



New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Petitions Committee

Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Petihana

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Petition of Niru Wijesundara: Allow gun club members to own banned semi-automatic rifles for competition

Presented to the House of Representatives
by Greg O'Connor, Chairperson

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Petition of Niru Wijesundara

Recommendation

The Petitions Committee has considered the petition of Niru Wijesundara—Allow gun club members to own banned semi-automatic rifles for competition—and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Request regarding ownership of banned semi-automatic rifles for competition

The petition was presented to the House on 16 November 2022. It requests:

That the House of Representatives allow bona fide competitive shooters from gun clubs to own banned semi-automatic rifles for competition.

The Petitions Committee of the 53rd Parliament began considering the petition. It received written submissions from the petitioner, the New Zealand Council of Licenced Firearms Owners, Pistol New Zealand, the New Zealand Service Rifle Association, the New Zealand Police, and Gun Control New Zealand. We resumed consideration in the 54th Parliament and received a written submission from the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand. We held a hearing with most submitters in February 2024.

Background

Acknowledgement of those who have died

Tēnei ka mihi ki te hunga i hinga i te 15 o Poutū-te-rangi 2019 ki Ōtautahi. We acknowledge those who fell on 15 March 2019 in Christchurch. Tēnei anō te mihi ki ngā āpiha o Ngā Pirihimana o Aotearoa kua hinga i te pū, inā hoki ki a Kātipa Matthew Hunt. An acknowledgement also of those officers of the New Zealand Police who have fallen due to firearms violence, especially Constable Matthew Hunt.

We acknowledge that our consideration of this petition has occurred during the time that New Zealand has commemorated the 5th anniversary of the shootings at two Christchurch mosques in which 51 people died. We recognise the sensitivity of this issue.

2019 and 2020 law changes

Substantial changes were made to the Arms Act 1983 in 2019 and 2020 after the terrorist attack at Christchurch's Al Noor and Linwood mosques.¹

The first tranche of firearms changes increased the number of prohibited types of weapons and weapon parts and reduced the exemptions allowing ownership of prohibited weapons.

¹ An outline of the changes to firearms laws is available on the website of Te Tari Pūreke | Firearms Safety Authority. For more information about the events of 15 March 2019, a comprehensive account is provided in the [report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch mosques on 15 March 2019](#).

Centrefire semi-automatic rifles were made illegal to own for competitive or sporting use. Specific changes included the following:

- All military style semi-automatics were banned, along with weapons parts that could be used to convert another firearm into a military style semi-automatic weapon.
- All other forms of semi-automatic firearm were banned with specific exceptions:
 - licence holders with a pistol endorsement can own and use semi-automatic pistols for sporting purposes
 - standard licence holders can own and use semi-automatic rimfire² rifles up to 0.22 calibre that hold up to 10 rounds
 - (other specific non-rifle exceptions apply that are not relevant to this petition).
- Exemptions for use of semi-automatic centrefire rifles were only granted for pest control purposes; recreational and sporting use were no longer grounds for an exemption.
- Collectors and those who have a restricted firearm as an heirloom or memento were also able to apply for an exemption to own a restricted rifle. These exemptions do not grant the right to use the weapons and they must be rendered inoperable by removing a key part and storing it at a different location.

Exemptions for ownership and use of prohibited weapons in sporting competitions were considered during the policy development of the law changes³ and in the consideration of the 2019 legislation by the Finance and Expenditure Committee.⁴ We note that differing views from the National Party and ACT in the select committee report expressed disappointment that an exemption for international sporting shooters was not included.

The second tranche of firearms law changes introduced in September 2019 included the establishment of a Firearms Registry from June 2023 and regulations for shooting clubs and shooting ranges from December 2022.⁵

Comments from the petitioner

The petitioner asks that competitive shooters from gun clubs be allowed to own semi-automatic rifles for competition. He said that, since these weapons were banned, New Zealanders have not been able to practise or compete on an equal footing in international shooting competitions.

Mr Wijesundara told us that before the ban on centrefire semi-automatic rifles New Zealand had excelled in competitions such as 3-gun,⁶ International Practical Shooting,⁷ and United

² Rimfire ammunition has the chemical primer which causes the bullet to fire in the rim of the cartridge, while centrefire has the primer in the centre of the cartridge. The petitioner's submission states that the rifles used in the types of competition he discusses need to be both centrefire and above .22 calibre.

³ Advice provided to the Minister of Police at the time is contained in [the supplementary submission of the Council of Licenced Firearms Owners](#).

⁴ Report of the Finance and Expenditure Committee of the 52nd Parliament on the Arms (Prohibited Firearms, Magazines, and Parts) Amendment Bill, April 2019, [available on the Parliament website](#).

⁵ More information about the New Zealand Firearms Registry and requirements for licence holders, and about the approval and certification of shooting clubs and shooting ranges, is available on [the website of Te Tari Pūreke | Firearms Safety Authority](#).

⁶ [3-gun shooting competitions](#) require competitors to use three different firearms as they move through a course involving different stages and targets.

States National Rifle Association competitive shooting programmes, including NRA Silhouette and NRA Speed Steel Rifle.⁸ He told us that participating in these competitions requires the use of rifles that are now banned in New Zealand.

The petitioner submitted that the physical specifications of semi-automatic and centrefire rifles are important for competitions. He said that success in time-sensitive competitions relies on the increased speed and lower recoil, and therefore higher accuracy, offered by semi-automatic weapons.

Mr Wijesundara's submission explained that sport shooters use custom rounds allowing lower recoil with just enough power to knock down targets, rather than factory rounds designed for combat. The current New Zealand firearms laws allow semi-automatic rimfire rifles that fire up to .22 ammunition but, according to the petitioner, these rifles do not allow customisation in the same way as larger gauge and centrefire rifles.

We heard that approximately 20 out of the 120 members of Mr Wijesundara's shooting club would be interested in participating in shooting competitions involving semi-automatic rifles. He told us he believed that a similar proportion of club members nationally would share this interest.

The petitioner acknowledged that the changes banning these firearms for sporting use were made after the Christchurch terrorist attack. However, his perspective is that terrorism is a complex issue that cannot be solved through a single policy measure, and that potential terrorists have other ways of obtaining weapons.

Before the 2019 law changes, there were already additional requirements for pistols: a person must obtain a pistol endorsement on top of the standard firearms licence. The petitioner said pistol clubs have a rigorous system to ensure that members who receive a firearms endorsement are genuine competitors who use the pistols exclusively for competition. Mr Wijesundara told us he believes a similar system can be implemented for semi-automatic weapons. He submitted that allowing gun club members to own semi-automatic weapons would ensure that these weapons would be in the hands only of law-abiding citizens.

Comments from submitters

Comments in support of the petition

Pistol New Zealand (PNZ), the New Zealand Council of Licenced Firearms Owners (COLFO), and the New Zealand Service Rifle Association (NZRSA) made submissions in support of the petition.

Using semi-automatic rifles in competition

Pistol New Zealand told us that it has 5,000 members competing in nine disciplines, both nationally and internationally. Between 2013 and 2019 over 50 members competed at 11

⁷ The [International Practical Shooting Confederation](#) organises competitions involving the use of firearms in courses involving multiple targets, moving targets, penalty targets, and obstacles.

⁸ More information about the National Rifle Association competitive shooting programmes is available on the [NRA website](#).

international events with centrefire semi-automatic rifles. It said an increasing number of members had been interested in competing internationally. PNZ said some members still compete in overseas pistol and shotgun events, but the inability to practise rifle shooting in New Zealand has meant that members are no longer shooting in this category.

The New Zealand Service Rifle Association said its members have been competing internationally against Australia and South Africa since 1998 at Service Rifle Competitions. Its members have competed against the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) team and have annual competitions on NZDF ranges. It stated that in order to continue to engage with the NZDF and to align with international competitions, it would need to use semi-automatic rifles.

The Council of Licenced Firearms Owners confirmed that New Zealand's current firearms regime prevents participation in international competitions that require the use of semi-automatic weapons.

We heard that licensed gun owners who want to participate in shooting competitions that require semi-automatic weapons include former members of the Police and the Defence Force who gained their skills in the service of New Zealand. We were told that competitors enjoy the mental and intellectual challenges as well as the technical skills required for the courses used in these competitions.

Proposed elements of a potential sporting exemption

COLFO said it believes that a sporting exemption based on the existing exemption for pistol possession would provide tighter controls than those that existed before the 2019 Arms Act changes, while enabling participation in international competitions. Aspects of the pistol exemption that could be replicated in a semi-automatic firearm sporting exemption included:

- a requirement for gun clubs to work in close cooperation with the Police
- proof that a licence holder trained regularly at an approved range
- supervision by a licence holder of any person shooting with a firearm without holding an endorsement for that weapon.

PNZ also proposed that the use of semi-automatic weapons be subject to the measures required for a pistol endorsement, which is applied for on top of the standard firearms licence. PNZ recommended that requirements for a person to use a semi-automatic firearm for competition purposes should include:

- membership of a gun club for over 5 years
- attendance at regional and national competitive events
- completion of the rifle range and training course run by PNZ
- competition in a required number of rimfire rifle events, such as four events per year for two years.

PNZ submitted that people who obtained a sporting exemption should be subject to an annual security check. It also recommended that they be required to maintain entry and completion of a specified number of regional and national centrefire rifle matches each year.

NZSRA also recommended that elements of the pistol and pest control exemptions be adapted for an exemption for competitive sporting use of semi-automatic firearms. It submitted that the following aspects should be considered as part of an exemption:

- membership of a recognised club, to include a probationary period, a training programme, participating in a minimum number of events, and maintaining financial membership
- reinstatement of the storage requirements that were previously required for military style semi-automatic rifles, with evaluation of storage arrangements arranged as part of an initial application, and then followed up by annual visits
- use of firearms on approved ranges.

Risks of semi-automatic rifle ownership and use

COLFO told us it does not believe that an exemption for sport shooters would increase public risk. COLFO said sport shooters who would use this type of firearm would usually be experienced shooters. It said that people using firearms for shooting competitions take particular care in maintaining and transporting them, as their firearms are integral to their success in competitions.

The NZSRA said it believed semi-automatic rifle sporting use could be allowed and regulated within the current firearms framework. PNZ told us that participants in international shooting competitions come from a range of countries that recognise and take risks seriously and have found ways to manage them. It believes New Zealand can do the same.

Comments opposing the petition

The New Zealand Police, Gun Control New Zealand (GCNZ), and the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ) made submissions opposing the petition.

Risks posed by semi-automatic rifles

The Police submitted that a sporting exception was considered at both the select committee and committee of the whole House stages of consideration of the Arms (Prohibited Firearms, Magazines, and Parts) Amendment Bill 2019. The Police said the decision not to allow a sporting exception for semi-automatic rifles was made intentionally. This was part of the broader aim to restrict the overall availability of semi-automatic weapons by reducing the number and type of exceptions.

FIANZ said that the 15 March 2019 attacks have taught New Zealanders not to be naïve in assuming this is a safe country. It said the petitioner's submission had not shown an understanding of the risks associated with the petition request. It said any change in firearms laws would be seen as backsliding on promises made to affected communities and the people of New Zealand following the 2019 attacks.

GCNZ told us that it did not believe the risk from semi-automatic weapons can ever be completely eliminated.

Weapons that pass into the wrong hands

The Police said that allowing the change requested by the petitioner would introduce an unacceptable risk of high-capacity semi-automatic centrefire firearms becoming readily

available in the black market through theft or provision by non-compliant licence holders. They told us that they believe the vast majority of New Zealand gun owners are law-abiding citizens. However, they gave examples of situations in which guns had passed from licensed owners into the hands of unlicensed people, including the shooting of three people in Northland in 2017 with a weapon supplied by a licensed gun owner.⁹

FIANZ also submitted that, despite robust vetting of gun owners, there can always be the possibility of rogue licence holders, theft, or legitimate gun owners supplying guns to unlicensed people. It pointed out that the 15 March 2019 shooter was a licensed gun holder, who was a member of a club and had regularly trained and practised there, and that no alerts had been raised about his bad intentions before the mosque attacks. It said it took only one shooter with one weapon to kill 51 people and wound many more.

International competitions

Both the Police and GCNZ commented that shooting competitions at the Olympics and Commonwealth Games do not involve semi-automatic firearms. They said it is unlikely that these competitions would do so in the future. The Police noted that there are competitions run by the International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC) and the US National Rifle Association (NRA) that do not require the use of firearms prohibited in New Zealand.

The Police said that when the Finance and Expenditure Committee considered the 2019 law change it was told that there were at most 10 people from New Zealand competing internationally using semi-automatic rifles. However, they expressed concern that in order for experienced competitive shooters to be able to compete internationally, there would be a desire for domestic competitions so others could obtain skills and experience. The potential number of people seeking a sporting exemption could be far greater than just the most highly skilled and experienced shooters seeking to take part in international competitions.

In the Police's view, the private benefit to those who would want to participate in sporting use of semi-automatic rifles is outweighed by the proportionate increase of risk to the public that this would pose. They said that New Zealanders who want to compete in other types of sport not available in New Zealand, such as Formula One racing and sumo wrestling, base themselves overseas.

GCNZ told us that although the kinds of competitions outlined in the petition are described as "practical shooting", it believes they would be better described as "combat shooting". It said that, unlike target shooting, these events simulate "real world" scenarios where shooters complete obstacle courses which may include firing at human silhouettes. GNCZ told us it does not support the use of lethal firearms in sports designed to simulate the experience of killing people in situations of combat or self-defence.

The Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ) questioned the petitioner's statement that prior to the 2019 arms law changes New Zealand had excelled in international competitions of this kind. It said that since 1999 New Zealand had not won any IPSC world records. It also noted that the number of medals won by New Zealanders at IPSC events had increased, rather than reduced, since the 2019 law changes. FIANZ's

⁹ New Zealand Herald, Northland double-killer Quinn Patterson's weapons supplier, a former soldier, sentenced.

perspective is that practical shooting competitions, rather than being elite or iconic international events like the Olympics or Commonwealth Games, are events sponsored by weapons suppliers and manufacturers for marketing purposes.

Oversight of clubs and ranges

The Police told us that before April 2019 there was no regulatory oversight of clubs whose members or visitors shot centrefire semi-automatic rifles on a range. That included the rifle range used by the 15 March 2019 shooter. They said it would take a number of years to set up a regulatory system comparable to that established for pistol shooting.

The 2020 law changes introduced a process for extending oversight to all shooting clubs and shooting ranges from June 2023. However, the Police noted that approval and certification of clubs and ranges under the current legislation will take some time. They noted that a transition period was provided because Parliament recognised in making the 2020 law changes that most clubs and ranges are run by volunteers.

Membership of gun clubs

The Police disagreed with the petitioner that requiring licence holders to be involved in clubs would reduce the risks of broadening access to currently prohibited weapons. They told us that between 2013 and March 2023 the same proportion of pistol-endorsed licences were revoked as standard licenses (0.3 percent). The Police said this indicates that pistol licence holders, despite being required to be involved in clubs, are not especially more law abiding than standard licence holders.

The Police expressed concern at COLFO's submission that a sporting exemption could allow non-endorsement holders to use semi-automatic rifles under supervision from a licensed holder. This arrangement could mean that some semi-automatic rifle users would not have had additional scrutiny from applying for, and acquiring, a licence endorsement. They said that during the buyback stage of the 2019 legislation, the Police learned that non-licensed users had included children.

Our response to the petition

We acknowledge that this is a very sensitive issue, and one on which New Zealanders hold very strong and differing opinions. We note that the Petitions Committee of the 53rd Parliament had scheduled a hearing on this petition for 19 July 2023, which was postponed when a fatal shooting in Auckland took place that day. Our own consideration of this petition has taken place as New Zealand has commemorated the 5th anniversary of the Christchurch mosques shootings. We note, as the Police reminded us in their submission, that the victims of semi-automatic rifles in the wrong hands include Constable Matthew Hunt, who was killed with a semi-automatic rifle on a routine traffic stop in June 2020.

We felt that the petitioner could have more fully appreciated the sensitivity of his petition request. We felt that the gun membership groups who made written and oral submissions were perhaps more aware of wider public concerns and sensitivities. It appeared to us that the gun clubs were aware of the necessity for change post-15 March 2019, and open to that change. We did not hear any expectations that laws and regulations controlling semi-

automatic gun ownership and use could or should simply go back to those that existed prior to 2019.

We acknowledge that licensed gun users include many law-abiding citizens who wish to participate in activities for which they have committed time, resources, and energy to acquire skills for competition. We also acknowledge that gun clubs are run by volunteers. We heard concerns that clubs may not have the resources and expertise to monitor their membership to the extent that the New Zealand public could be assured that any member with criminal or terrorist intent could be identified simply through their gun club membership.

We also acknowledge widespread public concern about law and order, and support for increased gun control following the March 2019 attacks. This includes deep public concern that lethal weapons not find their way into inappropriate hands. We asked whether it is necessary that lethal weapons are used for the sporting challenges posed by international shooting competitions, or whether non-lethal methods could be found, such as using simulations or weapons with laser lights.

Among the members of our committee are various views, representing the range of views present in New Zealand society. Some of us see an opportunity to redesign gun laws in a way that both manages risk and enables participation in shooting sports, while protecting public safety. Others of us see the protection of vulnerable members of our communities as the highest priority, noting the immense damage that can be caused by a single person with a semi-automatic weapon.

We accept that it is appropriate to review legislation that was developed at speed during a time of heightened emotions and tensions. We note that the 2019 and 2020 arms law changes included the requirement for a formal review period to take place three years after the legislation came fully into effect. This means the law is due to be formally reviewed in 2026. We believe it is appropriate that this review take place in 2026 as scheduled, and a thorough and considered decision be made at that time.

However, since our hearing, the Government has announced that a review of gun laws will take place this year.¹⁰ The Government formally announced a programme to review New Zealand's firearms legislation on 14 June 2024.¹¹ We believe useful work could take place now that could help guide future decision-makers in the formal 2026 review and any current policy considerations. This could include the following matters.

Assessment of the size and scope of a possible sporting exemption

We heard a very wide range of assessments of the possible size and scope of a sporting exemption for semi-automatic rifle ownership and use. This ranged from the information given to the Finance and Expenditure Committee in 2019 that only 10 people were competing internationally in shooting competitions, to the petitioner's assessment that approximately one-sixth of all gun club members would like to participate in these kinds of activities, internationally or domestically. PNZ told us that about 50 of their members competed internationally between 2013 and 2019, but said there was wider interest.

¹⁰ Radio New Zealand, [Semi-automatics on the table in gun laws shake-up](#), 28 February 2024.

¹¹ [Government to overhaul firearms laws | Beehive.govt.nz](#), 14 June 2024.

It would be beneficial, in considering any possible gun law changes, for decision-makers to have a clear understanding of the size of any proposed sporting exemption. We think the public response may be quite different if the proposal is for a very narrow exemption that would provide for a small group of elite participants competing internationally, compared to an exemption that could enable much wider ownership and use of semi-automatic weapons in New Zealand. We believe this information would be useful to both the public and decision-makers.

Bottom-line requirements for any potential sporting exemption

In written and oral submissions on this petition, the petitioner and gun club representatives told us that the following matters would be bottom-line requirements in considering any potential sporting exemption:

- storage of weapons at a level equivalent to or greater than the current exemptions for pest control and historic weapons
- length of local club membership, such as a minimum of five years
- significant additional training and assessment on top of any regular licence requirements
- resourcing for ongoing close scrutiny and inspection of any exemption holders.

Capability of gun clubs to assess and monitor members

We acknowledge that the vast majority of gun club members are law abiding. However, we must also note that the person responsible for the 2019 attacks in Christchurch was a licensed gun owner, a member of a club, and regularly practised on the club's range.

We do not think that all New Zealanders would be satisfied by the petitioner's assertion that allowing only gun club members to own semi-automatic weapons would ensure that these weapons would be in the hands only of law-abiding citizens. We understand that would be of particular concern to communities and families affected by gun violence.

We note the willingness of gun clubs to contribute to the screening, training, and monitoring of gun club members. We welcome that. We would want to seek assurance that member participation in local training and competitions would provide sufficient scrutiny to identify the minority of licensed gun users who are ill-intentioned or could be tempted to pass weapons into illegal hands.

We believe it would be helpful for gun clubs to undertake a realistic assessment of their own capacity to take responsibility for screening, assessing, monitoring, and reporting their members on any matters of concern. It would be appropriate for the Police and security agencies to review whether gun club processes alone would sufficiently identify licensed gun owners with criminal or terrorist intent.

Acknowledgement

We finish as we began, with an acknowledgement of those communities and families who are still healing from the terrible misuse of semi-automatic military style weapons. This petition raises significant questions concerning the balance of rights and responsibilities. It will be important that, in any consultation about changes, all voices are heard.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was referred to the Petitions Committee of the 53rd Parliament on 16 November 2022. It met between 16 March and 27 July 2023 to consider it. The committee received written submissions from the petitioner, the New Zealand Council of Licenced Firearms Owners, Pistol New Zealand, the New Zealand Service Rifle Association, the New Zealand Police, and Gun Control New Zealand.

On 6 December 2023, the petition was reinstated with the Petitions Committee of the 54th Parliament. We met between 14 December 2023 and 18 June 2024 to consider it. We received a written submission from the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand and heard oral evidence from the petitioner, the New Zealand Council of Licenced Firearms Owners, Pistol New Zealand, the New Zealand Police, Gun Control New Zealand, and the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand.

Committee members

Greg O'Connor (Chairperson)

Carl Bates

Kahurangi Carter (to 7 May 2024)

Greg Fleming

Francisco Hernandez (from 7 May 2024)

Hon Dr Deborah Russell also participated in our consideration of this petition.

Related resources

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available on the [Parliament website](#).

A recording of our hearing can be [accessed online here](#).