

Lessons from Down Under

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From 1998 to 2002, my husband and I lived and worked in Melbourne, Australia. In 2002, my first child was born there. We love Australia, especially Melbourne, and it was truly a difficult decision to return to America. I take consolation in our relocation to Durham, which I've often described as a 'Little Melbourne' while recognizing Durham's own identity. Both are vibrant, diverse, cultural and progressive cities with public consciences. Both emphasize walkability and public transport. Both have top-notch universities, great sporting rivalries, and highly reputed science/research centers. And both are recognized as arts and culinary centers.

Last month we returned to Melbourne with our kids. I couldn't help comparing Melbourne and Durham, and in the process Australia and America, and noting things that would improve our county and country. I have a two-page list but have space here for only two of the most far-reaching comparisons.

Far from considering driving an entitlement, Australia takes great pains to ensure that a person granted this privilege fully understands the hazards and his/her responsibility to avoid them. Though the rules vary slightly by state, in Victoria (including Melbourne) drivers must be 18 to advance beyond 'learners'. One must first pass a knowledge test to obtain a Learner's Permit, put L plates on any car (s)he drives, and learn to drive. (S)he must then pass a driving test, log 120 hours of supervised driving, and pass a computerized test in order to graduate to 'provisional driver.' During the next 12 months, his/her car must have provisional (P1) plates, and (s)he can carry no more than 1 passenger between 16-21 YO, must have *zero* blood alcohol content, cannot drive cars with >V6 engines, and cannot use even a hands-free mobile device. For the subsequent twelve months (or more), (s)he must have P2 plates and abide by the same restrictions, except (s)he can use a hands-free mobile phone. Police can pull over L/P drivers just to check their car and condition. Once (s)he has completed these requirements with a minimal number of demerits and is at least 22 YO, (s)he can obtain a full driver's permit.

Even fully licensed drivers cannot use any but hands-free mobile phones while driving. *Justtouching* a cell phone while the keys are in the ignition carries a fine of \$218 (+ 3 demerit points) and, if it appears to have impaired one's driving, police can charge the driver with 'driving without due care,' carrying a penalty of \$2500.

Car accidents are a leading cause of death in both America and Australia. But America's road deaths (per 100,000 people/year) are nearly double those in Australia (14.7 vs. 8, respectively), despite the fact that Australia's legal drinking age is 18. U.S. automobile fatalities can only benefit from adopting rules like Australia's.

Australia also has real gun control, something America should have adopted long before Columbine. In April 1996, a 28-year-old Australian shot and killed 35 people and wounded 21 others at Port Arthur, a popular tourist spot. As a result, all Australian [states](#) and territories banned or heavily restricted the legal ownership of 60% of all firearms and heavily tightened controls on their use, requiring registration of *all* firearms and licensing of *all* gun owners. At a cost of \$350 million, the government bought back 643,000 guns voluntarily surrendered to police.

One's first gun permit has a mandatory 28-day delay before being issued. All firearms must be *locked* in steel cabinets/safes with ammunition stored in *separate* locked safes, all of which must be bolted to the wall or floor. Police can inspect the storage facility before issuing a license and

make random checks to ensure compliance. (The [Sporting Shooters Association of Australia](#) has endorsed this policy.) As a result, the number of stolen guns has fallen dramatically from 4,195/year (1994-2000) to 1,526 (2006-2007). Crimes of passion have undoubtedly decreased as well.

Currently, about 5.2% of Australians own [firearms](#). For each firearm a "Genuine Reason" must be given, relating to pest control, hunting, target shooting, or collecting. Self-defense is not an acceptable reason, although it may be legal under certain circumstances.

In 2002, an international student killed two fellow students at Victoria's [Monash University](#) with pistols he'd acquired as a shooting club member. As a result, legislation was strengthened further in all Australian states and territories. Changes included a 10-round [magazine](#) capacity limit, a caliber limit of not more than 9.65 mm, a [barrel](#) length limit of not less than 120 mm for [semi-automatic pistols](#) and 100 mm for revolvers, and even stricter probation and attendance requirements for sport/target shooters. [Victoria](#) spent \$21 million to confiscate 18,124 target pistols and import 15,184 replacement pistols.

Consequently, it's much easier to catch the bad guys before they hurt anyone. If you have a gun on your person and aren't hunting or at a shooting range, then you are breaking the law and are arrested, no questions asked.

As a result, knives are used up to three times as often as firearms in robberies, and the majority of firearm-related deaths are suicides, which typically involve 'hunting rifles'. In the 18 years prior to the Port Arthur massacre there were 13 mass shootings and in the decade since 1996 there have been none.

The overall homicide rate in Australia is 1.57 (per 100,000 population/year), 16% with firearms, compared to 8.55, 46% with firearms, in the US.

If only America responded to our incessant shooting rampages with half this vigor and political consolidation. But our legislators can't even agree on whether we are making *progress* toward debt ceiling legislation.

The NRA insists that 'Guns Don't Kill People; People Kill People.' The fact is that *People with Guns Kill MORE People*. No matter how the statistics are manipulated, I'll eat my tongue if they ever equate the danger of a baseball bat with a handgun.