

Sweeping ban on handguns penalizes innocent owners

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Law-abiding gun-owners are now handing over the weapons at a rate of 50 to 60 a day

They aren't too chuffed, says Insp. Paul Brightwell. "I've seen grown men close to tears handing over a gun they've had a long time, saying 'this is the pistol my father had in the Second World

War', or 'my wife gave me this for our 25th wedding anniversary'."
"It's part of their family history. Some of them have been shooting for 20 to 30 years and they have got thousands of pounds invested. I had a chap hand over five replica Colts worth 19,000 pounds."

We are sitting in a back room of Maidenhead police station. Every so often there is a rich, gravelly clunk of bullets unloaded on to plastic desks. Police marksmen in satiny black overalls are sorting and carrying them away.

The men — and they are virtually all men — come in two at a time. They have aluminium suitcases, safes, plastic bags and set expressions.

Nanny is confiscating their toys. It is like

one of those vast Indian programmes of compulsory vasectomy.

It is as if the state had decided to round up all the model train sets or the stamp collections, an operation causing immense distress to thousands of innocent enthusiasts, and just about as pointless.

Thanks to a sweeping ban on handguns introduced here in the wake of the Dunblane, Scotland, massacre of school children last year, law-abiding gun-owners are now handing over their weapons here at a rate of 50 to 60 a day.

Of the 6,000 fullbore and smallbore handguns in the Thames Valley area, about 3,000 have already been surrendered. That includes about 550 examples of .22 pistols.

"They're not banned yet, but some people are seeing the writing on the wall," says Insp. Brightwell. In two weeks, the three-month surrender period will be up. The legal will have become illegal.

An entire pastime will have been exterminated. Britain will be the only country in the world where it is forbidden to practise for an Olympic sport.

The British taxpayers will have to cough up about one billion pounds in compensa-

tion; and still the shooters will receive 25 per cent less than the full value of any improvements to their weapons.

"It wouldn't be going too far to say they are feeling a little bit victimized," says the inspector, the kind of amused, reflective copper by whom it would be a pleasure to be arrested.

"These people are being legislated against because of the insane actions of one or two people. They are ordinary people. Dunblane affected them in the same way that it affected you and me."

So he makes sure they are received sensitively. The Firearms Inquiry Officers speak in low, respectful voices.

A man wearing cowboy boots, moustache and denims is walking denuded to the door. His eyes are moist as he proclaims that he is "absolutely fed up with the situation and the way everyone's been treated."

He continues: "I've been shooting for 30 years. My eldest daughter shoots. I've never been in any type of trouble with the police."

"I have served two terms with the Army in Northern Ireland," he says, adding that he is about to resign from the Territorials. "If I can't be trusted to put a few holes in a bit of

paper, why should I be trusted to defend my country?"

Insp. Brightwell may feel sorry for the shooters; and yet at heart he is a policeman. For him, the problem is not that the law is now too tight.

It is just incoherent; because handguns, he says, are a comparatively small threat to the peace of society.

"As an organization we find the shotgun is most likely to turn up in crimes involving firearms."

But then what is the point of banning handguns? Will it make any difference? Insp. Brightwell looks coy. "Well, it's a difficult question, isn't it?"

It is no use the shooters protesting that this will do nothing about the myriad of illegal weapons, or legal shotguns; or that the existing law should have ensured that guns were taken away from Thomas Hamilton, the loner who killed 16 small children in a moment of madness at Dunblane last March.

The owners of all the 160,000 handguns are penalized for the dementia of a couple of their number, and because no one, in the current climate, dare speak for them.