

NICK GRIMM, PRESENTER: How sharp is the Shooters' Party when it comes to using its political influence?

Events over the past week in New South Wales have demonstrated you don't need a gun to commit acts of horrifying violence against your fellow man, woman or children.

Even so, firearms and their availability remains a contentious issue.

There were warnings about an increased risk of violence when the NSW Parliament voted recently to amend the state's gun legislation.

Those laws were introduced in the wake of the Port Arthur massacre 12 years ago.

Critics say the changes will make it easier for the deranged and criminally-minded to get their hands on a gun.

It comes as the NSW Shooters Party finds itself with unprecedented political influence.

An embattled Iemma Government is desperate to please those who might support its controversial power privatisation and planning laws.

We've been looking at some of the Shooters' recent trophies.

This is the Hill Top area in the Southern Highlands, south west of Sydney.

From the air, some might look at this 800 metre long clearing and see an unsightly scar on a pristine wilderness.

But to those with a steady hand and a sure eye, it's a sitting target.

Lex Welham, persuade me why this bush shooting range should be transformed into a major complex?

LEX WELHAM, NSW SPORTING SHOOTERS ASSOCIATION: Well, it's to cater for the large number of shooters that are shooting in this area.

IAN DUNNE, LOCAL RESIDENT: It's going to cause property values to drop. It's gonna cause distress in the community.

ROY SMITH, NSW SHOOTERS' PARTY MLC: It's simply getting harder and harder to find land for a shooting complex.

IAN DUNNE: The noise impacts of this place are going to be devastating to the local community.

LEX WELHAM: This one has the advantage that it backs on to state recreation area, and

there's virtually unlimited space for the safety templates that you need.

**KATHY BOLLIGER, LOCAL RESIDENT:** To me, Frank Sartor's front garden would be a better site than this one for a shooting range. That's why I'm fighting.

**NICK GRIMM:** Weapons are drawn and the first shots in the gun-fight of hill top have been fired as locals and shooters alike have answered the call to arms to fight for and against the proposal to enlarge the shooting range into a major complex.

The state's Planning Minister is due to make a decision next month.

**RESIDENT:** Mr Minister, I challenge you to come and ride this horse and then lead another young horse behind me with a young child and have those guns shootin' and see how long you do last on a horse. And then you can make up your mind about that shootin' range.

**ROY SMITH:** We thought, obviously wrongly, that we would get very little opposition to a range - expanding an existing one, rather than starting a new range from scratch.

**NICK GRIMM:** I guess the question people are asking Roy Smith is: has the Shooters' Party been promised that shooting complex as a reward for backing the Government when it needs support in the chamber?

**ROY SMITH:** No, not at all.

**LEE RHIANNON, NSW GREENS MLC:** Clearly, the representatives from the Shooters' Party realised that they are in a powerful position. They've exploited it.

**NICK GRIMM:** So, what's the fuss all about?

Hill Top residents showed Stateline the bushland earmarked for the shooting complex. Leading the tour, their gun for hire: private ecological consultant Dr Stephen Ambrose.

**STEPHEN AMBROSE, ECOLOGICAL CONSULTANT:** ... the part of the site that's being proposed to be a shooting range. As a consequence of that, you'll have some of this endangered ecological community removed.

**NICK GRIMM:** Stephen Ambrose argues the construction of the shooting complex will require the destruction of sensitive habitat for endangered species including koalas.

**STEPHEN AMBROSE:** If there's a lot of noise disturbance in this area, koalas are likely to avoid this area altogether and the shooting activity will act as a barrier to the movements of these particular individual koalas.

**NICK GRIMM:** However, residents are being accused of exaggerating the likely noise problems and to prove it, shooters have been conducting sound tests, measuring the decibels generated by different types of weapons.

**LEX WELHAM:** Well this 800 metre range has operated successfully here for 20 odd years and only became an issue with Council becoming aware of it, once the increased - expanded complex was proposed.

NICK GRIMM: But while the existing range is used only at weekends, the new centre will operate morning to night, seven days a week.

Residents fear it will also cater for much larger numbers of shooters; in fact, many times the number currently using the facility.

Those living closest to the shooting range say they'll be inundated with more noise than they already cop when the existing range is busy.

IAN DUNNE: It was good enough to get my 20-year-old son out of bed, which usually requires gelignite or something like that.

NICK GRIMM: Hill Top sits in Sydney's water catchment area and the locals also warn that lead ammunition could contaminate Sydney's water supply.

But they believe their protestations are falling on deaf ears in Macquarie Street.

Essentially what you're saying is that despite a plethora of reasons why the shooting centre shouldn't be here, the state Government is determined to press on regardless?

JODI LAING, LOCAL RESIDENT: They are determined. I mean, we have succeeded in delaying this process for at least 12 months, but everything that we hear is, "It's going ahead. It's going ahead. It's going ahead."

LEX WELHAM: No. I think we have a legitimate right to apply for an expanded complex.

NICK GRIMM: So a shooting complex will be low impact, so to speak?

LEX WELHAM: Well, in terms of development in this area, this range has been here for twenty years. We haven't brought in any feral animals. We haven't planted any exotic trees. We've left the soil and water management as it was for that time, and I don't see that happening around the village. So I think that we're a relatively good citizen in this area.

NICK GRIMM: A good neighbour?

LEX WELHAM: A good neighbour.

NICK GRIMM: But whatever the arguments, it might be the shooters' lobby has simply been quicker on the draw where Frank Sartor is concerned.

For a start, the Planning Minister has already classified the building of a new shooting centre as a project of state significance. That essentially means that if Mr Sartor is determined to give shooters what they want, the complaints of Hill Top locals won't amount to a hill of beans.

KATHY BOLLIGER: And I really get so angry that the idea that you can make something of "state significance" and suddenly all environmental aspects go out the window, state planning - I mean Council planning goes out the window. And quite without any transparency. They don't need to justify. Mr Sartor can lay down his decision and we have to put up with it. And

that is not democratic.

NICK GRIMM: Lee Rhiannon, why does the NSW Shooter's Party have so much political clout at the moment?

LEE RHIANNON, NSW GREENS MLC: Well in the NSW Upper House, the Government doesn't have the numbers

NICK GRIMM: Ask the NSW Greens and they'll tell you it all comes down to old-fashioned political horse-trading.

LEE RHIANNON: They have developed a cosy relationship with the Shooters MPs in both obtaining support during election campaigns and then, particularly once Parliament starts to operate, relying on their votes to get critical legislation passed.

NICK GRIMM: With the State Government keen to get its controversial planning amendments and power privatisation legislation through Parliament, the two Shooters Party members have found themselves being stalked by Labor powerbrokers bearing gifts.

Last week, they hit the bulls-eye, with the Government and Coalition voting together to rush through urgent amendments to the state's gun laws.

But at the end of the day, Lee Rhiannon, can you really blame the Shooters' Party for taking advantage of the leverage that it's got over a weakened State Government?

LEE RHIANNON: Well, the Shooters Party say they're doing it for their constituents, but to jeopardise public safety, we would argue is always wrong. And the Government has been quite unprincipled in making deals that have actually wound back the national uniform gun laws that came in across Australia after the Port Arthur Massacre and NSW is now the first state that has weakened those laws, putting public safety at jeopardy. It's quite a dangerous way this has played out.

ROY SMITH: There's no watering down whatsoever. All we're looking for in this legislation is to remove some of the serious impediments on legitimate sports shooting.

NICK GRIMM: Whether or not the amendments help put firearms into the hands of the deranged or criminally-minded remains to be seen. But in the meantime, the Shooters Party plans to make the most of the political ammunition it's been issued.

Roy Smith, gun laws, shooting complexes - the Greens say that these are some of your rewards that you're receiving from the State Government in return for agreeing to back controversial legislation on planning issues and power privatisation and so on. Now, is that the case?

ROY SMITH: Well, if they're rewards, then they've been long fought for. I mean we've been arguing with the Government for a number of years over these issues. It's not just a matter of making a deal as the Greens have suggested. The Government's known our position for quite some time. And so for us, it's just a matter of coincidence that some of these more controversial bills have come out at the same time as our issues.

NICK GRIMM: But you'd have to agree that Government ears are a lot more receptive at the moment?

ROY SMITH: Well, look, the Government certainly needs our numbers in the Upper House, and certainly the Shooters are very clear on what we hope to get support from the Government on, and maybe we're just not so demanding as the Greens are on other issues.

NICK GRIMM: Are you enjoying having that position of influence?

ROY SMITH: I certainly am from the point of view that we're able to achieve things that we haven't been able to do in the past. And, um, yes, look, I'm the first one to admit we've got a very cooperative and workable relationship with the Government.

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