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Chairpersons:
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Committee Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
P.O. Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

I write to make a submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee's inquiry into suicide in Australia.

The National Coalition for Gun Control has existed in Australia for about 13 years. A catalyst for its creation was the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania in 1996. Prior to that, there had been coalitions for gun control at a state level. For my part, I was part of a small group that set up the Tasmanian Coalition for Gun Control in 1987, after the Hoddle Street and Queen Street massacres in Victoria.

I have been a legal practitioner for over 20 years. I have participated as counsel in a long running inquest in relation to deaths in custody at Tasmania's Risdon Prison. I have experience as a legal practitioner involved in litigation against the State of Tasmania, acting for a mother whose son committed suicide in Risdon Prison. I understand enough about suicide to know that the precipitating factors are extremely complicated, are varied, and notoriously difficult to foresee. That part of the suicide equation is best dealt with psychiatrists.

My submission to the committee flows from and relates to role of firearms in suicide.

From the earliest days of research on firearms in Australia, the misuse of firearms has been linked to availability. This is the case for whether the firearm is used against self or against others. If a citation is necessary, see *Firearms and Violence in Australian Life* by Professor Richard Harding (1981).

I first became involved in firearms control advocacy in 1987. Tasmania plainly had one of the highest rates of firearms suicide in Australia. It was in the order of twice the national average. Whilst others' views will differ, it is no coincidence that at that time Tasmania had the weakest firearms control laws in Australia. The minimum age for a firearm was 16. There was no need for a licence to be held. There was no registration of firearms (apart from handguns), and the only restriction on the use of firearms in 1987 was that they could not be fired over a public road or within a town area. The anecdotal evidence was that there were a very large number of firearms owners and a large number of guns in the community.

In the early 1990's, we saw the beginning of firearms laws in Tasmania, with a rudimentary licensing system introduced in 1991. Finally, in 1996, we saw the introduction of uniform national gun laws, following the national firearms agreement. These laws saw an effective licensing system with the requirement that a person have a good reason before they owned a gun, registration of all guns and safe storage requirements.

Firearms control in Tasmania went from being a low order issue to one that was enacted and enforced with commitment and priority.

In May 2005, the Auditor General for the State of Tasmania released Special Report No. 55, Gun Control in Tasmania. One of the areas specifically investigated by the Auditor-General, and referred to at page 16 of the report, is the effects of the new gun control laws on suicide. The Auditor-General concluded that the 1991 Guns Act lessened the high number of suicides and the downward trend was "further boosted" by the much more stringent *Firearms Act 1996*" (at page 17).

It is with considerable dismay that I read submissions to your Committee such as that by Drs McPhederan and Baker, who in attachment A to the submission persist with their rather extraordinary assertions that the 1996 reforms enacted across Australia after the Port Arthur massacre have not effected rates of firearm homicide in Australia. Not only is this contrary to other studies, it defies the anecdotal evidence. In the decade prior to the Port Arthur massacre, Australia was seeing an average of one public mass-shooting each year with a rifle or shotgun. The National Firearms Agreement put an end to that, because since the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, Australia has not had a single public mass shooting with a rifle or shotgun. The only public mass shooting since that time has been in 2003 at Monash University, and the firearms used were handguns.

Similarly, other indicators of firearms misuse have fallen, and the suicide rate and overall gun death rates remain low. Whilst early legislative reforms in the late 1980's in Victoria, and perhaps New South Wales, began the downward trend, the National Firearms Agreement, to use the Tasmanian Auditor-General's words, has "further boosted" this trend. See *Firearm related deaths: the impact of regulatory reform* by Ozanne-Smith and others, *Injury Prevention* (2004) Vol 10:280–286 (attached to the covering email with this submission).

Drs McPhederan and Baker are wrong. Their work has been the subject of stinging criticism. See for example the article by David Hemenway in (2009) *Journal of Public Health Policy* Vol. 30, 3, 260–268 (attached to the covering email with this submission).

They also fail to disclose to the Committee that at least one of them is a target shooter , that they are associated with the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia, a major player in the shooting lobby in this country, and that they founded the "International Coalition of Women in Shooting and Hunting".

People recover from attempted suicides where the mechanisms used are drugs or sharp objects for slashings. Many can go on to lead healthy, happy and productive lives. This is in considerable contrast to the consequence of the use of firearms in suicide.

Yours sincerely,

Roland Browne