

# The New Zealand mosque massacre

## 1. The heartache, turmoil and absolute dread of Port Arthur

**Commentary:** The Port Arthur Massacre of 28-29 April 1996 was a mass shooting in which 35 people were killed and 23 wounded in Port Arthur, Tasmania, Australia. The gunman pleaded guilty and was given 35 life sentences without possibility of parole. Fundamental gun control laws within Australia followed. The Christchurch Mosque Massacre in New Zealand of 15 March 2019 involved two inner city mosques in the South Island city when 50 people were killed (another victim died six weeks later taking the death toll to 51). The accused gunman, a white supremacist, has been charged with 51 murders and 40 attempted murder counts, and also charged with terrorism. The author, a leading cartoonist, reflects on the parallels and contrasts between Australia and New Zealand and writes of the vitriol directed at him because of his satire: ‘My effigy was hung in a tree in Ipswich, and we lived daily with the threat of a drive-by attack on the family home. This sort of stuff rattles you to the core, but it also fills you with the adrenaline and conviction to barge on regardless. Such is the power of the pen and satire.’

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*ROD EMMERSON*

*Cartoonist, The New Zealand Herald*

**R**OAMING the ruins of Tasmania’s Port Arthur is a sobering experience. I’ve made two pilgrimages there and on each occasion, been blessed with cloudless skies, millpond waters, manicured lawns and gardens, rich green landscapes dotted with the hint of spring colours. The picture postcard vistas belie its macabre history.

These now frail stone, skeletal buildings stand as a sentinel to a period of history that saw these grounds as home to the most brutal of criminals Britain could possibly muster.

In the middle of all this damnation is a memorial to a more recent tragic event—the Port Arthur Massacre on 28-29 April 1996, when a 28-year-old local

apparently flipped out over a long-standing grudge involving a property dispute and went on a shooting rampage with an AR15 rifle, killing 35 people. Most of the slain were tourists to this corner of Australian history.

The youngest victim was Madeline Grace Mikac, just three years of age. For his barbaric act, the 28-year-old terrorist is now 51 and serving 35 life sentences concurrently, with an additional 1035 years without parole.

The coincidental parallels with the Christchurch shootings on 15 March 2019 were in lax gun laws; nationality of the alleged shooters; their similar age; the weapon of choice; New Zealanders among those killed and the age of the youngest victim.

Collectively, these acts of home-grown terrorism have cut short 86 innocent lives (one survivor from the Christchurch mosque attacks died later on 2 May 2019).

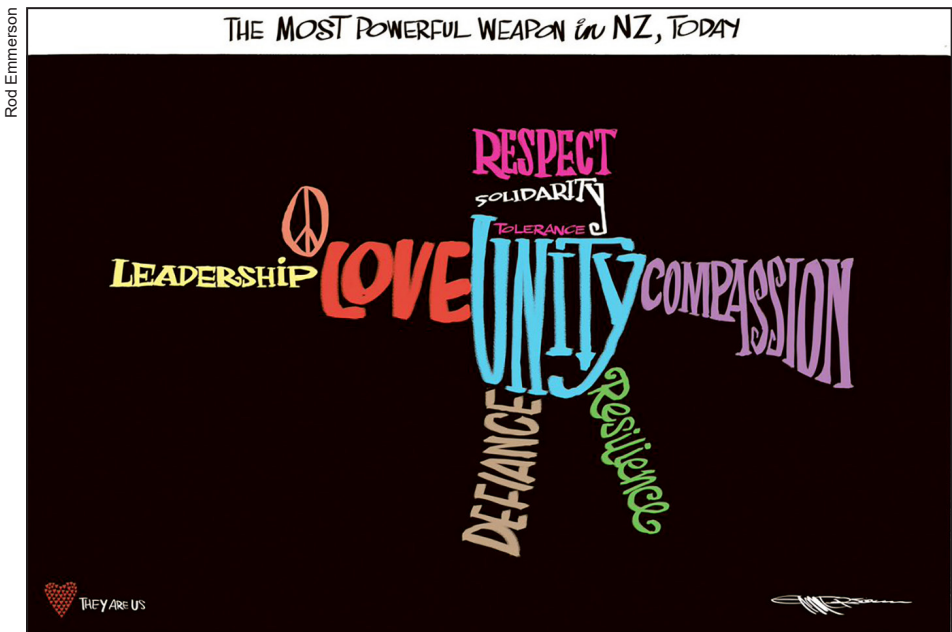


Figure 1: Rod Emmerson’s ‘most powerful weapon’ comment on the Christchurch mosque massacre.

I covered the Port Arthur tragedy as an editorial cartoonist, working from Rockhampton in Queensland, servicing a string of papers throughout the Australian Provincial Press (APN) network and beyond. The grief, pain and suffering that we, in New Zealand, have all been experiencing as a community is sadly, all too familiar.

What makes it worse, is that this vile, calculated act in Christchurch allegedly was carried out by an Australian, on a very soft target. New Zealand is a welcoming, peaceful, inclusive country—not without its own social ills, but a

place that I have proudly called home for well over 15 years. It beggars belief that this poison has followed me here.

My experience of covering the Port Arthur aftermath is one of heartache, turmoil and absolute dread. It was of course, another time and another country. The year 1996 was an election year in Australia and the new Howard government had been in power a mere seven weeks when this atrocity occurred.

The government promised immediate gun law reform and the wider community welcomed it, but with six state parliaments, two territorial parliaments and two federal houses of parliament, time was not all on Howard's side.

The resistance from rural communities, gun clubs, gun shops, gun owners and NRA-affiliated lobbyists managed to mobilise a terrifying campaign of fear-based hysteria that put the politicians and journalists on notice.

Like many of my contemporaries, I was subjected to death threats, warnings of beatings after work, and almost had 10 cubic metres of gravel dumped in my driveway, a mess averted by an alert truck driver.

My effigy was hung in a tree in Ipswich, and we lived daily with the threat of a drive-by attack on the family home. This sort of stuff rattles you to the core, but it also fills you with the adrenaline and conviction to barge on regardless. Such is the power of the pen and satire.

The 1996 March election was also the entry point for the Ipswich fish'n'chips shop owner, Pauline Hanson, who first stood on a Liberal Party ticket. She was sent packing at the last minute after her racially-charged campaign, but won the seat as an independent.

Her maiden speech as the MP for Oxley was laced with racism, attacks on multiculturalism, Asian immigration and the Aboriginal community. It may well have appealed to the toothless underbelly but Australian communities and Asian countries were horrified. They reacted strongly, denouncing her diatribe.

Tim Fischer, the deputy Prime Minister, and many government ministers, condemned her tirade at every opportunity, especially in light of the trade connections with Asia. The elephant in the room though was none other than Prime Minister John Howard, whose silence was considered to be a formidable nod of approval.

Thus the seed of hate was planted in Australia's conservative politics and it has done nothing but germinate, grow and spread like gorse across the political spectrum, spawning the likes of Fraser Anning. Hanson is now a regular, welcome guest on morning TV chat shows and a 'go to' for comment on current affairs programmes. Visual click-bait.

Off radar, Rashna Farrukh, a Muslim journalist based in Canberra with SKYNEWS Australia, handed in her resignation on 16 March 2019. Her personal story appeared on ABC Online (Meade, 2019). Rashna cited the Jekyll and Hyde of SKYNEWS Australia and as she explained, could no longer turn a blind eye to the platform it was providing to inflammatory, right-wing commentary.



**Figure 2:** Rod Emmerson’s take on New Zealand gun laws after the Christchurch mosque attack.

Rashna says she stood by while the ‘fear and hate’ continued to grow, until it became unbearable. ‘I am done being a part of something I do not stand for, and I urge other young journalists to do the same.’

New Zealand was being fed the same diet via SkyNZ of course, and in hindsight, it’s cringeworthy realising this is our closest neighbour, yet much of the nightly content is so foreign to our values and way of life. If only SkyNZ had replaced it with the ABC, rather than FoxSports.

But this is the new weapon—words. Words dressed and served as healthy debate, labelled free speech but laced with opinionated razor blades of misinformation and vitriol, much of it aimed at disenfranchised and voiceless minorities.

As my Sydney peer Cathy Wilcox expressed in a *Sydney Morning Herald* cartoon depicting a young Muslim child in a swing, saying, ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can inspire someone to kill me.’ Sadly, how very true. We now have a duty of care to individually and collectively call it out and shut it down.

The globally-applauded New Zealand response to the Christchurch tragedy has been one of genuine love, compassion, and inclusiveness. I doubt that the Friday Call to Prayer—a united remembrance and defiant stand against the ideology behind this tragedy—would ever have happened in Australia.

Such is the divide.

Yet you need only read the open letter to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern from a 13-year-old Muslim student in Melbourne to grasp the depth of appreciation

from abroad (Joyan, 2019). This is the New Zealand I know and love. As we move through to a gun debate, I'm not anticipating the response I experienced 26 years ago (he said, fingers and toes crossed multiple times).<sup>1</sup> (Cheng, 2019; Christchurch mosque attacks, 2019).

Quite the opposite.

We are better than that, and I'm eternally grateful to find myself on the right side of New Zealand history—and on the right side of the Tasman.

Mā te kotahitanga e whai kaha ai tātau (In unity, there is strength).

#TheyAreUs

## Note

1. The *Arms (Prohibited Firearms, Magazines, and Parts) Amendment Bill* banning semiautomatic and military grade firearms was introduced in New Zealand's House of Representatives for its first reading on 1 April 2019, and became law 12 days later.

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*Rod Emmerson, cartoonist on The New Zealand Herald, was the 1996 QLD winner of the Print, Television and Radio section of the MBF Awards for his work on The Gun Debate. This commentary was first published in The Herald almost two weeks after the Christchurch massacre. The names of the killers in both countries have been withheld on principle.*

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