

The appalling tragedy of the shootings in Cumbria last week brought back some personal memories of 15 years ago when another madman, Thomas Hamilton, desecrated my own home town of Dunblane in Perthshire by the ghastly shootings in the school gym. My younger brother had attended Dunblane Primary School and my Father who was Minister in Dunblane Cathedral had been School Chaplain. In a strange way I remember being almost glad that he had died some years before the shootings, as it would have broken his heart. My Mother who was much involved with Cruse Bereavement Care helped with counselling the families of the children. So perhaps you'd have expected me to be in the forefront of those calling for an outright ban on all handguns.

On the contrary. I used my Maiden Speech in Parliament in July 1997, to argue that a total ban on Olympic handguns would not only be totally ineffective in preventing another Dunblane; it might even be worse than that, since by giving politicians a false sense that they were 'doing something' about it, it actually may have absolved them from taking truly effective action against gun crime. For the fact of the matter is that there are an estimated 3 million illegal handguns in the UK today, and the level of guncrime in the UK has risen exponentially since that 'politically correct' ban on all legally held handguns in the aftermath of Dunblane. In other words, it was a classic kneejerk reaction which may well have had the opposite effect to the one intended.

Now it is perfectly true that Derrick Bird used a fully licensed shotgun and '22 rifle in the appalling outrage in Cumbria. But let us suppose that in a desperate attempt to be 'seen to be doing something' it became well-nigh impossible to hold legal firearms of that sort, would that really prevent another Cumbria occurring? I think not. It would prevent farmers doing their jobs; it would interfere with perfectly legitimate shooting sports, but it would do nothing to prevent another Dunblane, or Cumbria, or Hungerford.

West Cumbria will take a very long time to recover. Perhaps it never will. The scars are still pretty raw in Dunblane. And I can understand those well-meaning people who will try to help the bereaved by calling for a change in gun ownership laws. But the truth is that it will be the churches, schools, community groups, counsellors who will start to heal the wounds of West Cumbria. And any kind of self-righteous attempt to limit legitimate gun ownership and usage might in the end be counter-productive.

So we grieve for the people of West Cumbria as a whole, and especially for the friends and family of those killed. But we should not confuse that grief and sympathy with politically-motivated calls for a change to gun laws.