

# maltatoday

## Gun control is about democracy, not guns

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America: another school shooting, another wave of passionate calls for stricter gun control laws in that country... and even from now, you can tell that the outcome of this latest controversy will be the same as all the others. Zilch.

America is not going to clamp down on gun ownership. It is not going to, in any way, amend its Constitutional right to bear arms. Not, at least, unless there is some kind of radical restructuring of that country's entire political set-up.

And it has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that the US President is currently Donald Trump, by the way. It was not much different when the President was Barack Obama, who once said that "in this country, we have a strong tradition of gun ownership that's handed from generation to generation. Hunting and shooting are part of our national heritage. And, in fact, my administration has not curtailed the rights of gun owners – it has expanded them, including allowing people to carry their guns in national parks and wildlife refuges."

Indeed it is even argued (debatably, of course) that Obama relaxed more gun restrictions than he actually tightened. His 2012 executive orders for 'mandatory background checks on gun owners', for instance, failed to win Congress approval. Adam Bates, a policy analyst with the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, wrote at the time that: "For all the pomp and ceremony, nothing in the President's proposals is going to put a dent in US gun crime or even substantially change the federal legal landscape..."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was no noticeable change on the ground either. In the eight years of Obama's administration, there were no fewer than 162 school shootings in the USA: roughly 20 a year. And that's just one category of gun-crime – shootings that took place in educational facilities. It doesn't factor in armed robberies, muggings, drive-by shootings, random homicides, excessive firearm use by the police, etc. I don't have stats for those at my fingertips, but my impression is that gun-crime in general has continued to escalate in that country, with no apparent end in sight.

Meanwhile, if I focus more on Barack Obama, it's only because he is perceived – probably correctly – to be the most 'anti-gun' President in US history. It would almost be superfluous to point out that there were no substantive changes under any of his predecessors: not George Bush

(without or without the W), not Bill Clinton... and you can rest assured it would have been no different under Hillary Clinton, either.

This is because the issue itself very clearly has nothing to do with whether the Republicans or Democrats are in power. Even if one really is more amenable to idea of gun control than the other, in practice the end result will be the same: more shootings, more debate, no substantive change.

It is almost as though 'gun ownership' is the one policy area over which no US government has any control whatsoever. More than a 'Constitutional right to bear arms', then, what it translates into is a Constitutional inability of any US government to actually interfere with the diktats of a single lobby-group.

And this tells us a good deal more about political power, and the structures that serve as its conduits, than about firearms. As far as I can see, the fact that America is a 'democracy' – where political power alternates between two supposedly different parties every so often – makes no difference whatsoever. This creates an enormous dilemma for the ordinary voter. From the perspective of those who would like to use their vote – the cornerstone of any democracy, please note – to force a change... well, what point is there in even trying, is there?

Democracy, as a system, offers no remedy. And this is particularly worrying, because it is democracy's job to offer remedies in such situations. The whole 'democracy versus tyranny' argument is that, in a democracy, you can get rid of a tyrant through legal, non-violent means. That argument falls flat on its face, when the 'choice' is de facto between two tyrants.

OK, enough about the United States of America: which is a grown-up country, at the end of the day, and as such doesn't need me to hold its hand while it irons out its internal difficulties. In fact, I wouldn't even have bothered with it at all, if the same fundamental democratic deficit was not such a conspicuous issue here, too. Luckily for us, it tends to manifest itself here in far less ghastly ways than school shootings; but just stop to consider for a moment how many issues, locally, seem to fall within the same broad category of 'doesn't-make-a-difference-who's-in-government'.

Hunting. Yes, it also involves guns... but let's not get carried away by that minor coincidence. For the sake of avoiding any misunderstanding (and the same goes for any other category I might mention below), I am not making any form of comparison between the issue of hunting and trapping in Malta, and the escalating incidence of gun-crime in other countries. The only comparison I see myself is the perfect inability of any government to actually make a difference. In the 30-odd years I've been looking, all I have ever seen is one administration after another – regardless of incumbent party – bending over backwards to accommodate that one lobby, at the expense of all others.

First it was lowering the eligibility age to apply for a licence; then it was increasing the public space available for (legal) hunting; then it was defying European legislation to permit trapping; then it was permitting hunting in a nature park, then it was extending the hours allocated for hunting in the same park... without going into too much detail, the movement has only ever been

in one direction, really. More and more concessions to hunters and trappers. The only restrictions introduced over the past 30 years were imposed on us by Europe: and both Nationalist and Labour governments resisted those impositions all the way to the European Court (successfully, in some cases).

Construction and development: this one's a little harder to digest, because unlike the hunting issue – where neither Labour nor PN has ever made any bones about its open, wholehearted support for that particular lobby-group – both parties claim to be equally sensitive to public complaints about overdevelopment. 'ODZ is ODZ' is a mantra we have heard from both sides: yet strangely, only when the party concerned happens to be in Opposition.

“The Nationalist Party that originally expanded the development zones now organises protests at the ongoing 'rape' of ODZ land”

Labour before 2013, for instance, attended all the civil society protests against the ODZ rationalisation schemes of 2005/6 (which explains why those protests attracted tens of thousands of demonstrators in their day... when an environment protest, organised solely by environments, rarely gets more than 500).

Ten years later, Labour in government dishes out ODZ land to speculators like pastizzi – and I mean that literally: the official excuse is 'because it's cheap' – and oversees a reform of the Planning Laws that creates loopholes for more ODZ development, while dissecting the Planning Authority so that its 'environmental arm' lacks the ability to actually throw a punch.

In a nutshell, the entire system has been rigged towards over-development... by the same people who howled so loudly when it was being rigged, for the same purpose, by others.

Meanwhile, the Nationalist Party that originally expanded the development zones by 16.6% – thus firing the starting pistol for land-grab schemes on an unprecedented scale – now organises protests of its own at the ongoing 'rape' of ODZ land under the present administration. While also hobnobbing with every developer on the island, at fund-raising activities aimed at lessening that party's multi-million-euro debt (much of it owed to members of the same lobby).

As with the gun question in America: where does that leave the ordinary voter who wants to see change, exactly? What use is it to be a democracy, in a situation where any single lobby-group can exert enough pressure to simply dictate the rules from outside the parliamentary system... where voters are powerless to intervene?

Clearly, the system is failing: and if it can fail in certain specific areas – and in certain specific circumstances – then it can conceivably fail in all other areas, too. Perhaps we should be thankful, then, that our systemic failure hasn't so far resulted in dozens of schoolchildren dead... as it continues to do in America, with no end in sight.

It is cold comfort, however, when you also consider that – though the issues differ wildly on the surface – the underlying pattern is not merely similar, but identical. The only reason we have so far been spared such scenes is because our national issues are different from America's. If they were the same... or similar enough to result in mass fatalities, under whatever circumstances –

you can rest assured that our inability to solve them would be the same, too... for exactly the same reason.

It's about democracy, not guns. So it is democracy that needs to be reformed first.