

Militarised guards create potential firezone with children as collateral damage

*'Tear Down
That Wall'*

*- US President Ronald Reagan to
Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev
re Berlin Wall, 12 June 1987*

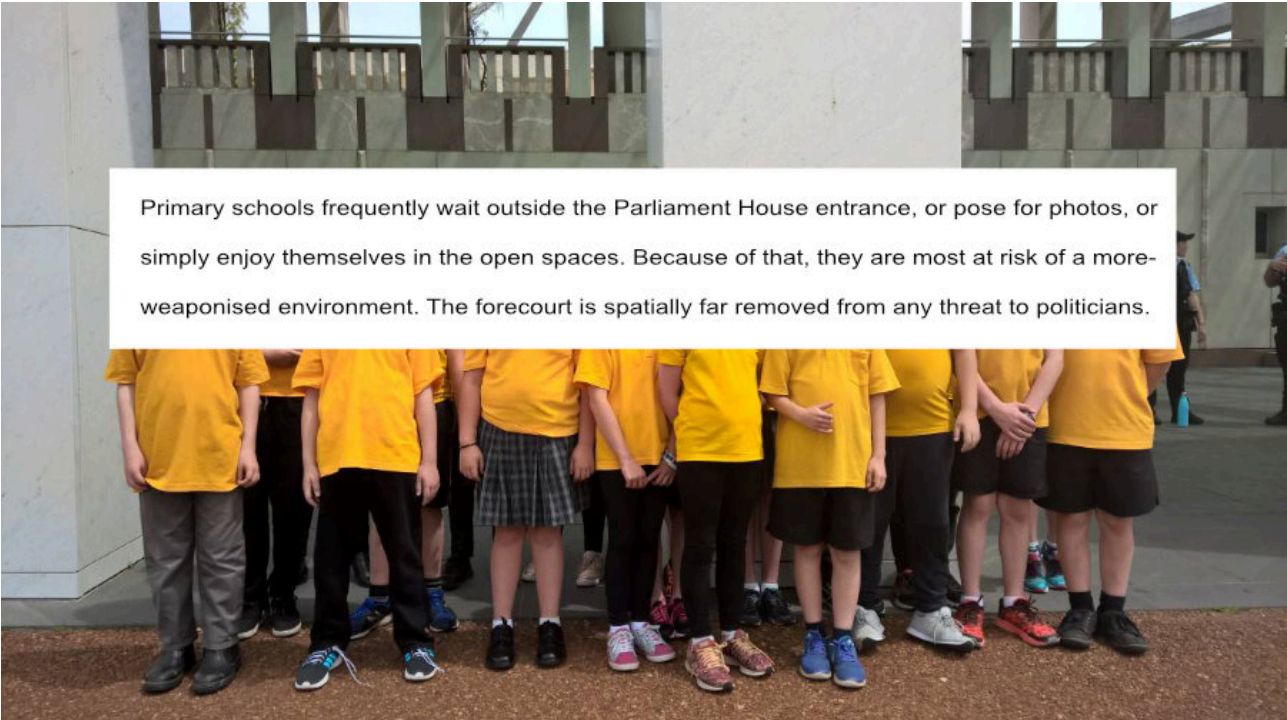
Part 3: Children at Risk

By Dr Tony Murney

Of all the new security measures, the introduction of assault rifle-style weapons into the parliamentary precincts and arming the guards patrolling inside the building are the most dangerous.

These areas are regularly crowded with visitors, including densely-packed groups of school children, often numbering in their hundreds

Weapons of this type are of military origin and designed for the express purpose of killing people. [They](#) have a cyclic rate of fire of up to [750 rounds a minute](#), are effective out to [500 or 600](#) metres and with standard ammunition have overshoot potential well beyond the parliamentary precincts.



Primary schools frequently wait outside the Parliament House entrance, or pose for photos, or simply enjoy themselves in the open spaces. Because of that, they are most at risk of a more-weaponised environment. The forecourt is spatially far removed from any threat to politicians.

Guards carrying these weapons are clearly outfitted for combat circumstances with each officer carrying multiple 30-round magazines.

Should a security officer discharge such a weapon outward from Parliament House, projectiles not striking intermediate targets or obstacles have potential to overshoot into populated areas including government offices, diplomatic premises, the Prime Minister's Lodge, residential neighborhoods and a primary school.

Such projectiles could also well strike heavily travelled roads, footpaths, carparks and parkland around Parliament House with lethal effect.

The new 'reception committee' at Parliament House
(AAP)



The prospect of discharging any firearm in crowded public places, outside or inside Parliament House, is deeply disturbing because of the catastrophic potential to kill or injure members of the public or other unintended targets.

Use of assault rifles in confined spaces is extremely dangerous and lessons should have already been learned from the Lindt Café siege in Sydney in 2014, where a hostage was killed by police firing similar weapons in a chaotic situation.

Some might argue assault rifles are deployed to public places overseas like Toronto and Washington. This is true but their security environments are very different to that in Australia: here, we have comprehensive firearms controls in place and a very low incidence of terrorism.

It also needs to be emphasised that many parliaments in other peaceful nations have deliberately chosen not to go down this path. Like these, the Australian Parliament previously maintained a strict exclusion policy on firearms and other weapons, with some very limited exceptions. This was done on the principle that safety is increased within the building by prohibiting weapons on the basis that prevention minimises the scope for mishaps or abuse. Security screening protocols were originally introduced at entry points to the building in support of the policy.



Tragic weapons policy failures are not infrequent around the world with recent examples including the [seizure of an assault rifle](#) from a soldier patrolling Orly Airport in 2017 (causing the forced evacuation of more than 3000 people), repeat *green on blue* attacks inside supposedly secure premises in conflict zones such Afghanistan and Somalia, and the recent [impersonation of a police officer](#) by a mass shooter in Canada, with 22 people killed.

Armed guards inside Parliament House. (AFP)

The only known event involving the discharge of a firearm inside the Parliamentary Precincts in Canberra was in fact an accidental discharge by a security guard which evolved into an internal scandal following concerted attempts to conceal the incident from the then Presiding Officers.

Given all of these factors, one can only wonder how the Prime Minister might explain to President Xi Jinping a stray bullet bouncing across the Chinese Ambassador's desk or worse, striking one of his personnel. (The Chinese embassy is well within over-shoot range).

The low incidence of terrorism in Australia combined with tight firearms controls means there is no requirement for the routine deployment of automatic weapons at the Australian Parliament or anywhere else for that matter.

The increasing disposition of Australia's leaders towards introducing automatic weapons into public places reveals a bad mixture of poor judgement and increasing tendencies towards endangering the lives of their fellow Australians, notably children, rather than protecting them.

Implementation - where money and morals are no object

Implementation of these security upgrade projects has seen calls for the [Auditor General](#) to investigate the whole sorry mess. There have been cost and delivery over-runs which saw the security budget increase from [\\$60 million](#) to [\\$126 million](#).

That is not the final cost, however, with annual outlays for two large guard forces, one armed and one not, and a vast array of equipment, including ex-ray machines, metal detectors, vehicles, electronic access control, alarm systems, closed circuit television, software licenses and maintenance contracts.

The strangest thing in all of this is that it was three years – after the initial 2014 security panic – before constructing the “urgently-needed” 2.6m steel security fencing on the grassed ramps even got under way. Nothing like “a go hard go fast” response to demonstrate how important these changes have been.

Apart from the failure of any “terrorist” onslaught to emerge during that time, or since, and the Parliament surviving without a scratch, this lengthy delay also raises questions about the ‘urgency beat-up’ around the whole upgrade and the ignominious way it was pushed through the Parliament.

The project also suffered from a raft of [due diligence failures](#) including at least one bankruptcy, \$14 million worth of defective security infrastructure (which had to be rebuilt) alleged links to Russian loan sharks, prostitution and illicit drugs.

Unfortunately, it didn't end there: another contractor was linked to [\\$15 billion](#) in ethically questionable armament sales in the Middle East and the loss of a 1000-page Parliament House [security manual](#). This ‘master plan’ is still missing three years later, which raises further questions about the integrity of the entire security plan.

This fiasco has already adversely impacted the [careers](#) of several senior public servants but, predictably, no political scalps have been taken so far. What were our politicians thinking when they launched the Parliament into this multi-faceted quagmire?

Good news, bad news

The good news in all of this is that most of the issues outlined above can be easily corrected by removing the assault rifle armed guards and armed internal patrols of the building, with the benefit of cost reductions, and disassembling the fences for storage against some future need, like lining the last few hundred metres of a marathon course.

The only obstacle to such a quick correction is the egos of those involved and the depth of the hole they have dug for themselves.

The bad news is that, if the Speaker of the House and President of the Senate really believe assault weapons are necessary inside the Parliamentary Precincts, then they should not be inviting – and subsidising – school children and other visitors into a place which is so dangerous that a barrage of automatic weapons fire may occur without warning.

That is a clear danger no-one seems to be worried about.

As for the whole project, it is not a matter of security versus symbolism. Australia's political leaders have, without consultation, just chosen new symbols for our parliamentary democracy which reflect appallingly on them and the Parliament for as long as those symbols remain in place.



Original design view. (Canberra Times)



Current public view – design vandalism. (TM)

ENDS Part 3

(Part 1 discusses ‘The Fortress’ that Australia’s Parliament House has become).

(Part 2 point out that the fences themselves produce new security danger points).

Dr Tony Murney is an international security sector reform advisor with experience in Afghanistan and Somalia. As well as being a member of Civil Liberties Australia, he is a former Senior Executive Service officer in the AFP and a former Parliament House Deputy Security Controller.

Publisher’s note: The Serjeant-at-Arms, James Catchpole, and the Usher of the Black Rod, John Begley, sent a letter to the author seeking to intimidate him in respect of any further work on this subject, quoting the discretionary authorities of the all-powerful Speaker of the House of Representatives and President of the Senate to impose arbitrary penalties on him. CLA thanks them for self-identifying as the people to contact should anything go wrong with security at Parliament House, and for being the people nominated to receive letters of complaint.