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Submissions to the Bill Committee:

“Offensive Weapons Bill” 2018 sections 28 - 35

I write to ask for your support in opposing that part of the bill which relates to legally held firearms; i.e. Sections 28 -35 and Schedule 2. You will be aware that this has been rushed forward very quickly, and I respectfully suggest that haste has clouded all logic.

I am a Firearms Certificate holder, Life Member of the National Rifle Association and a member of Mars and Minerva Shooting Club. I also hold Range Conducting Officer qualifications for both small bore and full bore. I started target shooting as an Air Training Corps Cadet, in 1959, qualified as an RAF marksman, and held the RAF Range Officer qualification. I spent some 5 years employed as a civilian RAF instructor and some 6 years commissioned. I am now registered disabled and shooting is the only sport I can now participate in. For me, it is challenging, competitive, even if only against myself, and gives me a social circle which I would otherwise be without. It also keeps me as physically fit as is practicable, and keeps me mentally alert.

Whilst this bill realistically addresses issues with the misuse of acids and knives, and these should be fully supported, (save for legitimate safeguards proposed by others), we say that this is a major misdirection and that the target shooting community are to be unfairly treated and unreasonably penalised by prohibitions proposed in the above Bill. I draw your attention to one dictionary definition of “weapon” A *weapon*, is any device used with intent to inflict damage or harm. To classify sporting target rifles as *offensive weapons* is to ignore intent.

Shooting is a major sporting activity in the UK with some 2.25 million rifles and shotguns legally held by almost 500,000 certificate holders, of whom the deleterious incidents can be counted on less than the fingers of one hand (<0.0001%). Certificate holders are citizens of considerable integrity and most rigorously assessed by the police, and are subjected to medical assessments, references, background checks and continuous monitoring. I know of no other section of the community subjected to such comprehensive scrutiny.

The Bill seeks to prohibit two specific groups of sporting rifles (high muzzle energy and “rapid firing” or more accurately, “assisted extraction”); the rate of fire is in any event a function of the user, not the rifle. When a rifle is fired, the spent case expands in the chamber, and some force is needed to extract it. This is fine for fit people, but for those with damaged wrists, it is often too much. (My wrists give way if I try to lift even a small kettle when full). Whilst these proposals only affect some 3,000 or so firearms out of the c2.25 million legally held on certificates, it will have significant impact on those holders, especially for disabled shooters, who use those which are classified here as “rapid firing” to provide a way around their limitations, since they do not have to heave on a bolt handle, this being done for them by the mechanism – gas bled off from the barrel to drive the extraction and ejection mechanism . (Actually, a proficient shooter of a modern bolt-action rifle can probably fire at least as rapidly, if not more so, but target shooting is about accuracy and discipline, not about rapid-fire).

Members of the shooting community view these proposed prohibitions as a gross breach of natural justice, since the Home Office (and those who advise them on this) has failed to provide any valid evidence that legal possession of these rifles poses any additional risk to public safety. They have referred to vague concerns raised by the Police and the National Crime Agency (NCA) but have never published any details. To link licensed civilian target shooters to gun crime is grossly misleading; pistols, which have been almost completely illegal to possess in the UK since 1997, remain the weapons of choice for the criminal fraternity.

There are three key points to the shooting community's objections:

(1) No legally owned rifle of the types proposed to be prohibited has ever been used in criminal activity, despite being used by target shooters for many decades.

(2) The Home Office have evidently provided references we say are misleading, by linking the rifles to be prohibited to shooting events in the USA; they quote the Las Vegas shooting despite the fact that the full-bore semi-automatic firearms used there were prohibited in the UK back in 1988.

(3) Current legislation (Section 27 Firearms Act 1968 as amended) requires Chief Officers of Police who grant firearms certificates to ensure "the applicant can be permitted to have the firearm or ammunition in his possession without danger to the public safety ...". This duty is recognised by all as very well managed.

We feel the prohibition is a token attempt to distract attention away from the serious matters of illegal firearms, acid and knife crime, and as such not only will achieve nothing, but is counter-productive, offending against some of the Country's most law abiding citizens, without reasonable cause.

To seek to ban certain already legally held firearms on the basis of unsubstantiated claims of threats to public safety is both unconstitutional and an abuse of process, as well as impacting the disabled and offending against the Equality Act.

The capacity for firearms used for target shooting to cause harm is highly subjective and in any event is intent driven – a successful criminal prosecution still requires mens rea; almost all modern cars have the capacity to substantially exceed the legal speed limit but the licensed driver is responsible for driving safely within that limit, and most do without incident.

Indeed, there is never any suggestion that all owners of vehicles used in serious road traffic accidents (or indeed recent terrorist activities) should be banned from owning that vehicle, or the said vehicles removed from sale to the general public, let alone requiring a higher standard of driving qualification in order to own one.

How much more tightly regulated is the owner of a target rifle? They are required to undergo specialist training; are subject to rigorous scrutiny, annual monitoring within the shooting community, and to take considerable precautions as to safe-keeping, safe-transport and safe use. All the latter are continuously monitored, and even minor infractions dealt with severely, with the more serious resulting in lengthy prison sentences for the very few who heighten risks, even without actual harm to third parties. Does the Home Office now say its own regimes are inadequate, and not fit for purpose? If so, then surely that is for the Home Office to deal with this, by proper security directives to the Police, and not to seek to legislate to further restrict the legal shooter.

We urge that Members of Parliament:

- A. Recognise the risk of this evidence-free procedure eroding civil liberties,
- B. Apply the most careful scrutiny to these proposals to prohibit legitimate possession of specific firearms which have not been shown to be a source of real risk;
- C. Interrogating the claimed enhancements to public safety;
- D. Challenge the risk assessments purportedly generated but not published by the NCA.

By way of background, the National Rifle Association, the UK National governing body for full bore target shooting has published some briefing:

<https://nra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/NRA-Response-Home-Office-Consultation-Offensive-Weapons.pdf>

May I therefore ask that you raise the following questions:

1. What evidence is there that any legally owned rifles of the types proposed to be prohibited have ever been used in criminal activity? So far as we know, there is none – only “perception”. We know of no evidence base of any of these rifles having been used in commission of crimes.
2. Why are comparisons with the USA to be relied upon?
3. Why is current legislation (Section 27 Firearms Act 1968 as amended) determining suitability of individuals to be permitted to have such firearm or ammunition in their possession now considered inadequate?
4. What provisions are proposed for disabled shooters for whom these rifles allow engagement in their chosen sport? The way the bill is drafted, it would effectively ban any rifle which used propellant gas to extract the spent round from the chamber – even if the said rifle were single shot! This removes a key means of disabled shooters who lack the wrist strength to operate a bolt, from following their sport. We say that this goes directly against the Equality Act and the principles of inclusiveness.
2. The language used, describing these target rifles as offensive weapons is inflammatory. Cars kill more than 1500 people on our roads each year yet no one seems to suggest that they should be banned.
3. Legal ownership of such rifles is already tightly restricted to those who are vetted, both by the Police for the firearms certificate, and by the club issuing the competency certificate, AND can demonstrate to the Police that they have a legitimate reason for wanting them.

For .50 cal, their use is very limited and only as an ultimate test of skill. There are also very large clumsy things to transport, and I am given to understand that if one were sawn down it would likely explode in the face of the user!

For "rapid fire", the rate at which a skilled shooter can cycle a modern bolt, or even that of a first World War SLME Rifle, is faster anyway - the big value to disabled shooters like myself is that no wrist strength is required to extract and eject the spent round.

As I understand it, moving these to Section 5 would prohibit private ownership, and do so without valid reasons.

Since there is no evidence to suggest misuse by licensed holders, this consultation element would appear to be unfounded and pure scaremongering.

In any event, if the Home Office feels they have legitimate concerns as to storage, it would make much more sense just to require that when stored, any ammunition is kept separately from magazines and removable action parts, which are in turn kept separate from the body of the rifles - a practice I have always adopted anyway.

I would suggest that no reasonable person can but agree with the strictest regulations on acids, knives and the like, and indeed, by explanation, I have yet to see a "bump stock" at all.

However, banning so called "rapid fire rifles and certain powerful firearms" for legal holders who have been very carefully screened by the authorities, makes no sense. There is no evidential base to show that these have or will cause a risk.

Contrast this with the hazards posed by kitchen knives, mopeds, scooters, motorcycles, cars and vans, all of which have been used to cause carnage, either deliberately or accidentally. Does the government act to ban these? Of course not, But the evidence is there! How more

A Criminal's Weapon of Choice?

The Bill seeks to ban private ownership of 50 cal, and MARS / Lever Release rifles, with no evidence that these have been used in crimes, or indeed are a criminal's weapon of choice.

NABIS published in their annual report statistics which rate rifles as the least likely weapon of choice.

<http://nabis.police.uk/user>

So, if the criminals do not get their weapons by stealing licenced rifles, where do they come from?

The evidence suggests the following sources:

1. Illegal importation from the continent, where apparently it is easy to buy these;
2. Antique guns with "obsolete" calibres are still in wide circulation, uncontrolled; i.e. legal weapons, and extensively used for crimes, with "home-made" ammunition. see: "legal weapon" broadcast on BBC TV Panorama, First shown: 8:30pm 20 Aug 2018, and available on iplayer. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0bfkdwX/panorama-legal-weapon>

3. Illegal new manufacture - indeed, a very recent discovery was of a new handgun factory in Hailsham, apparently masquerading as a gearbox workshop!

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6086369/Three-people-arrested-illegal-gun-factory-discovered-Hailsham-Sussex.html>

The relevant Parliamentary brief (SN01940.pf) says that handguns are 44 times more likely to be used in crimes than rifles are!

<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN01940>

In summary therefore clauses 28 -35 should be struck out because:

1. It is morally wrong to attack a law-abiding section of the public without compelling evidence;
2. It would be very bad law to attack a minority for something that others do;
3. This bill attacks a mythical potential of less than 3% of the problem, and completely ignores the other 97%+. Where is the logic in that? Why are resources being so misdirected?

Why the focus on law abiding citizens when there is a clear target which has a direct impact on handguns used in crimes?

Yours sincerely,

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