sarantakos, above, 1998a, 1998b.