The Halifax Explosion and the Port Arthur Massacre:
Testing Samuel Henry Prince’s Ideas

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Samuel Henry Prince wrote that major catastrophes lead to change. Despite his status in the field, there have been few attempts to examine empirically Prince’s ideas about change. In this paper the authors describe a massacre in Port Arthur, Tasmania, in 1996 in which a man armed with automatic weapons killed 35 persons and injured 19 others. As a result of the massacre, changes occurred in Australian gun-control laws. The fallout from the massacre is examined in light of Prince’s thesis about change following catastrophes.

In 1920, in the first scholarly study of disaster, Samuel Henry Prince wrote that the sinking of the Titanic led to changes in the rules regulating maritime safety and that the mass fatality Triangle fire in New York City’s garment district led to improvements in American labor laws (Prince 1920). Similarly, he said that the munitions ship explosion in...
Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1917—1,963 dead, 9,000 injured, and massive destruction—led to a new and improved city with a substantially better health system. These examples showed, he argued, that catastrophe leads to social change. He repeated his thesis in *The Social System* in 1958:

Under the stimulus of catastrophe, necessity becomes the mother of invention. . . . Thus public health in England is attributed to the cholera visitation, in America to the yellow fever epidemics. City planning took its rise from the Chicago fire . . . while the wreck of the *Titanic* reduced for all time the hazards of the sea. (Prince 1958, p. 110)

Although Prince is generally acknowledged as the pioneer scholar in disaster (Finn and Nossow 1958; Orbach 1986, pp. 1–2; Anderson 1966; Anderson 1970, Scanlon 1992; Dynes and Quarantelli 1994; Dynes, de Marchi, and Velando 1987), there have been few attempts to examine empirically his ideas about change.

On April 28–29, 1996, a man armed with automatic weapons killed 35 persons and injured 19 more in Port Arthur, Tasmania, moving about as he shot customers in a restaurant, the occupants of a bus, pedestrians, and motorists. In the wake of that incident, there was an immediate call for action by Australia’s federal government, followed by significant changes to the gun laws in Australian States. In short, at least on paper there was immediate and significant change. The reaction to the Port Arthur massacre offers a rare chance to examine how a single incident apparently triggered change. In addition, because as time passed some of the initial enthusiasm for new gun laws waned, Port Arthur also allows us to examine whether change sparked by a dramatic event will go beyond rhetoric and become permanent. What emerges is support for Prince’s thesis that change can occur after a single incident—but also evidence that that will happen only if conditions are right and there is a change agent to see that change occurs.

While the changes in Australia were significant, they need to be put in context. The best estimates available suggest that there is at least one gun in 20 percent of Australian households (Chapman 1998, p. 120). But ownership is highly skewed by gender and location. Only 1.1 percent of females, more than fifteen years old claimed to own a gun in a 1978 survey (Mardling 1981), and there were few female participants—under one percent—in the pro-gun demonstrations which accompanied the new laws. The proportion of households with a gun is much higher in rural (41 percent) than urban areas (12 percent) (figures quoted by the Public Health Association of Australia).
Two authors working independently but cooperatively developed the material in this article. One collected the material on the massacre itself during a visit to Tasmania arranged by the Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI). During that visit, he talked to many of the key players on the understanding that none of those he interviewed would be identified. He also visited the sites of the shooting and institutions involved in the response. Later, he talked to a number of persons involved in various ways while visiting the Emergency Management Institute and obtained material from a seminar organized by the Tasmanian State Disaster Committee and sponsored by EMA (Emergency Management Australia, 1997). To determine if there was significant change, the other author reviewed the various regulations affecting distribution and ownership of weapons, reviewed other documentary material, and talked to persons involved with the changes. Using this material, he added to and critiqued the original draft of this article. The draft was then rewritten and reviewed by both authors.

First, Prince's thesis is reviewed and the Port Arthur massacre and its impact described and analyzed. Then the political and social context and response is reviewed and the rapid development of the Nationwide Agreement on Firearms is set out. Some comments are then made on backsliding. Finally, Prince's thesis is evaluated in light of the massacre and the political response to it.

**Prince's Thesis**

In presenting his thesis, Prince said that change might be positive or negative. The only thing certain is that change was bound to come. "The point is," he wrote, "catastrophe always means social change. There is not always progress. It is well to guard against confusion here" (Prince 1920, p. 32). E. L. Quarantelli supports Prince's perception that disasters can be positive:

"It seems to me that the negative consequences of disaster should be a matter of empirical findings and not an a priori part of a definitional concept... Not only will this allow us to see better the positive social aspects of disasters, it will also allow us to treat threshold problems, if any, as both consequences and conditions for disaster phenomena. (Quarantelli 1998, p. 266)"

Prince said that there might be conditions setting the stage for change, but that the change could be triggered by a single incident.
... however important the accumulation of impulses toward social transformation may be, there is often a single "precipitating factor" which acts as the "igniting spark." (Prince 1920, pp. 19-20)

Tied to this view was his concept of fluidity:

... fluidity is fundamental to social change.... When there comes that shattering of the matrix of custom by catastrophe, then mores are broken and scattered right and left. Fluidity is accomplished at a single stroke. There comes a sudden chance for permanent social change. (Prince 1920, pp. 19-20)

Prince added that the strains that led to fluidity could be internal or external, from within or without the society where change occurs, and they could be created by, "accidental, extraneous or dramatic events" (Prince 1920, p. 15). Whatever the cause, these strains led to "the establishment of a species of collective behavior" (Prince 1920, p. 67). This seems to be the first time the term "collective behavior" appears in the academic literature, although Prince draws on others in formulating his idea and in selecting that term. For example, Edward Alsworth Ross had suggested an "igniting spark" or a "precipitating factor" could create change (Ross 1959, p. 211). Giddings had stated that, "under common danger... similarities of behavior... develop into spontaneous collective action" (Giddings 1920, p. 395). C. C. Curtis (1917, p. 361), writing within three weeks of the explosion, had tied change specifically to Halifax:

Halifax will gain as well as lose. ... It may confidently be expected that through this calamity there may be developed a program for the care, training, and education of the sightless... that medical social services will be permanently grafted upon the hospital and out-patient services. ... If there should result no other benefits and there are likely to be many others, as, for example, in city planning, housing and health—the death and suffering will not have been in vain.

But it was Prince who, while recognizing the contribution of others (his sources are meticulously cited), tied these ideas into a concept of collective behavior. His work was published two years before that of Robert E. Park who is generally credited with first using that term, eighteen years before Lapiere (1938), eighteen years before Sorokin (1942), and twenty-six years before Blumer (1969).
While it is difficult to tie down the origins of any term, Park is usually seen as the first to use “collective behavior.” In his introduction to On Social Control and Collective Behavior, Ralph Turner says that “Park named the field of study and identified the major forms of collective behavior...” (Park 1967, p. xli; emphasis added). Yet an examination of Introduction to the Science of Sociology, where Park and Ernest W. Burgess first used the term, shows that Park was aware of Prince’s work (Prince is cited in the bibliography), which had come out a year earlier, and that his definition fits perfectly with Prince’s description of Halifax. Prince said catastrophes shake up the crucible that is society and make social change possible. Park and Burgess (1924, pp. 924-925), in their section on collective behavior, say that they limit their use of the term to:

... those phenomena which exhibit in the most obvious and elementary way the processes by which societies are disintegrated into their constituent elements and the processes by which these elements are brought together into new relations to form new organizations and new societies.

That definition might not apply to Titanic or the Triangle fire, but it does fit perfectly with what happened when an explosion one-seventh the power of the first atomic bomb destroyed large parts of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1917. It is of course possible that Park used the term without being aware that Prince had already used it in a published work, but it is clear that Prince used it first in a publication and that Park and Burgess knew of that publication.

Until Port Arthur, the closest to a test of Prince’s thesis was William Anderson’s study of the 1964 Alaska earthquake. Anderson found that organizational change was most likely to occur under certain conditions. These include movement towards change before the disaster, new or more critical strains created by the disaster, and increased support for the organization as a result of the disaster (Anderson 1970, p. 113). While these points fit Port Arthur—for example, there were well-organized groups lobbying for changes in gun laws prior to the massacre—Anderson was talking about changes in organizations rather than broader changes. Prince’s ideas and what happened after Port Arthur relate to changes that affect the laws of an entire country.

For the most part, however, Prince’s thesis does not seem to be supported by what normally happens in the wake of disaster. Usually, instead of pressures for change there are pressures to return things to
the way they were. Restoration is the key, not renovation. If the reaction to Port Arthur led to significant change, what was it about Port Arthur that made it different from other events? Why does it appear to fit the model developed by Prince?

The Port Arthur Massacre

Port Arthur is near the southern tip of the Tasman peninsula, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) by road from Tasmania's capital, Hobart. Between roughly 1830 and 1873, it was one of the major prisons for convicts transported from England. It is now an historic site, and about 100,000 visitors each year to an important part of Australia's history. On Sunday afternoon, April 28, there were 18 staff and about 100 visitors on site. Some were taking part in organized tours; others were sitting around and relaxing, often inside or on the veranda of the Broad Arrow Cafe. Others were waiting for the ferry to the Isle of the Dead.

The first sign that something was wrong came when neighbors heard shots at Seascapes, a guesthouse about five kilometers (three miles) up the road. They knew that their neighbors had a gun collection, and Tasmanians are accustomed to shooting rabbits and other animals, sometimes simply firing out a window. However, when they phoned to see if all was well, a strange man answered the phone and told them that the residents were away. They called the police. It now appears that they heard their neighbors being shot. The gunman had a grudge against them because they had refused to sell him their property, and they became the first of his victims.

Soon after that, the man left Seascapes and drove to the historic site where he apparently paid the usual entry fee at the toll booth. By the time he found a parking spot and walked over to the ferry to the Isle of the Dead, it was full. He then entered the Broad Arrow Cafe and ate a light lunch. Then he took a 7.62 FN light automatic rifle and a 5.56 M16 out of a duffel bag and started shooting. In a moment, there were 20 dead and 12 injured. Next, he shot four persons and injured four more in and by a bus parked near the cafe. After that, he got into his car and drove back towards the guesthouse, killing as he went. He shot and killed a woman and her two children. (The six-year-old fled, but he tracked her down behind a tree.) He shot four persons by the entrance toll booth. He forced a man to get into the boot (trunk) of his car, then killed the man's wife. He shot another woman at a restaurant. He shot at and injured passing motorists. Then, as the first police arrived, he laid
down so much fire that they were forced to retreat. They were armed
with handguns: he had a rifle and an assault weapon and was at a house
with a gun collection and 3,000 rounds of ammunition.

The man remained in the guesthouse until early the next morning,
wandering from window to window, firing intermittently. Although
police could not detect other activity, they were not certain if the two
residents and the man brought there in the car were dead. Marksmen
reported once or twice that they had a good chance to shoot him, but it
was feared that if they missed he might kill his hostages. Police were
also uncertain if he had acted alone. Bone fragments and bits of debris
caused minor injuries to some victims and survivors. That made some
wounds appear to be from a shotgun, suggesting at least two weapons
were fired at the same time.

The incident ended when the man set the guesthouse on fire. He
came out alone, his clothing on fire. As he ripped off his burning cloth-
ing, officers jumped on him, covered him with a blanket, and handcuffed
him. After being treated for burns, he was taken by ambulance to the
burns unit of the Royal Hobart Hospital. There he joined the survivors
of his rampage. When that became known, the hospital became a target
for public anger. Someone spray-painted “AN EYE FOR AN EYE” on
its wall. Others phoned with threats against the man and against hospi-
tal staff who were caring for him. Some staff refused to treat him.

The Response

Even after the gunman left the historic site, most of those still alive
remained under cover. When they were finally sure the carnage was over,
some survivors got into their cars, stared around the bodies on the road
by the toll booth, and left. Others were unable to leave; their cars had
been damaged, or their coach had been shot up and their taxi driver dead.
A tour guide tried to comfort the injured, but one man died in his arms.
However, a staff member used her apron to try to stop the bleeding in
her own leg, a nurse took a chair and used it to prop up the head of an
injured man, and an information officer, a trained ambulance volunteer,
made certain the injured could breathe by clearing airways. She also
used tea towels as bandages. Several victims died before outside med-
ical help arrived. No one died after the first ambulance reached the site.

The first responding police officers took the road that led past the
guesthouse. They were driven back by gunfire. They turned back and
took the opposite road to Port Arthur, circling past the entrance to the
site. They established a forward command post at the Tasmanian Devil
Park, four kilometers (2.5 miles) from Seascaper. They also blocked the main road to Port Arthur. Then they used buses to transport armed police officers from Hobart where their incident command center was located.

Ambulance dispatched volunteer ambulance crews from the nearest places to the scene, cautioning them that the gunman had not been caught. Then it sent two paramedics by ambulance from Hobart, one paramedic by helicopter (he traveled with a police officer), and a supervisor from his home. The first ambulance crews responded from nearby Nubeena on a road that does not pass the guesthouse. They stopped at the toll booth, checked the bodies there for vital signs—there were none—then continued on to the Broad Arrow cafe where they found injured survivors. A second ambulance arrived by the same route. The third ambulance drove through the gunfire. Minutes later, the first helicopter came in from the sea and landed at the site. These first responders were backed up by more volunteer ambulance personnel, more paramedics, and by two family physicians. One heard about the shooting, told her husband, and both responded from their home in Nubeena.

Two persons declined to be treated at the site: their wounds were not serious, and they felt others needed help more. They showed up at the hospital later on their own. The other 17 injured survivors were moved to Hobart by helicopter, by ambulance, and, in seven cases, by bus. Relatives were not allowed on the helicopter or the ambulance but were allowed on the bus. Because all three modes of transportation were used and because it is roughly 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Port Arthur to Hobart, the victims arrived at Royal Hobart Hospital in a steady flow. Staff had time to assess one before the next arrived. Since ambulance had a direct telephone line from the cafe to the Royal Hobart, the ambulance was able to inform the hospital who was coming and of their condition. Eventually, at the site there were 20 persons looking after 18 injured. There was also so much equipment that the supervisor told communications to stop sending supplies.

As soon as the first injured person was ready for transport, the first helicopter returned to Royal Hobart, a twelve-minute flight. It carried the pilot, one of the injured, and the police officer who had come with it. That left the ambulance crews with the dead, the injured, and the uninjured survivors—and no police. As they listened to radio news reports stating that the gunman had not been caught, they wondered if he would return. About three and one-half hours later, police and ambulance personnel finally checked out the area. No other victims were found.

The Royal Hobart Hospital cancelled elective surgery scheduled for the next day, discharged all but critical patients, and called in more than
150 staff. This was far more than needed for 19 casualties, especially when those died slowly. In any case, physicians were just finishing a three-day course on advanced trauma life support at the hospital. The major problem was not a shortage of medical help but an influx of specialists into emergency. At one time, there were 42 physicians and 18 medical students at the hospital. Besides receiving the injured, the hospital eventually also received the dead. Since its morgue has a capacity of 20 bodies, it had to set aside one ward for use as a morgue and place the rest in a refrigerator truck.

Other Concerns

While police dealt with the standoff and ambulance crews with the injured, the local mayor, a former State Emergency Service (SES) coordinator, set up an Emergency Operations Centre at the municipal offices at Nubeena. There, he fielded hundreds of media inquiries about the impact of the shootings on the community and provided the police with maps of the area and plans of Seacape, where the siege was taking place. The media demands became so overwhelming that the state provided him with a media relations assistant from the premier’s office.

At SES headquarters in Hobart, staff geared up for a massive community recovery effort. That first night, Community and Health Services dispatched eight person teams to the scene, sent others to State Emergency Service headquarters and some hotels, and kept others in reserve at the Tasmanian police academy. Once police were on site, they insisted that the remaining uninjured survivors stay until they were interviewed. Some, including relatives of the dead, were on a bus for several hours. They were not allowed to go to their loved ones or retrieve anything from their bodies. In some cases they were unable to get their car keys, their hotel keys, or the keys to their homes. That evening they were taken to the police academy in Hobart. When they arrived, they were angry and frustrated. They needed to go to a washroom. They wanted to phone their relatives. They needed a way of getting to and getting into their hotel rooms and homes and, in some cases, simply wanted the first available flight out of Tasmania. All were upset, and a few were scared. Two refused to leave the academy. They did not feel safe. Social Services staff tried to calm them down, working out arrangements with hotels and airlines and arranging free telephone service so they could call their families.

Although the police were in full charge at the scene, overall direction of the government’s response was with officials in Hobart. Starting on the day of the massacre and continuing for weeks, representatives
from the cabinet and the premier's office, the Justice Department, Community and Health Services (which deals with the hospitals and counseling and recovery), and Treasury met each morning. To make certain they were fully in touch with local concerns, an official sent out to assist the mayor drove in to each of the daily meetings. Because many senior officials were unfamiliar with the impact such an event can have on a community, one day the entire senior committee was briefed on community recovery.

**Media Response**

When local media heard the sketchy initial messages over the police radio—radio communications in and out of Port Arthur were very bad, so there was little to monitor—they started to send the story around the world. BBC London called Hobart twenty minutes later. Others flocked to the scene. There soon were reporters in Tasmania representing British, American, Japanese, and Canadian media including a CNN reporter sent from Bonn, Germany. There were enough journalists to fill two coaches when police arranged a visit to Port Arthur the day after the shooting, and enough to fill another coach the following day.

On arrival, some journalists headed to Port Arthur, gathering outside the police forward command post. (They were allowed past the first roadblock but were stopped well away from the standoff at the guesthouse.) Others congregated in Hobart, positioning their satellite dishes on the lawn of the hospital, diagonally opposite police headquarters. Still others gathered where ambulances were waiting for helicopters bringing in injured. Media also telephoned radio and television outlets in Tasmania, the police, and the local mayor, trying to get information for a story that was now the top story in the news in the Western world.

As the death count rose, the Australian and world media realized they were dealing with the worst single assault ever. Gradually the focus turned to the dead; as their names became known, reporters visited their hometowns and talked to the survivors and to the families and friends of the dead. The media learned, for example, that two victims had gone there as part of a reunion; they had served in the war together. Stories also focused on the cause of the incident and what could be done about it. Coverage had reached such intensity that anything, no matter how trivial, was being used.

However, in Tasmania local television was censored. There are strict controls of court rules in Australia, and the local station had spent $30,000 AU (about $15,200 U.S.) on legal costs after a previous con-
tempted citation. The restraint this time was bolstered by the fact the state Director of Public Prosecutions issued an advisory calling for media caution. However, the outside media and one Tasmanian newspaper were less discreet. Working with its sister paper in Sydney, the Hobart Mercury obtained a picture of the accused and ran it full length down the right-hand side of its front page. Beside it they ran text that left no doubt as to who had committed the murders:

**THIS IS THE MAN**

**THIS is the man** whom Tasmanians want to face 35 murder charges.

**This is the man** who stumbled out of an interno of a house yesterday, his clothes ablaze, leaving behind three hostages.

**This is the man** who allegedly calmly, chillingly, coolly and brutally stalked and gunned down men, women and children at the Port Arthur historic site on Sunday afternoon.
This is the man who grabbed the hostages and holed up in a cozy bed and breakfast home as police laid siege to the refuge.

This is the man who is now in Royal Hobart Hospital being treated for burns as police wait to interview him.

This man is Martin Bryant, 28, a man of mystery from the Hobart suburb of New Town.

The Mercury was cited for contempt, as was its sister paper in Sydney. (Bryant was later convicted of the killings and is in custody.)

The contempt citations made the media more cautious. Tasmanian television brought in management staff to monitor all programs coming from outside Tasmania and blocked any broadcast that showed the man accused of the killings. Photos were either covered with a grid or a slide appeared explaining that for legal reasons the item would not be shown in Tasmania. Australian newspapers, also worried about further contempt citations, started printing special editions for delivery in Tasmania. One result was that persons reading, listening to, or watching only Tasmanian media received a different version of the news. When, for example, Bryant tried to commit suicide, that was not reported in Tasmania. It did make the news elsewhere.

However, there is a long history of police/media cooperation in Tasmania, and for the most part it continued during the incident. Only one media helicopter violated a five kilometer (three mile) “no fly” zone set up around the site. Only one reporter telephoned Sesoscope. When a man answered the phone, she could hear him laughing. “What are you doing,” she asked? He replied: “I am enjoying myself. I’m killing people.” Stunned, she turned her tape over to the police.

When the police asked the media to broadcast a request for persons to stay away from the Port Arthur area, the media did so. When police lost contact with the gunman—the batteries on his phone had run down—the media obligingly reported where batteries could be found.
inside the house. (There was no response: apparently he was not listening to the radio or watching television.) Finally, since some of the dead carried no identification, the media broadcast telephone numbers that persons who thought their relatives were at the site could call.

In appreciation of the media’s cooperation, police allowed the media to visit, photograph, and record visuals of the Major Incident Centre during the standoff. Police felt that visuals showing the center would reassure the public that the police were in control. During the visit, two boards containing sensitive information were turned and covered, and the media were asked not to take visuals of the major status board. None did. After the siege ended, police arranged for media visits to the Port Arthur area even while there were bodies inside the cafe (the ones outside and visible had been removed). They also made no attempt to stop the media for trying to interview persons going into and coming out of the hospital. Similarly, instead of trying to hide events, local authorities announced what was happening and indicated whether the media were welcome. One release stated that residents had been cooperative with the media and “now wish to have two activities during which their privacy will be respected.” One was a meeting of residents at the school at Nubeena, the other a church service. The announcement said: “This information has been provided in good faith, and all media personnel are asked to respect the wishes of the community.” The media did so.

Impact of the Massacre

Tasmania is an island of about half a million inhabitants, and almost everyone knew some of the local dead or injured. The two physicians who responded were friends of the chemist (pharmacist) who had left Victoria and set up in Nubeena. That man lost his wife and two children. The ambulance supervisor had grown up near the couple killed at the guesthouse. They were friends of his mother. One of the dead was the daughter of a volunteer with the State Emergency Service. Over the next few days and weeks, Community and Health Services spent a great deal of time listening to and helping residents of the Tasman peninsula. Besides holding meetings and helping organize a private memorial service, they prepared a pamphlet, “Coping With a Tragic Event,” outlining normal emotional reactions and arranged to have the post office distribute it to every home. In addition to residents, nearly 700 persons visited counselors for Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. They included 526 police, 62 ambulance officers, 49 firefighters, 18 SES volunteers, and 32 others. Most counseling was done in the field, but
operational headquarters and the SES provided staff support. There was a problem with those who had been upset by the carnage they had seen, but there were also concerns with some who had not participated: they felt left out. Both problems have been identified at previous incidents.

Without doubt, some people are very disturbed by what they experience... The pressure appears to be eased when opportunities are provided to talk with counselors or to share thoughts with others, as long as these are confidential. Sometimes stress occurs because responders feel guilty about being unable to help. (Scanlon 1992, p. 61; see also Lamonagne 1983)

Overall, the response in Port Arthur matched what normally happens in disasters. Despite the horror, the victims coped well. During the shooting, one man lay across two female companions and told them not to move. He was shot but survived. They escaped injury. There was the usual absence of panic and the usual failure to recognize the signs of a serious situation. While tour guides shepherded the people in their groups away from the scene, other persons videotaped the shootings because they thought it was a historical reenactment with muskets, not a massacre. Some who did understand what was happening phoned those nearby to warn them. One caller enabled the person in the toll booth to duck down and escape injury. Another allowed visitors to the Fox and Hounds to head upstairs above the restaurant, out of the line of fire. The first ambulances and the two local physicians went to the scene even though they knew the gunman was still loose. They risked their lives to help others. One man talked quietly to ambulance officers about his injuries—a bullet had gone through his jaw. He was so coherent that they decided he could wait to be treated until he arrived at hospital.

There was convergence—by police, by ambulance officers, and by the media. There was a failure to keep records. No one tagged the bodies as dead although tags for this purpose were in all ambulances. No grid maps were made, and there was no systematic search for two and a half hours. There were five or six separate command centers. The police had their own forward command post and a major incident center at their headquarters in Hobart. The ambulance service ran its response from its communications center in Hobart. The State Emergency Service operated a local command post at the municipal offices in the lower Tasman peninsula and at its headquarters, also in Hobart. Because of the topography, there were problems with communications in and around the site. The police, for example, had enormous
difficulties during the siege. Its Special Operations Group had to use runners. Ambulance personnel found that they could reach Hobart by radio from some locations at the historic site but not from others. They were forced to move about until they made contact.

While the various agencies worked on their own, there was a lot of cooperation. When police asked one of the first helicopters available to assist with surveillance, the pilot declined—his first responsibility was to transport the injured. The police accepted that answer. When ambulances were moving the injured from the helicopter landing site to the hospital, police cordoned off a clear traffic route in downtown Hobart. When Community and Health Services needed to get some counselors to the injured in and around Port Arthur, the police provided transportation. The police also provided their academy as a reception and counseling center.

In Australia the public reaction was quick and generous. Donations flowed into a special relief fund. The money was to be used for victims, their families, witnesses to the incident and their families, members of the local community, and any others in need of compensation. The fund would pay for funerals, transportation costs of families (including the costs of a visit to the site), counseling costs (if those were not covered in some other way), research into major traumatic incidents, a trust fund, and, if money was available, a permanent memorial to the victims. There was also an outpouring of emotional concern. An ambulance officer from Queensland—he was wearing a badge that said "counselor"—wrote of one experience he had in Tasmania:

I recollect there were two ladies who were twins—dressed identically, in their middle 30s—and huddled together. They walked over and put their flowers down, both in tears. I was standing near them and they turned around. . . . Suddenly they turned over and said, "We didn't know whether we should have come." And I said, "Thank you for coming. People needed to have you here." Then the tears flowed. . . . They burst into tears and we had this group hug. There was a lot of that going on. (Scully n.d.)

When the Anglican bishop of Tasmania suggested a national moment of silence for prayer or simply quiet thought, the suggestion was picked up by the premier and the prime minister. At 10:30 a.m. a few days after the shooting, silence was observed throughout Australia. When a memorial service was held in Hobart, St. David's Cathedral was packed, and thousands gathered outside. When staff and patients at Royal Hobart
Hospital joined the silent tribute, so many wanted to place wreaths that the silence lasted fifteen minutes.

The initial reaction of the politicians to Port Arthur was as might have been expected. The prime minister, after being briefed by police, issued a statement of concern and expressed his condolences to the families of those who were killed. (Most of the dead were tourists.) Then he left the response to the police. There was an ecumenical service at the Roman Catholic Church in Canberra (the federal capital) attended by leading politicians. The prime minister announced he would fly to Tasmania and visit the survivors in hospital. However, in less than twenty-four hours, there were demands for changes in the way Australian states deal with weapons and a strong indication that the Commonwealth (federal) government would take a leadership role.

The day after the shooting Australia’s Attorney General, Daryl Williams, said: “I can’t think of a greater need for uniform gun laws than that demonstrated by what happened at Port Arthur.” Support came immediately from two groups that have continually argued for gun controls—the National Coalition for Gun Control (NCGC) and the Australian Medical Association (AMA)—and from members of the public. A spokesman for Gun Control Australia, a Melbourne-based group that has lobbied for tighter gun controls, said that because politicians had not acted in the past they had blood on their hands. It started holding vigils on the steps of state legislatures.

At the ecumenical service, a minister asked that those present remember in their prayers, “...those responsible for legislation regarding gun laws in the country.” After that service, the prime minister announced that he would hold a meeting of state police ministers in 10 days. He announced: “The federal government will do everything possible to get an effective tightening of the gun control situation in Australia.” The attorney general in one state, New South Wales, agreed. He said: “A national response, a national solution is required.” Later, the prime minister reaffirmed his position, announcing: “I will not retreat an inch from the national responsibility (for gun control).”

**Why Change Occurred**

Australia has a federal government, but law and order—including gun control—falls under the jurisdiction of the six states and two territories rather than the Commonwealth (central government). Gun controls, therefore, vary from state to state. Prior to Port Arthur, most...
itself, a single license allowed a resident to own as many guns as wished, including automatic weapons. To achieve a national approach, the states and territories in effect had to informally cede some of their power to the federal government. In the context of a tradition of ‘cooperative’ federalism, with a relatively weak central government, this has rarely been an easy task. It happened on this occasion because of the impact of the massacre and because of the pre-existing social and political context, which had come to favor gun control.

Gun control was already on the agenda of the conservative federal government, which came into office shortly before Port Arthur. As early as 1995 before the massacre the new Attorney General, Daryl Williams, was reported in The Australian newspaper as saying that he intended to pursue nationally uniform gun control laws (Taylor 1996). This was consistent with a statement made by new Prime Minister John Howard during an election debate, when he said that he wished to control military-style firearms. In a major policy speech a year earlier, he had indicated that Australia should learn from the United States’ gun experience and not follow the same path.

In addition, opinion polls had repeatedly shown overwhelming public support for gun control, with some 90 percent of Australians supporting tighter regulation. For example, just before Port Arthur a public opinion poll conducted by the New South Wales Health Department found that about 90 percent supported firearm registration—with 83 percent of rural residents supportive (Lagan and Lamont 1996). A referendum held during local government elections in North Sydney in September 1995 found that 93.1 percent supported registration of firearms (Chapman 1998, p. 65). Most important, the media had generally been strongly supportive of tighter controls and frequently castigated politicians for their timidity in the face of the pro-gun lobby. Finally, gun control was evolving gradually from a law-and-order issue to a public health and safety issue, which greatly broadens its appeal. Increasingly, control is being equated with human rights: the National Coalition for Gun Control was (jointly) awarded the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission community award in 1996. Gun control is also seen by its advocates, and by those concerned with worldwide health and crime, as an international issue (e.g., U.N. Economic and Social Council 1998).

In 1987, Prime Minister Bob Hawke convened a National Gun Summit after a massacre in Melbourne. But this meeting failed to achieve agreement even to ban military-style semiautomatic weapons.
Tasmania and Queensland. The only concrete outcome was that the federal government banned the import of such weapons in 1991. Nevertheless, the National Committee on Violence was established which presented its recommendations to the Australian Police Minister’s Council in 1988—and these recommendations formed the basis of the Nationwide Agreement on Firearms.

The Nationwide Agreement on Firearms

The day after the massacre, Prime Minister John Howard announced an emergency meeting of the Australian Police Ministers Council (APMC) to consider gun law reform. He received the unequivocal support of the opposition Labour Party, the Greens, and Australian Democrats. The APMC meeting was held on May 10, 1996. In summary, the key aspects of the ten-point agreement—known as the Nationwide Agreement on Firearms—were:

- uniform national gun laws;
- a ban on the ownership or manufacture of semiautomatic rifles and pump-action shotguns;
- a twelve-month amnesty and compensatory “buyback” scheme to pay gun owners the market price of prohibited weapons they hand in. This was funded by an increase in the national health insurance (Medicare) levy. This program went hand in hand with a nationwide public education campaign;
- a national register of all firearms;
- licensing of shooters to be based on a “genuine reason” or “genuine need” for gun ownership, with a minimum age requirement of eighteen years; and
- a requirement that all guns be stored securely.

Many states already had aspects of the agreement in place, but without national uniformity their effect was limited.

After the APMC meeting, the governments of Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory tried to water down aspects of the agreement. However, Howard threatened that, if full agreement was not reached by 22 July, he would go to the people with a referendum asking that the constitution be amended to move control of guns to the central government. Opinion polls indicated he would have won easily. The recalcitrants fell into line.
Implementation and Backsliding

The agreement was historic and welcomed throughout the media and across the political spectrum—apart from the far right, some independent members of Parliament, and a few outspoken but unimportant members of the main parties. But to have an impact, the agreement had to be translated into legislation, and that legislation had to be enforced. The commonwealth commissioned the Australian Institute of Criminology to help monitor the implementation of the agreement:

The [Institute's] report concludes that the core elements of the Agreement—the prohibition of certain firearms, the establishment of registration systems and the development of a 12 month amnesty and buyback scheme—have been almost fully implemented. The report also indicates that, in relation to other components of the Agreement, there are particular areas where further legislative and administrative work is required. (Warner 1997, pp. 1-2)

The most significant departures from the APMC resolutions include:

• [Correction] of the exemption for clay target shooting in the Northern Territory and Queensland;
• failure to implement a uniform regulatory regime for firearm collections; and
• failure in South Australia and Western Australia to require automatic revocation or refusal of a licence where a person is the subject of a domestic violence order . . . (Warner 1997, pp. 6-7)

It was not until May 1997 that all states and territories had implemented the new regulations, though each state and territory differs "in their levels of enforcement of the new legislation" (Mouzos 1999, p. 3). Table 1 sets out the details. At the end of the buyback scheme 643,726 firearms had been handed in and $320,000 AU (about $162,400 U.S.) paid out in compensation (www.gun.law.gov.au/guns/tally.htm). As little time has passed since the legislation was put into place in all states, any evaluation is still tentative (see, for example, Mouzos 1999). Estimates of the number of new illegal guns remaining in Australian society vary widely, although it appears there are significant numbers. But, "for every 100 guns handed in, only eight are being replaced"
(Brewer, quoted in Chapman 1998, p. 168). This observation was supported by later figures on firearm imports (all new guns are imported) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Wainwright 1998).

The issue of gun control is now disappearing from the national political agenda, but it is active at the state level. While the states are unlikely to overtly undermine the National Agreement, there are ways its full intent can be weakened. For example, exemptions to the laws can be allowed and granted, and the full-training regime required before shooters are licensed is yet to be implemented. There is evidence that both these approaches to weakening the agreement are occurring (see various sources, including Gun Control Australia 2000; WA Office of the Auditor General 2000). One populist political party, the so-called "One Nation" Party, would work to overturn the National Agreement. Its policy states that it would "correct the coalition’s failed and costly firearms policies . . . while protecting the right of . . . citizens to self-defense and appropriate use of firearms" (www.onenationwa.com/policies). One Nation has obtained significant support in many rural areas and is supported by the gun lobby. This support appears to come largely at the expense of the major conservative political parties who, facing elections across Australia in 2001, feel pressure to go quietly on gun control.

Analysis and Discussion

Given the similarities to other incidents, what was it that set the Port Arthur massacre apart? Why did it trigger change? First, the incident got massive media coverage, coverage that continued until the murder trial was over; this kept the shooting, and therefore gun control, on the national agenda. Second, there was an obvious and publicly popular way to prevent similar incidents—gun control. Third, someone with political power—the prime minister—was prepared to take a leadership role in urging change and seeing that it came about. In fact, one key to change was the ability of the prime minister to forge a bipartisan agreement on the need for gun control. Previously the gun lobby had played politicians off against each other. But there were two other factors that helped create support for new gun laws. One was that the Port Arthur massacre was the latest in a number of mass killings. The other was that most Australians could relate to the Port Arthur massacre and visualize themselves as possible victims.

In the decade prior to Port Arthur, there had been ten shooting incidents with five or more fatalities in Australia. In 1987, there were two in the State of Victoria, one when a man used an automatic weapon to
fire at passing motorists on Hoddle Street in Melbourne (seven killed, nineteen injured), the other when a man entered an office building housing mainly postal workers, also in Melbourne, and went up and down the elevator, occasionally getting off, entering an office, and shooting the occupants (eight dead, five wounded). Another incident occurred in Sydney in 1993 when a man used a weapon to kill some shoppers at the suburban Strathfield shopping mall (seven dead, six wounded). All this received attention in the Australian mass media as did similar incidents elsewhere. For example, there was a mass killing at École Polytechnique, an engineering school in Montreal; a mass killing in the English town of Hungerford; and finally, six weeks before Port Arthur, the killings at a school in Dunblane, Scotland.

All these incidents were horrifying and shocking, but they did not seem to relate to all Australians. Melbourne and Sydney are major cities—things like that wouldn’t happen in rural areas. École Polytechnique involved female engineering students, Hungerford the citizens of one town, Dunblane the children at one school. Port Arthur, however, involved tourists from all over Australia. More important, it involved tourists visiting a place most Australians have visited or intend to visit. Port Arthur is an important part of Australia’s past, one of the British convict colonies that led to European settlement of Australia. It is now a point of pride in Australia to have convict ancestors. Port Arthur is a symbol of that pride. It was also the setting for Australia’s first important novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (Clarke 1996), originally published in 1874, a novel that tells the horrors awaiting an innocent man who was sent to Port Arthur, and a recent novel, *The Potato Factory*, by Bryce Courtenay (1996), one of Australia’s best-known authors. To Australians, a massacre at Port Arthur was like one at the Statue of Liberty, Trafalgar Square, or the Eiffel Tower. It was easy for any Australian to imagine being a victim at Port Arthur.

**Comparison to Prince**

In his dissertation, Samuel Henry Prince used several examples to show that catastrophes lead to change. While Prince may have been correct about the importance of Titanic and the Triangle fire in changing the law, there was little evidence of immediate change after the explosion in Halifax. Because it occurred in the third year of the First World War, the authorities were not interested in changing the way they handled munitions. What happened to Halifax was tragic, but winning the war was more important. Port Arthur is more similar to
 Titanic and the Triangle fire than to Halflas. The problem could not only be identified, it could be fixed, and there was no strong case for leaving things alone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Boundary with coding and pump area figures</td>
<td>Provided by all jurisdictions, but there are exceptions, especially in Nevada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Nationwide regulation of engines</td>
<td>All jurisdictions require the use of steam engines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gas and oil engines and fuels used on engines</td>
<td>A few states require gas engines. Some require diesel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ballast tank system</td>
<td>All jurisdictions require a ballast system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Fire and smoke detection systems</td>
<td>All jurisdictions require smoke detection systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Lifeboats and life jackets</td>
<td>All jurisdictions require lifeboats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Escape routes</td>
<td>All jurisdictions require escape routes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Means of egress</td>
<td>All jurisdictions require means of egress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Fire extinguishing equipment</td>
<td>All jurisdictions require fire extinguishing equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Wall and fire partitions</td>
<td>All jurisdictions require wall and fire partitions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There was another reason working against change in Halifax. When the explosion occurred, it was front-page news in much of the Western world. It stayed on page one in places such as neighboring Boston for more than a week, but elsewhere it disappeared from the media agenda. At that time, the Allies were experiencing severe losses in the North Atlantic. The Germans were threatening to break through to Paris. The British had captured Jerusalem, something denied to Western Europeans since the Crusades. The Bolsheviks were taking power in Russia. These events were more significant than the Halifax explosion.

After the shooting, the media also kept the incident alive, partly because the man accused of the killing was still alive, partly because the prime minister made certain it remained on the public agenda, partly because the gun control lobby included many ordinary Australians who were determined to keep it in front of the politicians, and partly and importantly because the gun lobby inadvertently kept the issue alive through its own protests and demonstrations. Finally, it was kept alive because gun control had almost unanimous support from the media, and the media therefore kept it on the public agenda. But the media also kept it alive because no other event occurred that might have seized the public agenda.

Another element needed for change is a change agent, a leader to seize the opportunity for action. Just weeks before the incident, a new prime minister, John Howard, had been elected with a massive majority. In the past, Howard had often been portrayed as less than decisive. Port Arthur gave him the chance to change that image. More important, he took the initiative right after the election, when he was still in the "honeymoon" period of his new administration. Typically interest slackens off, and post-disaster resolve to make fundamental change fades. His determination prevented that from happening. In addition, an independent organization, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), monitored the initial implementation of the agreement, as did the NCFC. Now, the AIC is monitoring firearms-related crime. Gun Control Australia is monitoring and publicizing progress—and perceived lack of progress—with the agreement. Other government bodies, such as audit offices, are also monitoring implementation (WA Office of the Auditor General 2000). This suggests that it will be difficult to sidestep full implementation.

The more aggressive element in the gun lobby—led by the Firearms Owners Association (FOA), which is closely associated with the U.S. National Rifle Association (NRA)—was increasingly marginalized as an extremist group during the debates following Port Arthur. They were
eventually largely ignored by other gun groups who sought to distance
themselves from groups that were clearly undermining the idea of
responsible gun ownership and were profoundly insensitive to the poli-
tics of the moment. However, this element of the gun lobby, while
influenced by the Australian media, probably unintentionally helped to
keep the issue high on the political and media agendas. Australia is not
a country with a "gun culture" comparable to the United States—the
necessary leadership for the new controls came from the conservative
side of politics. The mainstream gun lobby may have opposed the
changes, but many of its members supported them.

The massive reaction to Port Arthur, determined efforts by the gun
control lobby (Chapman 1998), preexisting support for controls, and
overwhelming media support for change ensured that the major politi-
cal parties combined in a bipartisan approach to the issue. This removed
the gun lobby's major political card of playing the major parties off
against each other. The conservative liberals generally ran in coalition
with the National Party, as does the federal government of John Howard.
The National Party draws its support from rural areas and came under
pressure over the Agreement, but stood firm. In addition to some indi-
vidual politicians, two small right-wing parties were vocal in their
opposition. The Shooters Party, which fields candidates in some elect-
orates in the eastern states, has gained on average some 3 percent or so
of the New South Wales' state vote in some electorates—and occasion-
ally achieves significantly more. It has one member in the state's
upper house. Although this representative opposed the new laws and
had long prevented change in the state, he was pragmatic enough to dis-
tance himself from the extremist elements. The Shooters Party has not
been electorally successful elsewhere. The One Nation Party, based in
Queensland but national, is much more significant electorally, with one
member in the national senate and members in the Queensland
Parliament. It has been a strong supporter of the gun lobby.

There will certainly be pro-gun candidates promising to repeal parts
of the new legislation in future elections. Although there are relatively few
Australians who feel that guns are the main issue in their lives, single issue
candidates can have influence through the preferential voting system in
Australia. Under this system, all candidates potentially have some influ-
ence on the final outcome of a close election. Even some who felt action
was required feel the government has been too harsh. Nevertheless, they
generally appear to have gone along with the new regulations.

It is true—as opponents of gun control pointed out—that the man
convicted of the murders did not have a permit to own weapons.
also true that there were good reasons for that. (Among other things, there was a legal restraining order against him because of his unwanted attention to a young woman.) It is also true that Australia already has uniform national restrictions on handguns and that no one, not even gun owners, was supporting widespread availability of automatic weapons. These arguments did cause delay in some states—and it is state parliaments where action had to be taken. However, all national parties supported the prime minister, a support made evident when the other party leaders traveled with the prime minister to Port Arthur. Whatever the merits of the argument, Port Arthur was too much to counter. Perhaps a useful political pointer to the prime minister’s judgment is the poll taken a year into his first term. This asked respondents to rate the government across 19 items. The average rating of “good/very good” was only 27.5 percent, but for gun control it was 63 percent (Chapman 1998, p. 41).

Summary and Conclusions

Prince was right when he suggested that catastrophe can shake up society and be, to use his words, the igniting spark that leads to change. However, what happened after the Port Arthur massacre suggests that his thesis needs some modification. While Prince mentioned preconditions, Port Arthur suggests that these are more important than he implied. One reason change occurred after Port Arthur is that previous incidents had set the stage for change. In addition, in contrast to Halifax—though perhaps not to Titanic—change occurred after Port Arthur because the issue remained on the public and media agendas, there was a leader who made it his business to see that it stayed there, and there were significant groups pressing for change, groups that escalated their pressure in the wake of the massacre. Finally, the Port Arthur massacre was something to which the Australian public could relate; as mentioned earlier, all Australians could visualize themselves being present at Port Arthur.

While these conditions may not be the only ones that are necessary or sufficient for change, they make it possible to examine Prince’s work in context, something he would have welcomed. (He said explicitly that he was a pioneer and that his ideas would have to be tested by others [Prince 1920, p. 24].) They certainly fit the model he developed of collective behavior (Prince 1920). They also fit the conditions for organizational change that Anderson identified in his study of the 1964 Alaska earthquake.
Prince dealt with disasters as totalities, events in time and space that are not only significant at the time but that also have a lasting identity. When he talked about change, he was talking not about changes in organizations but wider changes. Titanic led to changes in views about maritime safety and new safety codes. The Triangle fire led to a change in public attitudes about sweatshops employing immigrant women. The Port Arthur massacre did not lead to a shift in public attitudes—there was already strong public support for gun laws—but rather to a shift in the political will to take advantage of that support. It resulted in major changes in gun laws and a buyback of firearms made illegal by those laws funded by a one-off special health tax. Most disaster research has focused on various aspects of disaster—on the role of individual agencies, on community recovery, on business recovery, on mitigation, on organizational change, on panic, on convergence, etc. Perhaps it is time to stand back from this research and see whether it is possible to examine untoward events as totalities, to ask what identity they assumed and why, and what impact that identity has had on the community where they took place and on the society they affected. Prince and Port Arthur help point the way.

References


Clarke, Marcus. 1996. For the Term of His Natural Life. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.


