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## Political strategies of Australia's gun lobby

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*Australia's gun lobby is of comparable size and funding to the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the United States, but its influence on political debate is more subtle. With strong public support for gun control, the lobby must focus on sympathetic individuals within major political parties, pro-gun crossbenchers who may hold the balance of power, and pushing the limits of the National Firearms Agreement.*

Discussion paper

**Bill Browne**

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Commissioned by Gun Control Australia Inc

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# Summary

*This is one of a series of reports written by The Australia Institute for Gun Control Australia. Other reports examine gun use and ownership in Australia, the key players in the gun lobby and their relationships, and the National Firearms Agreement itself.*

The Australian public supports stronger gun control and stricter restrictions and laws on firearms. Despite this, there is a real danger of our firearm laws being watered down. Successive inquiries have found that no state or territory has ever fully complied with the National Firearms Agreement.

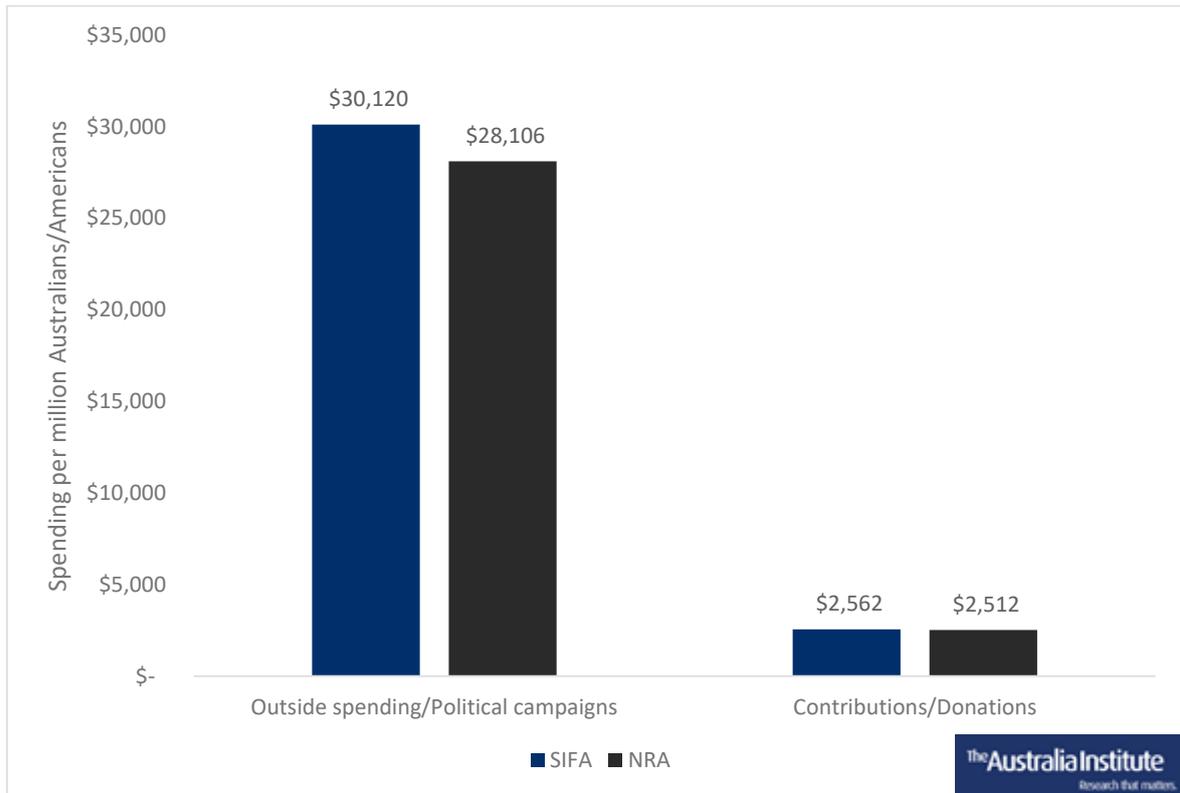
The public will on firearms is being circumvented because firearms interest groups have made a concerted effort to undermine these laws and loosen state-level gun controls. These groups include firearms suppliers and their peak bodies, members' associations like shooting and hunting clubs, and gun advocates who operate more informally. Either operating independently or together, these organisations have made significant political donations, run campaigns to influence voters and encouraged the election of pro-gun crossbenchers.

The Shooting Industry Foundation of Australia (SIFA), the peak body for Australia's five largest firearms suppliers, spends roughly the same amount of money, again as a share of population, on political campaigning as the National Rifle Association (the NRA) does in the United States.

The Australian gun lobby runs political campaigns and lobbies politicians and journalists, but it attracts little attention in Australia because it keeps its operations low key. Gun lobby political advertising in recent years has mostly avoided mentioning firearms or gun control at all.

Australians are probably more familiar with the NRA than Australia's equivalents, even though relative to population Australia's gun lobby is of a similar size and funding to the NRA. This report provides an account of the political strategies of the gun lobby.

**Figure: Spending per million population, Australia's SIFA versus the NRA**



## RECOMMENDATIONS

This report makes two formal recommendations:

1. The Parliamentary Friends of Shooting group should publish up-to-date membership lists.
2. Political parties should rule out accepting donations from the gun lobby, as some parties already rule out donations from other industries (e.g. tobacco products).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Labor, Liberal and the Greens do not accept tobacco industry donations: Koslowski (2019) *Labor and Coalition will continue to accept political donations from banks*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/business/banking-and-finance/labor-and-coalition-will-continue-to-accept-political-donations-from-banks-20190205-p50vpb.html>; Quit (n.d.) *Big tobacco buying influence through political donations*, <https://www.quit.org.au/news/big-tobacco-buying-influence-through-political-donations/>

# Introduction

Most Australians support the current gun ownership laws, or think they should be strengthened. Polling shows that 62% of Australians think that Australia’s gun laws are “about right”, while a further 25% think that the laws are too weak. Only 7% think that gun laws are too strict.<sup>2</sup>

Australians might be surprised to learn that the number of guns in Australia is growing, that no state or territory fully complies with the National Firearms Agreement, and that Australian politicians have received over a million dollars in donations from gun interests since 2011.

Australia’s gun lobby is large, well-resourced and tightly knit. Most Australians would be more familiar with the NRA than the domestic gun lobby, but – relative to population – Australia’s gun lobby has similar membership levels, and may even spend more on political advertising and political donations, than the NRA.

The Australian gun lobby pursues a strategy of promoting and supporting pro-gun crossbenchers, incrementally expanding the types of guns allowed in Australia, and directly lobbying sympathetic politicians within the major parties.

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<sup>2</sup> The Essential Report (2018) *Gun laws*, <https://www.essentialvision.com.au/gun-laws-3>

# Political strategies of Australia's gun lobby

The gun lobby's political strategy is limited by two powerful factors: the community is strongly against any weakening of gun laws<sup>3</sup> and there is bipartisan support for most elements of the National Firearms Agreement. As such, it often focuses on crossbenchers, sympathetic individuals within major political parties, and pushing the limits of the National Firearms Agreement, instead of challenging the agreement itself.

We identify four main strategies of the gun lobby:

1. Encouraging the election of pro-gun crossbenchers
2. Ratcheting pressure to push the boundaries of gun control
3. Direct donations to favourable parties and candidates
4. Lobbying sympathetic politicians

While we do not anticipate a significant change in community attitudes to gun control, there is the possibility of bipartisan resolve on gun control weakening – which would allow the gun lobby's strategies to expand dramatically.

## ENCOURAGING THE ELECTION OF PRO-GUN CROSSBENCHERS

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Bipartisan support for gun control since the 1996 National Firearms Agreement has meant that playing major party candidates off one another on the topic of gun control is not viable. Independents and minor party candidates represent the main opportunities for relaxing gun laws.

Although major parties have not always faithfully implemented or supported all elements of the NFA, they have overall remained supportive of gun control. The strength of the bipartisan consensus is shown by the lobby's preference since the NFA for attacking both major parties and promoting minor party candidates instead.

The strategy emerged months after the Port Arthur Massacre. Then Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA) president Ted Drane founded the Australia First Reform Party in July 1996, and later the Australian Reform Party. With little electoral success from

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<sup>3</sup> The Essential Report (2016) *Gun Laws*, <https://www.essentialvision.com.au/gun-laws-2>

those parties, or the Shooters Party (despite John Tingle's position as an MLC in NSW), the SSAA pledged its support (and "thousands" of dollars) for One Nation in Queensland in 1998, and took credit for One Nation's success in that election.<sup>4</sup>

Katter's Australian Party is a stalwart supporter of relaxing gun control. Bob Katter has described himself as "unashamedly a gun man", and describes gun control as "a freedom issue".

One Nation staffer James Ashby stated the party's position as not supporting "further restrictions being placed on licensed and responsible gun owners."<sup>5</sup> Some One Nation policies, such as extending the firearm licence period, would not be compatible with the NFA.<sup>6</sup>

Tim Wilms, editor of the right-wing blog The Unshackled, discussed the firearms strategy with the Shooters Union Australia president Graham Park:

Wilms: It would appear that the strategy is for these pro-firearms minor parties [Katter's Australian Party and One Nation] to hold the balance of power and be able to cut deals, to relax some of the regulations ... Is that something that will work in practice? Has it worked in New South Wales, where the Shooters have had the balance of power in a couple of parliaments?

Park: It hasn't worked to any huge extent. It's worked in little ways, and it has stopped the laws from getting even worse than we think they currently are – so to that extent, it's had some effect, yes.<sup>7</sup>

The Shooters Union actively recruited volunteers for One Nation at the last election,<sup>8</sup> but other parts of the gun lobby also have their eye on minor parties.

SIFA, despite saying it does not want to "water down" Australia's gun laws, has followed the same strategy.

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<sup>4</sup> Chapman (2013) *Over our dead bodies*, pp. 178–184, Sydney University Press

<sup>5</sup> Templeton (2016) *Poll hunters take aim at gun laws*, <https://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/one-nation-and-katter-parties-chase-regional-votes-with-campaign-to-change-gun-laws/news-story/3a145d91f0cc31a060ab28e7a3a6f9c7>

<sup>6</sup> Council of Australian Governments (2017) *National Firearms Agreement*, sec. 34(d); One Nation (n.d.) *Firearms and Gun Control*, <https://www.onenation.org.au/policies/firearms-gun-control/>

<sup>7</sup> The Unshackled (2018) *Waves Ep. 198 Gun Politics in Australia*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRaCLTzDQo>

<sup>8</sup> Clarke (2017) *Shooters Union throws support behind political party*, <https://www.qt.com.au/news/shooters-union-throws-support-behind-political-par/3265100/>

SIFA's two most prominent political interventions have been the "FLICK'EM" campaign during the 2017 Queensland state election and the "Not. Happy. Dan." campaign during the 2018 Victorian state election.

Both "FLICK'EM" (stylised to look like "FUCK 'EM") and "Not. Happy. Dan." followed the same strategy of campaigning against sitting Labor governments (and, in Queensland, against the Liberal National Party opposition as well) and encouraging votes for minor parties. The advertisements covered topics like restricted access to public land, crime rates, the cost of electricity and "skills and jobs shortages" – rather than firearm policy.

Pre-empting criticism that its "Not. Happy. Dan." campaign did not mention guns, SIFA wrote:

It has been suggested that SIFA should restrict its public comments to firearm issues but with around a million licensed firearm owners in this country, SIFA considered it vital it include issues that affect these people and all Victorians.<sup>9</sup>

However, SIFA's members are not firearm owners or Victorians; SIFA's members are firearms companies – most with international connections. Executive director Rod Drew clearly describes SIFA's purpose as "support[ing] the interests of business".<sup>10</sup> The purpose of "Not. Happy. Dan." was to serve the interests of firearm companies.

How successful the "FLICK'EM" and "Not. Happy. Dan." campaigns were is debatable.

After the 2017 Queensland election, SIFA published an evaluation of the "FLICK'EM" campaign with four stated objectives.<sup>11</sup>

- The first objective, to reduce the Labor and LNP vote, was marked as achieved as the parties recorded their lowest combined primary vote in history. However, the average swing against the Labor Party in SIFA's "target seats" was –1.8%, which is less than the overall swing against the Labor Party of –2.1%. This suggests that the campaign had little effect on voters.
- The second objective, to deliver a minority government, was a failure. Queensland Labor went from minority government to majority government.
- The third objective was to show that Australian industry is capable of holding legislators accountable. The failure of the first two objectives makes it unlikely that the campaign made legislators felt more accountable.

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<sup>9</sup> SIFA (2018) *SIFA Happy With Not. Happy. Dan.*, <https://sifa.net.au/sifa-happy-with-not-happy-dan/>

<sup>10</sup> SIFA (2018) *The Campaign and The Future*, <https://sifa.net.au/the-campaign-and-the-future/>

<sup>11</sup> SIFA (2018) *Queensland State Election 2017: Project Report*, [http://sifa.net.au/wp-content/uploads/18\\_2156\\_SIFA-FlickEm-Report-2018-A4-20PP\\_PRINT-PUBLIC.pdf](http://sifa.net.au/wp-content/uploads/18_2156_SIFA-FlickEm-Report-2018-A4-20PP_PRINT-PUBLIC.pdf)

- The fourth objective was to establish partnerships with allied industries. Only one only non-shooting industry body was listed as a “partner”: Taxi Business Queensland [sic].<sup>12</sup> However, they do not appear to have provided any financial support.

In the lead up to the 2018 Victorian election, SIFA described itself as “happy” with the “Not. Happy. Dan.” campaign, but said that – despite naming the campaign after and specifically targeting the Labor Premier Daniel Andrews – they were not running “a political campaign on political issues” or “attacking a particular party”.<sup>13</sup> Four days after the state election, SIFA head Rod Drew congratulated the Andrews Labor Government for “emphatically winning” the election.<sup>14</sup>

SIFA has not so far published an evaluation of the “Not. Happy. Dan.” campaign as it did after the “FLICK’EM” campaign, but it too does not seem to have been a success since Victorian Labor has gone from governing with a narrow majority to governing with a significant majority.

## Negotiations over the Adler shotgun ban

In July 2015, the Abbott Government placed a temporary ban on high-capacity Adler shotguns. Senator David Leyonhjelm negotiated with Coalition ministers Michael Keenan and Peter Dutton in an attempt to have the ban lifted.<sup>15</sup>

The ensuing negotiation, described as “guns for votes” by journalist Malcolm Farr, involved an agreement for Leyonhjelm to vote on other legislation in return for an agreement to amend the lever-action shotgun ban.<sup>16</sup>

The agreement is documented in an August 2015 email from Keenan’s office later released by Leyonhjelm:

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<sup>12</sup> It is not clear if this refers to an anonymous taxi business in Queensland, or to Taxi Council Queensland.

<sup>13</sup> SIFA (2018) *SIFA Happy With Not. Happy. Dan.*

<sup>14</sup> SIFA (2018) *The Campaign and The Future*

<sup>15</sup> Farr (2016) *Guns for votes: Here’s the deal that went bad*,  
<https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/yearold-pact-highlighted-in-row-over-senate-negotiations/news-story/3c72991213592938e927c366d6a919c4>

<sup>16</sup> Colangelo (2016) *Coalition “horse-traded” on gun laws for Leyonhjelm’s vote*, p.  
<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2016/10/18/leyonhjelm-shotgun-vote/>; Farr (2016) *Guns for votes: Here’s the deal that went bad*

## Figure 1: Email received by Senator Leyonhjelm

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We confirm that Ministers Dutton and Keenan have agreed that the Government will amend the Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations 1956 to insert a sunset clause of 12 months into the recently amended provisions which ban the importation of lever action shot guns with a magazine capacity of more than 5 rounds. The effect of the sunset clause would be that 12 months after this amendment comes into effect the ban will automatically cease to be in place.

We also confirm the Government's commitment to ongoing consultation between Minister Keenan and a wide range of key stakeholders, including the group listed below.

In return, Senator Leyonhjelm will vote against the Labor amendments to the Migration Amendment (Strengthening Biometric Integrity) Bill 2015.

Please confirm Senator Leyonhjelm's agreement.

Source: Colangelo (2016) *Coalition "horse-traded" on gun laws for Leyonhjelm's vote*,  
<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2016/10/18/leyonhjelm-shotgun-vote/>

The ban had a sunset clause, but before it could expire the Turnbull Government banned high-capacity Adler guns outright (to be lifted after states implement the 2017 revised NFA).<sup>17</sup>

In October 2016, the Labor Party accused then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of being prepared to water down gun laws in exchange for Senator Leyonhjelm's vote on the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC). Abbott also expressed his concern, despite the earlier agreement having occurred during his time as Prime Minister, saying via Twitter: "Disturbing to see reports of horse-trading on gun laws. ABCC should be supported on its merits."<sup>18</sup>

Leyonhjelm discussed the negotiation process with Andrew Bolt:<sup>19</sup>

[N]ow it gets to the crunchy stage of the ABCC, and they're [Coalition ministers] seeking my vote, and all of a sudden they're saying "Okay, what do we have to do to get your vote?" and I'm saying "Well, first of all, there's this unresolved issue of dudding me on this deal that I had on the import ban".

And there are various other things that I've been talking to the government about, that I'm not talking about. If there'd been another bill that they'd been seeking my support on, not the ABCC, and I was 50–50 either way on that bill – so it depends on what it was – then the same issue would have arisen.

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<sup>17</sup> SBS News (2016) *Leyonhjelm warns government over Adler gun ban*,  
<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/leyonhjelm-warns-government-over-adler-gun-ban>; (2017) *Adler ban stays as states change gun laws*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/adler-ban-stays-as-states-change-gun-laws>

<sup>18</sup> SBS News (2016) *Leyonhjelm warns government over Adler gun ban*

<sup>19</sup> Bolt (2016) *Credlin: only Turnbull was talking guns for votes*,  
<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/blogs/andrew-bolt/credlin-only-turnbull-was-talking-guns-for-votes/news-story/6646ed8df00889477f2440bca34c596f>; Liberal Democrats (Australia) (2016) *Senator Leyonhjelm talks to Andrew Bolt about the Adler ban*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrQCPSPRLDU>

In the end, Leyonhjelm voted for the ABCC without changes to gun laws.<sup>20</sup> However, the controversy demonstrated the ability of crossbenchers to call for gun concessions if their votes are needed to pass unrelated legislation.

## Funding

A combination of media reporting and electoral disclosures gives us a sense of how SIFA funds its campaigns.

“FLICK’EM” cost \$555,460, with SIFA itself contributing \$220,000 or \$275,800, depending on reports.<sup>21</sup> Electoral disclosures from the Queensland electoral commission show that SIFA received \$279,500 from firearms groups and companies in the 2017–18 year. Of that, \$200,000 was provided by the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia’s Queensland branch, with the Firearm Dealers Association and Cleaver Firearms contributing around \$20,000 each. These payments are likely to have been mostly for the remaining costs of the “FLICK’EM” campaign.

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<sup>20</sup> Coorey (2016) *Malcolm Turnbull ends legal action to woo David Leyonhjelm*, <https://www.afr.com/news/politics/malcolm-turnbull-ends-legal-action-to-woo-david-leyonhjelm-20161121-gstmx6>; Karp (2016) *David Leyonhjelm ABCC deal to force ABC and SBS from behind “goat’s cheese curtain,”* <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/nov/28/david-leyonhjelm-deal-to-force-abc-and-sbs-from-behind-goats-cheese-curtain>

<sup>21</sup> McGowan (2018) *Australian gun lobby invests in rightwing parties in push to weaken reforms*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/mar/07/australian-gun-lobby-donations-rightwing-minor-parties-weaken-reforms-control>; Nicholls (2018) *“New era” gun industry lobby says it wants to intervene in state and federal elections*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-22/new-era-gun-lobby-to-play-role-in-more-election-campaigns/10395516>

**Figure 2: Contributions to SIFA in Queensland, 2017-18 period**



Source: Electoral Commission Queensland (n.d.) *Donor location map*, <https://disclosures.ecq.qld.gov.au/>

Although Victoria has introduced more extensive donation disclosure laws, they came into force after the Victorian election. As such, the same breakdown of contributions is not available for the Victorian “Not. Happy. Dan.” campaign – although *The Age* has reported that SIFA expected the cost to be between \$165,000 and \$200,000.<sup>22</sup>

## Similar strategies to NRA

The strategy of the firearms industry running political campaigns that do not mention guns is an import from the United States, where it has been used extensively by the NRA.

Ahead of the 2014 midterm elections in the United States, the NRA ran a campaign that was “a gathering of shared values that gives a sense of right and wrong”; in other words, the 16 ads of the campaign talked about Internal Revenue Service, media elitism, government surveillance and political corruption – not gun policy.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cockburn (2018) *Gun lobby spends big in Victorian election*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/politics/victoria/gun-lobby-spends-big-in-victorian-election-20181108-p50ev7.html>

<sup>23</sup> Washington Times (2014) *NRA ad campaign goes beyond gun rights, reaches out to concerned Americans*, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/sep/4/nra-ad-campaign-goes-beyond-gun-rights-reaches-out/>

During the 2016 presidential election, the NRA ran ads costing millions of dollars that criticised candidate Hillary Clinton’s history as Secretary of State and called for “TRUMP 2016” – again without mentioning firearms. These were followed in 2017 with a series of ads criticising President Trump’s opponents, with no mention of firearms or gun policy.<sup>24</sup>

SIFA denies that it supports “the American group” (the NRA) and asserts it “has never sought (as it was claimed) to water down or chip away at firearm regulation in this country”.<sup>25</sup>

## RATCHETING PRESSURE TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF GUN CONTROL

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The gun lobby has an established pattern of pushing the boundaries of gun control by steadily increasing pressure. The strategy follows these three steps:

1. Justify legalising a gun because it is only a bit more powerful or faster to fire than currently legal guns
2. Use that gun as the new benchmark for why slightly more powerful or faster guns should be legal
3. Repeat

The gun lobby has used this method to justify importing guns with faster rates of fire, most recently with the Adler lever-action shotgun. During the Adler import debate, SSAA divisions and pro-gun politicians argued that the Adler’s lever-action technology was 150 years old.<sup>26</sup>

This contradicts advice from NSW Police, who said:

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<sup>24</sup> Drabold (2016) *NRA Ad Attacks Hillary Clinton Without Mentioning Guns*, <http://time.com/4388207/nra-national-rifle-association-ad-hillary-clinton/>; Rosza (2017) *The NRA just released a violent, terrifying ad*, <https://www.salon.com/2017/06/29/the-nra-just-released-a-violent-terrifying-ad/>

<sup>25</sup> SIFA (2018) *The Campaign and The Future*

<sup>26</sup> 3AWRadio (2016) *Ricky Muir and Derryn Hinch debate gun laws with Neil Mitchell*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_1hGhvH5jzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1hGhvH5jzU); Billings (2016) *More than 100 five-shot Adler shotguns registered in Tasmania*, <https://www.themercury.com.au/news/tasmania/more-than-100-fiveshot-adler-shotguns-registered-in-tasmania/news-story/eca97a4f35a6dd1a8fcc45fac152f69e>; SSAA NSW (2015) *SSAA National calls for status quo to remain in Adler debate*, <http://www.ssaansw.org.au/index.php/home-page-articles/448-ssaa-national-calls-for-status-quo-to-remain-in-adler-debate>; SSAA Victoria (2016) *Clearing up the Adler questions*, <https://ssaavic.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Adler-facts.pdf>

The public safety concern with the Adler A-110 shotgun and other types of emerging technologies is their rapid rate of fire and their higher magazine capacity.

These types of shotguns were not considered a high public safety risk at the time of writing the National Firearms Agreement because their action, at the time, did not allow for rapid rate of fire. Technological advancement has meant that these types of firearms are now similar, in terms of their rapidity, to pump action shotguns, which are classified as Category C firearms (prohibited except for occupational purposes).<sup>27</sup>

A compromise was reached regarding the classification of the Adler, after imports were banned for a period.

The gun lobby then used the agreement on the Adler to justify further imports.

When the fast-firing, nominally lever-action Verney-Carron Speedline was criticised by gun control advocates, gun importer Rick Casagrande justified it on the grounds that: "I have got a shotgun that I would like to import that is no faster than the Adler A-110 that we have just been through" and "There are lever actions in place that have been coming into this country for quite some time that have the same rapidity of fire as the Veloce or the Speedline".<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, the SSAA National CEO Tim Bannister said "There's always going to be new technology, we have new technology in all things. I'm not sure why we'd try and circle a particular sport and say you're not allowed to advance ... It's not more dangerous or less dangerous than any other firearm. A firearm in the right hands is a safe piece of equipment".<sup>29</sup>

These are contradictory arguments: that technology should advance and that lever-action technology has existed for 150 years.

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<sup>27</sup> Manning (2017) *Shot to pieces: How the Adler fight threatens our national gun laws*, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/shot-to-pieces-how-the-adler-fight-threatens-our-national-gun/8785588>

<sup>28</sup> Carbonell (2018) *Controversial new "rapid-fire" gun comes into Australia*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-30/push-to-import-rapid-fire-shotgun-to-australia-sparks-concerns/9807790>; NRA-ILA (2018) *Australia: Law-abiding Rifle Owners Made to Justify Their Guns and Politicians Target "Semi-semi-automatic" Firearms*, <https://www.nraila.org/articles/20180622/australia-law-abiding-rifle-owners-made-to-justify-their-guns-and-politicians-target-semi-semi-automatic-firearms>

<sup>29</sup> NRA-ILA (2018) *Australia: Law-abiding Rifle Owners Made to Justify Their Guns and Politicians Target "Semi-semi-automatic" Firearms*

The gun lobby also uses promotional videos to talk up the products and create hype, but disavows them when they come in for criticism. Casagrande says that a promotional video showing the Verney-Carron Speedline rifle firing more than once a second is “to show reliability, not necessarily the amount of the rapid-fire ability of the firearm”. However, the footage of the rifle firing is captioned “for an unequalled rate of fire”; there is no mention of reliability. Furthermore, the one-minute long promotion is interspersed with three clips of a hand miming how quickly the gun can be fired.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the gun lobby pushes for states to introduce breaches of the NFA on the grounds that other states are already breaching the NFA in the same way. For example, the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association argued that Tasmania should breach the NFA rule that firearm licences last no longer than five years because Queensland and the Northern Territory already breach the rule.<sup>31</sup>

Another example of the gun lobby ratchet is taking pre-orders for guns, and then using the existence of those pre-orders to pressure politicians to permit those guns to be imported. Nationals MP Mark Coulton used that technique during the Adler ban debate, saying: "I'm hoping we can still get this through because I know of one gun dealer [in his electorate of Parkes] who has hundreds on order waiting for this decision"<sup>32</sup>

## POLITICAL DONATIONS

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Australia’s donation disclosure requirements are limited, meaning that we can only get a patchwork of donation data. The information that does exist suggests that the firearms industry gives heavily to two political parties: the Shooters Party and Katter’s Australian Party.

In the financial years 2011–12 to 2018–19 (to date), Katter’s Australian Party has received the largest amount of disclosed political donations, totalling \$808,760. Most of these donations have come from the firearms supplier NIOA or members of the Nioa family (\$429,060) and the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (Queensland) (\$325,000).

The Shooters Party has received the second most disclosed political donations, totalling \$699,834. Most of these donations have come from the Federation of Hunting Clubs (\$216,800), a Shooters Party associated entity, and the Sporting Shooters Association

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<sup>30</sup> Carbonell (2018) *Controversial new “rapid-fire” gun comes into Australia*

<sup>31</sup> Maloney (2018) *Relevance of the NFA slammed*, <https://www.theadvocate.com.au/story/5744963/relevance-of-the-nfa-slammed/>

<sup>32</sup> Bourke (2016) *Coalition MPs back calls to allow Adler gun imports, hours after Malcolm Turnbull says ban is permanent*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/coalition-mps-back-calls-to-allow-adler-gun-imports-hours-after-malcolm-turnbull-says-ban-is-permanent-20161019-gs5bea.html>

(\$175,225). They also received \$42,000 from SIFA, \$79,800 from the Amateur Pistol Association and \$66,924 from the Hunter District Hunting Club.

It is also worth noting that the Shooters Party has made almost \$200,000 transfers between branches since 2011, according to AEC and NSW Electoral Commission disclosures. Although we do not include these transfers in the table below, they are worth noting because journalists report that in previous years “the NSW party became the national clearing house for the SSAA funding to state Shooters parties”.<sup>33</sup> Whether this SSAA funding is captured in other disclosures is not clear.

The Liberal Party is a distant third, with \$46,525 in donations. They received \$22,500 from SIFA and \$24,025 from Thales. Thales is primarily a defence contractor, but its subsidiaries manufacture guns and ammunition for private sale as well as defence. Thales also donated to the Labor Party.

The Liberal Democrats have received \$37,311 in donations. They received \$20,000 from NIOA and \$17,311 from the SSAA.

Three political parties received between \$30,000 and \$40,000 in contributions from the gun lobby: the Nationals (including the Liberal National Party and the Country Liberal Party), the Labor Party and the Country Alliance. One Nation has received \$6,203 in contributions.<sup>34</sup>

Some of these donations are only known because of stricter state disclosure laws; they would not have been required to be disclosed under federal law. By extension, there are possibly other contributions that are also not required to be disclosed.

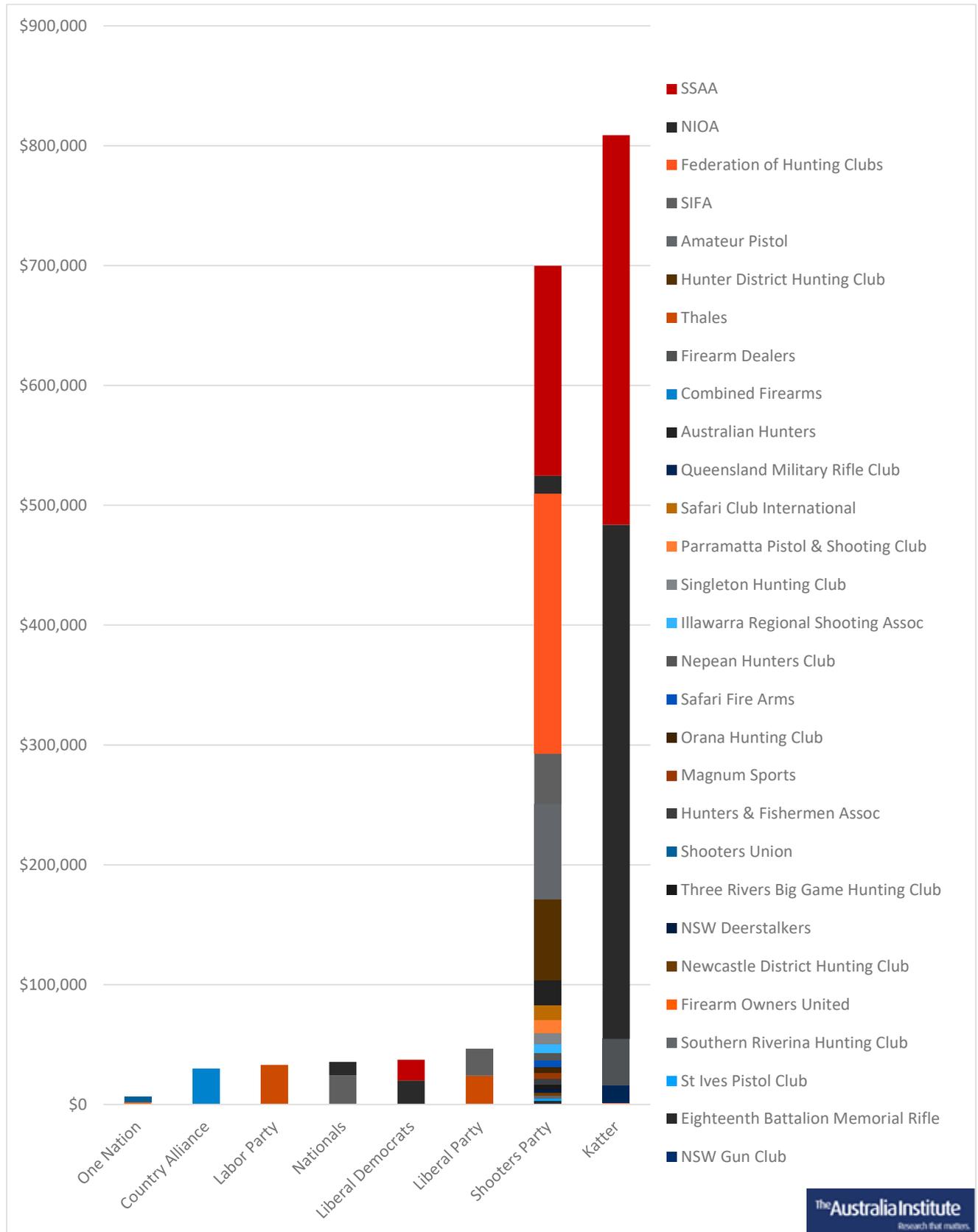
In addition, it is worth stressing that – as discussed under the “SIFA” chapter – much of the gun lobby’s political expenditure is in the form of campaigns that are not necessarily captured by disclosure laws.

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<sup>33</sup> Nicholls & O’Malley (2017) *The killer quirk hiding in Australia’s gun laws*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/politics/federal/the-killer-quirk-hiding-in-australias-gun-laws-20171006-gyvmho.html>

<sup>34</sup> AEC (2019) *Donor - Annual Returns*, <https://periodicdisclosures.aec.gov.au/Donor.aspx?SubmissionId=10&ClientId=21376>; Electoral Commission Queensland (n.d.) *Donor location map*, <https://disclosures.ecq.qld.gov.au/>

**Figure 3: Disclosed donations and other receipts (2011–2019)**

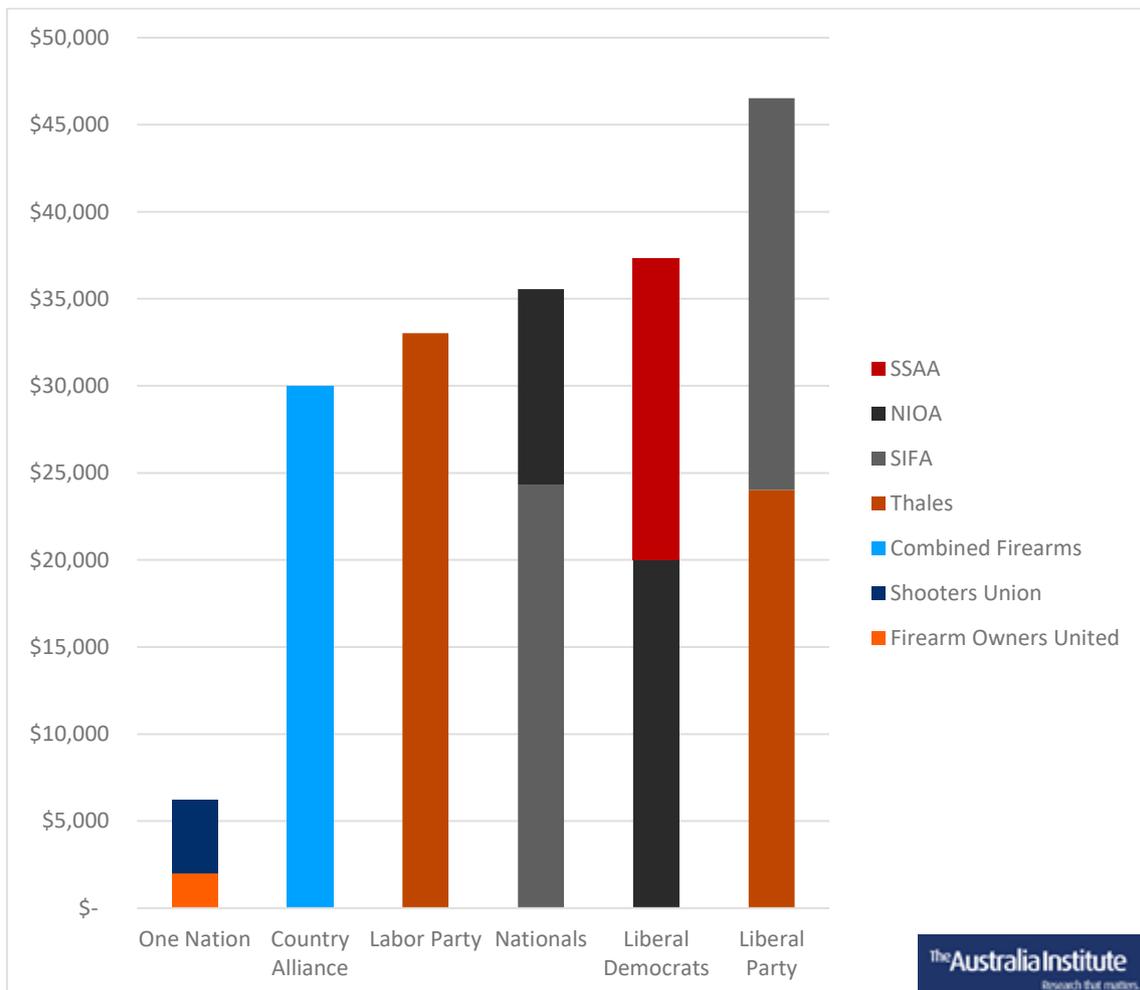


Source: AEC (2019) *Donor - Annual Returns*, <https://periodicdisclosures.aec.gov.au/Donor.aspx?SubmissionId=10&ClientId=21376>; Electoral Commission Queensland (n.d.) *Donor location map*; NSW Electoral Commission (n.d.) *Disclosures lodged*, <http://searchdecs.elections.nsw.gov.au/search.aspx>; Western Australian Electoral Commission (n.d.) *Funding and Disclosure*, <https://www.elections.wa.gov.au/candidates-and-parties/funding-and-disclosure>

Notes: For convenience, the Liberal National Party has been grouped under “Nationals”, although some members of the LNP caucus with the Liberal Party. We have included donations from Nioa family members under the “NIOA” category.

For ease of reference, we have replicated Figure 3 with the Shooters Party and Katter’s Australian Party excluded so the source of donations to other parties is more visible.

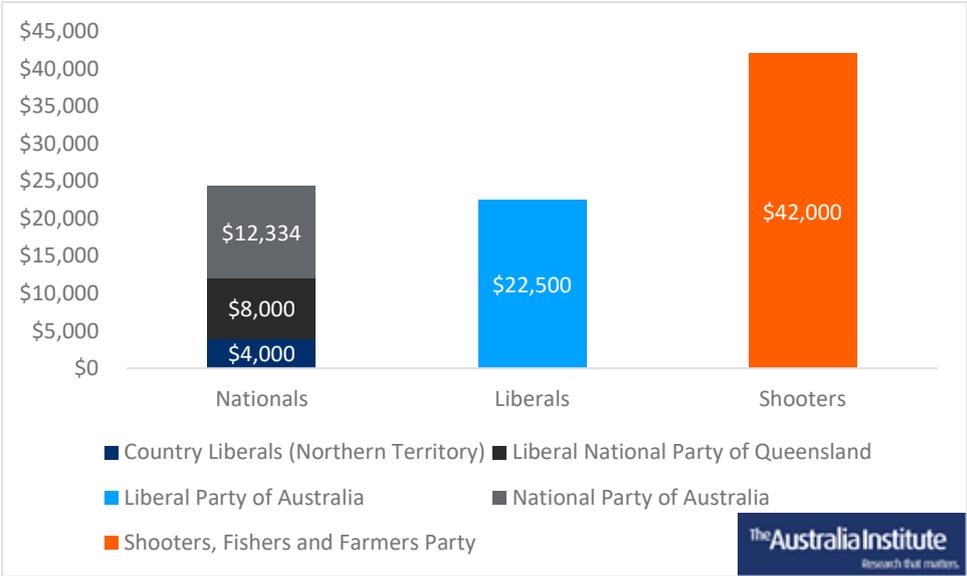
**Figure 4: Disclosed donations and other receipts (2011–2019), excluding Shooters Party and Katter’s Australian Party**



## Similarities to NRA

As discussed above, SIFA makes a range of political contributions. Despite having only been founded in 2014, it is the fourth largest gun lobby donor in the period 2011–2018. In 2015–16, they donated \$64,000 to the Liberal Party, the National Party and the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, according to Australian Electoral Commission reports,<sup>35</sup> and \$25,000 to the Shooters Party in 2016–17.<sup>36</sup> They also donated to the Shooters and Fishers Party in the lead up to the Victorian election,<sup>37</sup> although the size of that donation has not been disclosed.

**Figure 5: SIFA donations by political party (2015–17)**



Source: AEC (2019) *Donor - Annual Returns*; Electoral Commission Queensland (n.d.) *Donor location map*; Western Australian Electoral Commission (n.d.) *Funding and Disclosure*

Note: For convenience, the Liberal National Party has been grouped under “Nationals”, although some members of the LNP caucus with the Liberal Party.

Unfortunately, disclosure laws are such that our picture of SIFA political expenditure is patchy. There could be campaign spending and political donations that do not need to be disclosed.

Overall, however, we can build up a picture of how SIFA campaigns. Notable is that its political donations are relatively small compared to its political campaigning. SIFA’s most recent (disclosed) political donations at the federal level are from 2015–16 (roughly the

<sup>35</sup> AEC (2019) *Donor - Annual Returns*; Electoral Commission Queensland (n.d.) *Donor location map*

<sup>36</sup> Western Australian Electoral Commission (n.d.) *Funding and Disclosure*, <https://www.elections.wa.gov.au/candidates-and-parties/funding-and-disclosure>

<sup>37</sup> Cockburn (2018) *Gun lobby spends big in Victorian election*

last federal election), when they amounted to \$64,000. By contrast, spending in 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 on political campaigns must already exceed \$750,000 from the Queensland and Victorian political campaigns, and there are still NSW and federal elections before the end of the 2018–2019 financial year.

This pattern of political expenditure is found with other firearms industry lobby groups. In the 2018 election cycle (calendar years 2017 and 2018), the NRA spent relatively little (\$823,842) on political donations, but much more on lobbying (\$9,308,000) and outside spending (\$9,218,791).<sup>38</sup> “Outside spending” is “political expenditures made by groups or individuals independently of, and not coordinated with, candidates' committees”.<sup>39</sup>

The relatively low level of political donations from the NRA relative to other donors (the NRA made the 499<sup>th</sup> largest amount of donations in the 2018 cycle) has led some commentators to report that the influence of the NRA's political expenditure is overstated.<sup>40</sup> However, others have observed that the NRA's money is influential – but in the form of outside spending rather than direct contributions to candidates.<sup>41</sup>

The NRA's expenditure dwarfs SIFA's, but the United States is also much larger than Australia. In the 2018 cycle, the NRA spent \$2,512 per million US residents on political contributions. In the 2015–2016 financial year (the financial year leading up to the last federal election), SIFA spent at least \$2,562 per million Australians on political contributions.

In both cases, donations to candidates and parties are a small share of overall spending.

In the 2018 cycle, the NRA spent \$28,106 per million US residents on “outside spending”. In the Victorian and Queensland elections, SIFA spent \$30,120 per million Australians (or much more per million Victorians and Queenslanders) on its “FLICK'EM” and “Not. Happy. Dan.” campaigns.

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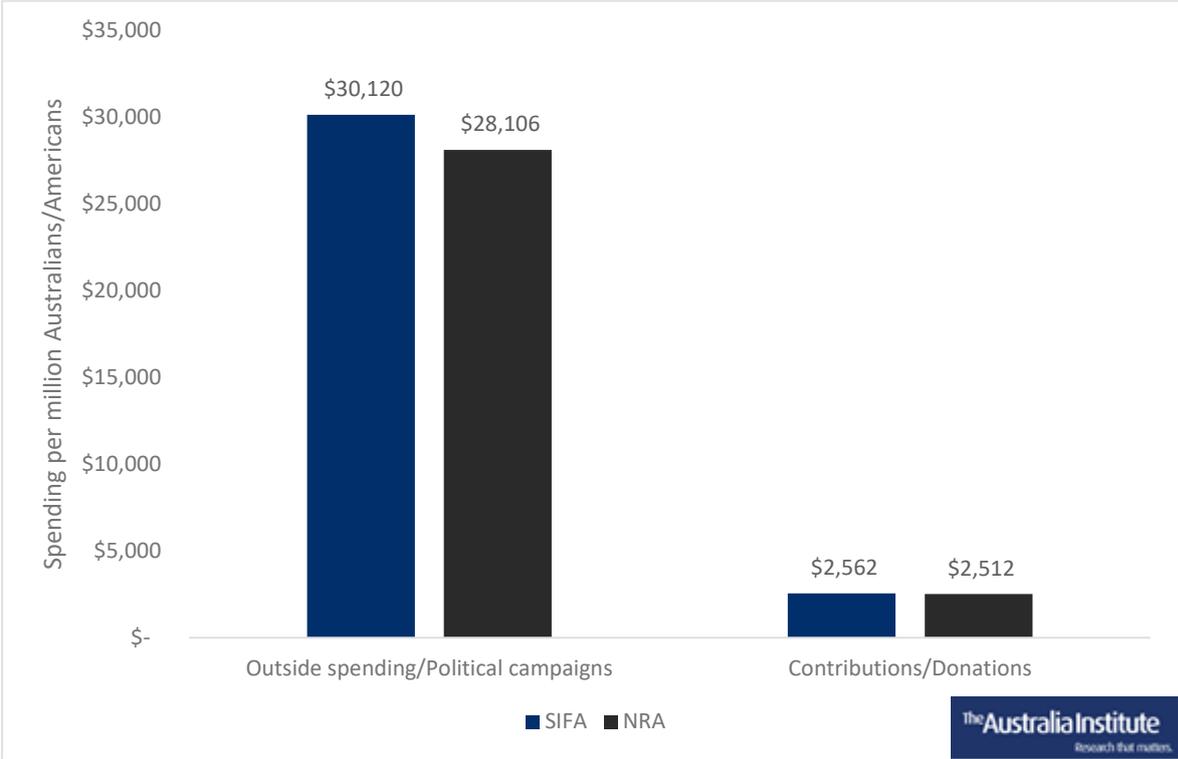
<sup>38</sup> At the time of writing. See OpenSecrets (2019) *National Rifle Assn: Summary*, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/summary.php?id=d000000082>

<sup>39</sup> OpenSecrets (n.d.) *Outside Spending*, <https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/>

<sup>40</sup> Lipton & Burns (2018) *The True Source of the N.R.A.'s Clout: Mobilization, Not Donations*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/24/us/politics/nra-gun-control-florida.html>; Novak (2018) *NRA money isn't why gun control efforts are failing—Commentary*, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/16/nra-money-isnt-why-gun-control-efforts-are-failing-commentary.html>

<sup>41</sup> Gambino (2018) *NRA contributions: how much money is spent on lawmakers?*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/16/florida-school-shooting-focus-shifts-to-nra-gun-lobby-cash-to-lawmakers>; Hill (2018) *The real reason the NRA's money matters in elections*, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/2/27/17051560/money-nra-guns-contributions-donations-parkland-march>

**Figure 6: Spending per million population, Australia's SIFA versus the NRA**



Source: Cockburn (2018) *Gun lobby spends big in Victorian election*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/politics/victoria/gun-lobby-spends-big-in-victorian-election-20181108-p50ev7.html>; McGowan (2018) *Australian gun lobby invests in rightwing parties in push to weaken reforms*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/mar/07/australian-gun-lobby-donations-rightwing-minor-parties-weaken-reforms-control>; Nicholls (2018) *“New era” gun industry lobby says it wants to intervene in state and federal elections*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-22/new-era-gun-lobby-to-play-role-in-more-election-campaigns/10395516>; OpenSecrets (2019) *National Rifle Assn: Summary*, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/summary.php?id=d000000082>

SIFA closely follows the pattern established by the NRA: spend most money on outside campaigns, rather than political donations. Relative to population, SIFA’s monetary expenditure is roughly equivalent to, or higher than, that of the NRA.

## LOBBYING SYMPATHETIC POLITICIANS

### Direct lobbying

The gun lobby sponsors shooting events in Canberra for politicians and journalists. SSAA hosted range days for the Parliamentary Friends of Shooting in December 2016, May

2017 and August 2018.<sup>42</sup> In December 2017, SIFA and the National Press Club co-sponsored a “festive Christmas shoot” held by the Parliamentary Friends of Shooting. Politicians and journalists were among the competitors shooting clay targets.<sup>43</sup>

## The Nationals

The Coalition has a history of support for gun control that goes back to Prime Minister John Howard’s decisive action on the NFA 1996 after the Port Arthur Massacre. Deputy Prime Minister, and then leader of The Nationals, Tim Fischer, continues to speak out in support of gun control. However, there have always been Nationals politicians opposed to the NFA – perhaps most prominently Bob Katter in 1996.

More recently, Nationals politicians were the most prominent major party politicians in support of lifting the Adler ban. At the federal level, Senator Bridget McKenzie, Deputy Speaker Mark Coulton and Ken O’Dowd MP supported a proposal to move the firearm to Category B and end the ban, as did then Deputy Premier of NSW Tony Grant at the state level. Senators Bridget McKenzie and John Williams voted for a disallowance motion to end the Adler ban, and three Nationals Ministers – Nigel Scullion, Fiona Nash and Matt Canavan – abstained from the vote; Nationals backbencher Barry O’Sullivan also abstained. House of Representatives Nationals whip George Christensen supported his colleagues, as did Liberal MP Ian Goodenough. Then Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce refused to state his position. Queensland LNP member Tony Perrett supported a disallowance motion at the state level, following the revised classification of the weapon in the NFA 2017.<sup>44</sup>

As the Nationals come under pressure in rural seats, especially from the Shooters Party, they may be tempted to change policy on guns. NSW Shooters Party MLA Philip Donato

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<sup>42</sup> Sporting Shooters’ Association of Australia (2017) *SSAA hosts second range day for Parliamentary Friends of Shooting group*, <https://ssaa.org.au/news-resources/politics/ssaa-hosts-second-range-day-for-parliamentary-friends-of-shooting-group>; (2018) *Shotgun shoot pulls big crowd in Canberra*, <https://ssaa.org.au/news-resources/politics/shotgun-shoot-pulls-big-crowd-in-canberra>

<sup>43</sup> Sporting Shooters’ Association of Australia (2017) *Busting clays in Canberra to celebrate our sport*, <https://ssaa.org.au/news-resources/politics/busting-clays-in-canberra-to-celebrate-our-sport>

<sup>44</sup> Bourke (2016) *Nationals stage a late-night revolt in the Senate over the Adler shotgun ban*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/politics/federal/nationals-stage-a-latenight-revolt-in-the-senate-over-the-adler-shotgun-ban-20161121-gsueqe.html>; Elks (2017) *MP votes against gun regulation*, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/mp-votes-against-adler-regulation/news-story/14ea2d3e07d99fabf86a93dad9718ae>; Holman (2016) *National MPs angry over plans to reclassify Adler shotgun*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-05/national-mps-angry-over-plans-to-reclassify-adler-shotgun/8091354>; Le Messurier (2016) *Nationals want restricted version of Adler shotgun*, <https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/nationals-call-on-federal-government-to-back-restricted-version-of-adler-shotgun/news-story/0b57df493669b112babbb64fedcc349e>

suggested that this already happened: he attributes then Deputy Premier Troy Grant's support for dropping the Adler ban to an unsuccessful attempt to head off Donato's election at the Orange by-election.<sup>45</sup>

## Lobbyist summary

While defence contractors are well represented among the clients listed in the federal third-party lobbyist register (we count 62 defence contractor–lobbyist relationships), the gun lobby itself is not.

Thales Australia retains two lobbyists (Australian Spectrum Consultants and Lyndon George Pty Ltd), Covenanter Arms and PBA Imports retain W J Wilcher Pty Ltd (trading as the Australian Firearms Management Lobby Group), and Field and Game Australia and the Australian Deer Association retain CPI Strategic Pty Ltd.<sup>46</sup>

SIFA was formerly a client of the Liberal Party-aligned lobbyist Barton Deakin, although this relationship has ended.<sup>47</sup>

The absence of big names like SIFA, NIOA and the SSAA from the list of clients in the third-party lobbyist register suggests that the lobby mostly uses in-house staff rather than contracting with external lobbyists.

## THE ADLER

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An example of how lobbying for changes in gun laws can be lucrative is the Adler shotgun.

NIOA's promotional videos for the seven-shot Adler resulted in over 7,000 pre-orders for the lever-action shotgun, which sold for somewhere between \$825 and \$900.<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>45</sup> Manning (2017) *Shot to pieces: How the Adler fight threatens our national gun laws*

<sup>46</sup> Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2019) *About the Register*, <https://lobbyists.pmc.gov.au/>

<sup>47</sup> McGowan (2018) *Tim Fischer warns "NRA-inspired" firearms lobby targeting Australia's gun laws*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/mar/18/tim-fischer-warns-nra-inspired-firearms-lobby-targeting-australias-gun-laws>

<sup>48</sup> McLennan (2016) *Adler importers to blame*, <http://www.thecourier.com.au/story/4243137/adler-importers-to-blame/>; McNally (2015) *New shotgun reignites gun control debate*, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/adler-lever-action-shotguns-sparking-new-gun-control-debate-in-australia/news-story/88ca9a1f5e840293c619ae34ca358dbb>

potential revenue for the seven-shot Adler, just from pre-orders, is therefore between \$5.8 and \$6.3 million. NIOA was planning to import 20,000 per year.<sup>49</sup>

After the Adlers were required to be modified to five-shot, *Sporting Shooter* reported that “many” people kept their pre-orders after the modification, and that the guns were selling for \$750.<sup>50</sup> Prices fluctuate for a number of reasons, but if it is the case that five-shots are worth \$75–\$150 less than seven-shots, then the change would have cost NIOA \$0.5–\$1.1 million in reduced value of product alone, and more in cancelled pre-orders and the cost of modification.

That the changing fates of just one product can potentially cost the gun lobby hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars in revenue demonstrates that the gun lobby has a strong vested interest in influencing public policy.

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<sup>49</sup> Maiden (2015) *PM steps in to ban rapid-fire shotgun*,  
<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/adler-leveraction-shotgun-to-be-banned-by-prime-minister-tony-abbott/news-story/42b8a5f29ac613e5cf6405b73548e1f6>

<sup>50</sup> Sporting Shooter (2015) *Adler shotguns delivered to Aussie shooters*,  
<http://www.sportingshooter.com.au/news/adler-shotguns-delivered-to-aussie-shooters>

# Conclusion

Most Australians support stronger gun control. Despite this, no state or territory fully complies with the National Firearms Agreement, and pressure remains for governments to allow the import and sale of more powerful and rapid-firing guns.

This defiance of the popular will on gun control can be attributed in part to the deep pockets of Australia's gun lobby, which has a much lower profile than the NRA does in the United States – despite Australia's gun lobby spending similar amounts (relative to population) on political campaigns.

Overall, the gun lobby involves tight relationships between what are nominally members' associations, the gun suppliers and other companies in the firearms industries and political parties – especially minor parties that could negotiate for loosened gun control from the crossbench.