

Murder At Port Arthur Was It A Conspiracy?

Condensed account
by
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Introduction

This brief paper is a condensed account of a much larger work of the same name.

The basic facts

The undisputed facts are that a lone gunman shot dead thirty-five people and wounded at least twenty others at Port Arthur, Tasmania on Sunday 28 April 1996. Most of the victims were in the *Broad Arrow Café*. Martin Bryant confessed to the crime and was sentenced to life imprisonment. The law courts, the police, the government and the media are in support of the conviction of Martin Bryant. Many conspiracy writers claim Martin Bryant is not the true gunman.

The conspiracy theory

The claim by some conspiracy theorists is that (unnamed) people within the John Howard Liberal Party government in 1996 hired a ruthless gunman to kill a large number of people in Port Arthur in order to get an unsuspecting public to hate guns as a first step in a plan to disarm the general public. Once that is achieved, the government can bring about plans which the general public may not like. The gunman was secretly taken out of the scene of the murders, and Martin Bryant was brought in to take the blame. This version of events is proclaimed by Joe Vialls in his book, *Deadly Deception at Port Arthur*.

Another version claims that Martin Bryant was the murderer, however, he was convinced he should commit the murders by government agents who were taking advantage of his poor mental state and low IQ. The person championing this view was Gympie Queensland gun shop owner, Ron Owen, who edited a magazine titled, *Lock Stock & Barrel*, a pro-gun magazine. This publication was issued twice a year from 1981 till 1999. The claim that the government was somehow behind the murders is of course quite a serious charge.

Problems with the theory

The first problem with the theory is over the likelihood that anyone in the Liberal Party of the time - or any other party for that matter - would approach another person with a scheme to murder a large number of innocent people for some sort of political benefit. The first thing we should expect from a plan of that sort is that the person conveying the plan would be reported and taken away for a mental health assessment.

One of the things which I felt was important in investigating the theory was to find out from which direction the allegations of conspiracy were coming. Usually with violent plans to overthrow the will of the people, there is a well defined group such as a well-armed militia. At the very

least, there is an underground political group with plans to make changes to the political landscape. Arguably the most serious challenge to Australia's democratic process was uncovered in 1949. On the 17th October 1949, Lawrence Sharkey, the general secretary of the communist party was sentenced to three years jail for sedition. In the light of our subject, I must point out that neither Sharkey nor anyone else in the communist party was accused of murder.

If anyone has good evidence that the police in Tasmania captured the wrong person, or that he did not act alone, then they can bring their evidence to the police, or to the Federal Police if they feel they can not trust the local police. In Australia, we have good procedures in place to deal with matters of sedition. In the case of Port Arthur, good evidence that the gunman was not Martin Bryant, or that he was manipulated to commit murder, is lacking.

Opposing political parties are not interested in the conspiracy claims. It defies logic that the various opposing political parties would just sit on powerful evidence that could bring down an opposition party, and of course, bring about true justice.

My investigation finds that the police and legal system are not interested in the conspiracy theory, politicians are not interested, nor are journalists. That is understandable given that the conspiracy claims lack substance. I must point out that one thousand pieces of questionable evidence do not overthrow one piece of solid evidence.

It is interesting that while the above groups do not support the conspiracy claims, there is one group in particular which is very interested; this group supports private ownership of military grade semi-automatic rifles. The contrast between this group and the above groups is quite revealing.

When the government brought in legislation demanding that people with semi-automatic firearms hand in their weapons, some in this group were hopping mad. Most, like myself, were happy to hand in our semi-automatic rifles for the greater good of the community. In the ten years up to that point in time, there was at least one mass shooting per year. In the ten years following the government buy-back of dangerous weapons, there was not a single incident of a mass shooting. The government plan, led by John Howard has been a huge success.

When one takes the time to investigate who it is that believes the conspiracy theory, it soon becomes evident that believers primarily fall into a few small categories.

- Guns and ammo retailers. They suffered financially through a decline in interest in shooting. It is the government which brought about their financial woes, and it is the government which must face their anger.
- Shooters who felt terribly deprived from the loss of their

semi-automatic rifle/s.

- Those who are suspicious of government - they are up to something.
- Those who believe in one false conspiracy story are vulnerable to further false stories including this one.

The bulk of the support for the Port Arthur conspiracy theory - if it was genuine - should come from those who have a concern for the protection of our democracy, but it doesn't. It comes from shooters and those who love conspiracy theories.

The gunman

When Martin was a teenager, he poured petrol over himself and set it alight. His teenage acquaintances - he had very few friends - rolled him in the sand and extinguished the flames. A psychopath has little concern for the suffering of himself, or for the suffering of others. Martin has been classified as a psychopath.

A web site back in 2005, put forward the argument that Martin Bryant was the killer after being seduced by conspirators. It offers the following arguments in support of the claim that he was mentally unbalanced.

"Bryant's neighbour, Jim Featherstone, said this about Bryant, 'We knew in our minds there was something wrong about the fellow. He had three or four personalities.'" Also, on one of his frequent overseas trips, it was reported in the *Sydney Sun Herald* that he had brought back videos from Scandinavia featuring animal sex acts and bestiality." And, "His favourite video was 'Child's Play 2' concerning a doll that comes to life and commits serial murder."¹

Regarding Martin Bryant's intellectual capacity, one conspiracy view is that he did not have enough intelligence to be able to use a rifle, however, it needs to be noted that he sat for and passed a written drivers licence test, then passed the practical driving test to gain his licence. Clearly, he had enough intelligence to operate a firearm.

The shooting and confession

A short time prior to the shooting, Martin drove his old Volvo to the property of Roger Lerner who lives a minutes drive from the Port Arthur site. They know each other well. Lerner reports, "I talked with him for about 10 minutes". After talking with Lerner, Martin drove to the Port Arthur site and spoke with Kingston, the security guard - who survived the shooting and gave evidence. Martin parked his distinctive yellow Volvo car with a surf board on top, and carried a heavy bag into the café. The heavy bag contained two high-powered military style semi-automatic rifles and a large amount of ammunition. At around 1:30 pm. Martin grabbed one of the rifles from his bag, an AR-15 (this is a 5.56mm calibre rifle) and began shooting.

When police questioned Martin about the incident, he was initially evasive, indicating that he knew that what he did was wrong. He could not argue that he was mentally insane. Inspector Warren says to Martin, "Well what would you say if I told you that you were seen going into Port Arthur and in fact you were at the toll gate?" Martin replies, "I could've been."² This is a half-hearted admission that he

went into Port Arthur. From Joe Vialls' point of view, this is a mistake in his book. He should have edited this part out to strengthen his case that the murderer was not Martin Bryant. Later, Martin makes a full confession that he is the gunman. His capture was not what he was expecting, he thought he would be killed in a shootout with police.

In a recorded police interview on 04 July 1996 at 2:14 pm, Martin is questioned. With a smile on his face, Martin says to a detective, "You see, if people didn't do these unfortunate things, you guys wouldn't have a job (snigger)" To which the detective replies, "Well, there's a lot of truth in that Martin, let me tell you." Straight after that comment, Martin Bryant points to the rifle he used, an AR-15 semi-automatic. When the rifle is held up for Martin to look at, he says, "That was the one, it's a sweet little gun because it is so light."

The above recorded confession has been aired across the major TV networks across Australia because of the public interest. One of the obvious points about this confession is the relaxed manner in which it is given, and the relaxed attitude of the police. There are no standover tactics employed by the police to extract a confession.

The witnesses

The eyewitness testimony that Martin Bryant was the killer is quite solid. Part of the testimony comes from those who were in the café at the time of the shooting, and saw him at close range.

Some of those who saw him at close range have reported what they saw to reliable television networks. Viewers can see for themselves the demeanor of those giving the testimony. It defies common sense that they would lie about what they saw.

Port Arthur was a popular tourist destination for those who visited Tasmania back in 1996. The number of people who saw him when he stepped out of the *Broad Arrow Café* continuing to shoot at people, was quite large - more than 200. They naturally looked in the direction of gunfire and saw him. The popular, Australia-wide distributed weekly news magazine, *The Bulletin* reported, "... Bryant was charged with the killing of one of the Port Arthur victims, a West Australian woman. With more than 200 witnesses expected to be interviewed - many of whom have returned to their homes - it may be some time before police can lay charges concerning the other 34 dead and 19 wounded."³

Suspicious

There are suspicions in relation to other deaths. Martin initially lived with his parents, but after a time there was conflict with his father. At this time, Martin had contact with Mrs. Helen Harvey, an elderly rich lady. She took a liking to Martin, so about the middle of 1990 when Martin was twenty-three he moved into her large home. Because they were often seen together, strangers usually concluded he was her son.

After Martin Bryant learnt that he would inherit the

wealth of Helen Harvey after her death, she died in a car accident under suspicious circumstances. Her car hit another vehicle, and was found on the wrong side of the road. Martin was in the car and had to be cut from the wreck.

People are suspicious of Martin's role in the accident. Helen was said to have told neighbours that "... she always drove slowly because Bryant would sometimes yank the steering wheel." ⁴ Martin inherited her wealth, valued at more than one million dollars.

Suspicious of foul play are not limited to the death of Helen Harvey. Maurice Bryant, the father of Martin came to an unfortunate end. Mike Bingham reports that "... Maurice's body was found, at the bottom of a deep dam. It had a weight belt strapped across it like a bandolier." Immediately after Martin came over to identify his father's body, "... the searchers were amazed to see Martin walking back from the dam, laughing. The young man must suffer from some form of mental illness they decided." ⁵

That incident had the neighbours worried. "John Featherstone, for one, remained deeply suspicious of the circumstances surrounding Maurice Bryant's demise..." ⁶

This is another incident from which Martin profited financially. This time he gained just over \$100,000 from the inheritance his father left to him.

We need a royal commission?

Many conspiracy theorists insist we need a royal commission into the shooting to gain the real truth. The conspiracy writers are on safe grounds calling for a royal commission because as most Australians will understand, there are no grounds for the commission. No politician is going to call for as much as a senate inquiry. If a royal commission was called, the conspiracy writers would begin living in fear, because the lies or lack of evidence they proclaim would soon be exposed. The outcome of the commission would be an affirmation that Martin Bryant was the gunman. Following on from that, those who hate the government because they have lost their precious semi-automatic rifles, would then have to try and love the government because they have got to the truth. In reality, the rapid-fire gun lovers are going to continue to hate the government. This leopard is not going to change its spots.

The plan

A significant problem with the idea that government agents planned and carried out the massacre at Port Arthur, then put the blame on Martin Bryant, is that it is a very sloppy plan. At the very least, they would need to kill Martin in order to prevent him from claiming he was setup. His death would not have been suspicious in the eyes of many, after all, he was armed and dangerous in the minutes before his capture.

In the more than twenty years that Martin Bryant has been in prison, he has not deviated for one moment from his confession back in 1996 that he was the gunman acting under his own volition. I might add that Martin has had many opportunities to talk to people, for instance, his mother, siblings, lawyer, cell inmates, guards and reporters

to name a few. Martin Bryant confesses to his crime, but shows no remorse. He continues to be a hate-filled dangerous man.

Gun control

Given that the conspiracy theory has primarily been composed and spread by those who support the use of rapid-fire firearms by the general public, I must mention why most Australians are against an unrestrained availability of semi-automatic firearms.

Politicians saw the need for gun control, not because of the Port Arthur massacre alone. The number killed on that day is small in comparison to the number killed by guns every year in Australia.

Simon Chapman who is Associate Professor in Public Health and Community Medicine at the University of Sydney says in his book, "*Over Our Dead Bodies*", "Between 1990 and 1995, an average of 560 people died from guns each year. Of all gun deaths, 81% were suicides; 14% resulted from violence, 4% were unintentional (accidents), 1% were of unknown intent." ⁷

The pro gun lobby wants us to believe the government has thoughtlessly decided to disarm Australians because of thirty-five deaths at Port Arthur in 1996. The true facts of the case are that many responsible politicians have been concerned for a long time about the hundreds of deaths from firearms in Australia each year. The thirty-five deaths represent only 6.25% of the annual total between 1990 and 1995.

The higher the number of guns in a community, the higher the number of deaths from guns. On that point Simon Chapman says, "The most striking feature of the distribution of firearm mortality in Australia is that the two States with the most permissive laws, Tasmania and Queensland, have gun death rates significantly above the average." ⁸

The United States has the highest level of gun ownership in the world. It also has the highest number of deaths from guns. "A comparison of homicide rates between the US and Britain found that the non-gun US homicide rate (per 100,000) population was 3.7 times higher than the British rate, while the rate of handgun homicides was 175 times higher. This suggests that, even if Americans were inherently somewhat more murderous than the British, the easy availability of handguns has produced a massively disproportionate number of homicides." ⁹ In 1991, deaths from guns in America was 38,317. In some states in America, deaths from guns was higher than deaths from motor vehicle accidents. ¹⁰

In 1991, the United States had a population of 249 million, that means they had an annual gun death rate per 100,000 of 15.3. That rate is very high. The chief reason for the high rate of deaths is the high gun ownership rate in the US.

Gun deaths in Australia between 1990 and 1995 averaged 560. Australia's population at that time was about 18 million. That gives a gun death rate per 100,000 per annum of 3.11 (less than one quarter of the terrible toll in the

US).

Gun control in Japan is very strict, even by Australia's new standards, with good results. "Japan has nearly seven times Australia's population, yet has nearly six times fewer gun deaths and nearly three times fewer gun homicides."¹¹

Some in the gun lobby have put forward the rather absurd proposition that if you increase the number of guns in the community, it will decrease the number of homicides and robberies - people will be safer. Sweden has a high level of gun ownership and a low number of deaths from guns. That statistic is used by the pro gun group to advance their claim. However, the citizens military force in that country is issued with rifles with strict regulations as to how the weapon is to be stored and used.

When I was a recruit in the Air Force, I was issued with a high-powered semiautomatic rifle as was every other recruit, so the gun possession among the recruits was 100%. Gun deaths among the recruits that year were nill and have been nill every year in the more than forty years since that time.

Zero gun deaths did not come from the fact that we all had guns. It came from the strict regulations which were imposed. We were all issued with a strong padlock and key. The rifle had to be locked in place in our rooms until needed in part of our training. Ammunition was only supplied to us when on the shooting range. Any rounds which were not expended had to be surrendered. Any person found to have taken ammunition off the range faced severe disciplinary action.

In an undisciplined environment, the powerful weapon in a cupboard can be viewed as a powerful solution to difficulties which humans face from time to time as many of the 38,000 annual gun deaths in America show.

A significant problem in America for those wanting to reduce the large number of guns in society is the huge amount of money spent on advertising by gun manufacturers urging people to buy guns. Further to that problem is the reason for the gun. The gun is needed to shoot another person if he should come at you with a dangerous weapon. Here in Australia, the reason for the gun was nearly always for sport - target shooting, or shooting game. In all of my life here in Australia, I have not seen an advertisement on TV recommending the purchase of a firearm for use against an aggressor. I and many others would be very concerned if we ever did see that type of advertisement.

Among those who love semi-automatic weapons are the criminal element because that type of weapon is effective in standover tactics and in a shootout with other criminals and police. For the hardened serious criminal, the semiautomatic is an essential piece of equipment. From a law enforcement point of view, if a policeman apprehends a motor vehicle and discovers a semi-automatic firearm in the car, he can make an arrest and lay charges. From that point, a more thorough investigation can begin. That is a powerful weapon in fighting serious crime.

In the United States, the widespread availability of

handguns is a serious problem for law enforcement officers. Back in November 2014, police fired upon and killed a twelve year-old boy because they believed they were under threat from his pistol. The pistol turned out to be a mere toy. The gun culture in that locality has resulted in the young Tamir Rice being killed, and suffering of his relatives and the officer who mistakenly killed him.¹²

Since the imposition of better controls on the ownership of firearms in Australia, the number of gun deaths per year has declined. Many in Australia now owe their lives to the strict and sensible gun laws that we now have.

The claim that strict gun laws were somehow forced upon Australians is quite false. An AGB-McNair national phone poll of 2,058 people (3-5 May 1996) showed that 90% were in favour of a ban of semi-automatics. A Morgan national poll of 526 voters in June 1996 on the question, "Do you agree or disagree with John Howard's new gun control laws?" 80% said they agreed, while 18% said they disagreed.¹³

Given the now proven success of the gun control laws, if a poll were to be conducted today, the number in agreement would be much higher.

Responsible shooters don't see the need for a semi-automatic rifle. An animal should be despatched with a well-aimed single shot. Furthermore, a repeater action rifle of any type (bolt action, lever action etc.) has slightly greater power and accuracy than a semi-automatic. The vast majority of semi-automatic users quickly learned to love their repeaters after the change in regulations.

Shooting as a sport suffered a decline with the introduction of new laws in 1996 which mandated for instance, that firearms be secured in a gun safe. Some simply decided to opt out of the sport. However, shooters have become accustomed to the regulations, and the sport enjoys a good following, particularly in country regions.

End Notes

1. Lennard La Rouge, from web page '*Lock Stock & Barrel*', accessed August 2005.
2. Joe Vialls, *Deadly Deception At Port Arthur*, p. 100.
3. *The Bulletin*, 14 May 1996, p. 14.
4. Mike Bingham, "*Suddenly One Sunday*", Harper Collins, 1996, p. 38.
5. "*Suddenly One Sunday*", p. 40.
6. "*Suddenly One Sunday*", p. 41.
7. Simon Chapman, "*Over Our Dead Bodies*", Pluto Press, 1998, p. 46.
8. S. Chapman, p. 47.
9. S. Chapman, p. 44.
10. S. Chapman, p. 49.
11. S. Chapman, p. 50.
12. *Time* magazine, 22 December 2014, p. 62.
13. S. Chapman, p. 61.

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