There's only one way to protect ourselves – and here's the proof

By Richard Munday
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Today, 96 years ago, London was rocked by a terrorist outrage. Two Latvian anarchists, who had crossed the Channel after trying to blow up the president of France, attempted an armed wages robbery in Tottenham. Foiled at the outset when the intended victims fought back, the anarchists attempted to shoot their way out.

A dramatic pursuit ensued involving horses and carts, bicycles, cars and a hijacked tram. The fleeing anarchists fired some 400 shots, leaving a policeman and a child dead, and some two dozen other casualties, before they were ultimately brought to bay. They had been chased by an extraordinary posse of policemen and local people, armed and unarmed. Along the way, the police (whose gun cupboard had been locked, and the key mislaid) had borrowed at least four pistols from passers-by in the street, while other armed citizens joined the chase in person.

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Today, when we are inured to the idea of armed robbery and drive-by shootings, the aspect of the "Tottenham Outrage" that is most likely to shock is the fact that so many ordinary members of the public at that time should have been carrying guns in the street. Bombarded with headlines about an emergent "gun culture" in Britain now, we are apt to forget that the real novelty is the notion that the general populace in this country should be disarmed.

In a material sense, Britain today has much less of a "gun culture" than at any time in its recent history. A century ago, the possession and carrying of firearms was perfectly normal here. Firearms were sold without licence in gunshops and ironmongers in virtually every town in the country, and grand department stores such as Selfridge's even offered customers an in-house range. The market was not just for sporting guns: there was a thriving domestic industry producing pocket pistols and revolvers, and an extensive import trade in the cheap handguns that today would be called "Saturday Night Specials". Conan Doyle's Dr Watson, dropping a revolver in his pocket before going out about town, illustrates a real commonplace of that time. Beatrix Potter's journal records a discussion at a small country hotel in Yorkshire, where it turned out that only one of the eight or nine guests was not carrying a revolver.

We should not fool ourselves, however, that such things were possible then because society was more peaceful. Those years were ones of much more social and political turbulence than our own: with violent and incendiary suffrage protests, massive industrial strikes where the Army was called in and people were killed, where there was the menace of a revolutionary General Strike, and where the country was riven by the imminent prospect of a civil war in Ireland. It was in such a society that, as late as 1914, the right even of an Irishman to carry a loaded revolver in the streets was upheld in the courts (Rex v. Smith, KB 1914) as a manifestation simply of the guarantees provided by our Bill of Rights.

In such troubled times, why did the commonplace carrying of firearms not result in mayhem? How could it be that in the years before the First World War, armed crime in London amounted to less than 2 per cent of what we see today? One answer that might have been taken as self-evident then, but which has become political anathema now, is that the prevalence of firearms had a stabilising influence and a deterrent effect upon crime. Such deterrent potential was indeed acknowledged in part in Britain's first

Firearms Act, which was introduced as an emergency measure in response to fears of a Bolshevik upheaval in 1920. Home Office guidance on the implementation of the Act recognised "good reason for having a revolver if a person lives in a solitary house, where protection from thieves and burglars is essential". The Home Office issued more restrictive guidance in 1937, but it was only in 1946 that the new Labour Home Secretary announced that self-defence would no longer generally be accepted as a good reason for acquiring a pistol (and as late as 1951 this reason was still being proffered in three-quarters of all applications for pistol licences, and upheld in the courts). Between 1946 and 1951, we might note, armed robbery, the most significant index of serious armed crime, averaged under two dozen incidents a year in London; today, that number is exceeded every week.

The Sunday Telegraph's Right to Fight Back campaign is both welcome and a necessity. However, an abstract right that leaves the weaker members of society – particularly the elderly – without the means to defend themselves, has only a token value. As the 19th-century jurist James Paterson remarked in his Commentaries on the Liberty of the Subject and the Laws of England Relating to the Security of the Person: "In all countries where personal freedom is valued, however much each individual may rely on legal redress, the right of each to carry arms – and these the best and the sharpest – for his own protection in case of extremity, is a right of nature indelible and irrepressible, and the more it is sought to be repressed the more it will recur."

Restrictive "gun control" in Britain is a recent experiment, in which the progressive "toughening" of the regulation of legal gun ownership has been followed by an increasingly dramatic rise in violent armed crime. Eighty-four years after the legal availability of pistols was restricted to Firearm Certificate holders, and seven years after their private possession was generally prohibited, they still figure in 58 per cent of armed crimes. Home Office evidence to the Dunblane Inquiry prior to the handgun ban indicated that there was an annual average of just two incidents in which licensed pistols appeared in crime. If, as the Home Office still asserts, "there are links between firearms licensing and armed crime", the past century of Britain's experience has shown the link to be a sharply negative one.

If Britain was a safer country without our present system of denying firearms to the law-abiding, is deregulation an option? That is precisely the course that has been pursued, with conspicuous success in combating violent crime, in the United States.

For a long time it has been possible to draw a map of the United States showing the inverse relationship between liberal gun laws and violent crime. At one end of the scale are the "murder capitals" of Washington, Chicago and New York, with their gun bans (New York City has had a theoretical general prohibition of handguns since 1911); at the other extreme, the state of Vermont, without gun laws, and with the lowest rate of violent crime in the Union (a 13th that of Britain). From the late Eighties, however, the relative proportions on the map have changed radically. Prior to that time it was illegal in much of the United States to bear arms away from the home or workplace, but Florida set a new legislative trend in 1987, with the introduction of "right-to-carry" permits for concealed firearms.

Issue of the new permits to law-abiding citizens was non-discretionary, and of course aroused a furore among gun control advocates, who predicted that blood would flow in the streets. The prediction proved false; Florida's homicide rate dropped, and firearms abuse by permit holders was virtually non-existent. State after state followed Florida's suit, and mandatory right-to-carry policies are now in place in 35 of the United States.

In a nationwide survey of the impact of the legislation, John Lott and David Mustard of the University of Chicago found that by 1992, right-to-carry states had already seen an 8 per cent reduction in murders, 7 per cent reduction in aggravated assaults, and 5 per cent reduction in rapes. Extrapolating from the 10 states that had then implemented the policy, Lott and Mustard calculated that had right-to-carry legislation been nationwide, an annual average of some 1,400 murders, 4,200 rapes and more than 60,000 aggravated assaults might have been averted. The survey has lent further support to the research of Professor Kleck, of Florida State University, who found that firearms in America serve to deter crime at least three times as often as they appear in its commission.

Over the last 25 years the number of firearms in private hands in the United States has more than doubled. At the same time the violent crime rate has dropped dramatically, with the significant downswing following the spread of right-to-carry legislation. The US Bureau of Justice observes that "firearms-related crime has plummeted since 1993", and it has declined also as a proportion of overall violent offences. Violent crime in total has declined so much since 1994 that it has now reached, the bureau states, "the lowest level ever recorded". While American "gun culture" is still regularly the sensational subject of media demonisation in Britain, the grim fact is that in this country we now suffer three times the level of violent crime committed in the United States.

Today, on this anniversary of the "Tottenham Outrage", it is appropriate that we reflect upon how the objects of outrage in Britain have changed within a lifetime. If we now find the notion of an armed citizenry anathema, what might the Londoners of 1909 have made of our own violent, disarmed society?

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