

# New Victorian firearms lobby group formed

by SSAA Victorian President Sebastian Ziccone

Most shooters are aware that the shooting sports had a major political problem well before the tragic events at Monash University. For the second time in seven years, we saw how quickly governments were prepared to seize upon this. They wanted the media and broader community to see them addressing 'problems' which they believed existed.

The result has been snappy headlines at our expense. It is difficult to recall another example of where policy development occurs in an information and consultation vacuum. Nor can I recall another example where the right to be treated with trust and dignity, is met with such contempt.

Shooting groups have lobbied governments in the past. Much of this has been televised - but failed to have any lasting political impact.

We were fortunate that at the time of the tragic circumstances surrounding the shooting at Monash University a state election was looming. It was an opportunity to turn our fight into a political issue.

In late October 2002, several major shooting organisations met at the Austrian Club and resolved that a unified single political voice was needed. For the first time that I can recall, differences between the various groups were put behind them as they formed the Combined Firearms Council of Victoria.

A few days later, the remaining major shooting organisations joined the CFCV, effectively covering all of the major shooting disciplines in the state.

All organisations had realised this fight was more than just about handguns. It could just as easily been about shotguns, centrefire rifles or the ability of juniors to participate in the shooting sports. It was about how firearm policies are developed. The lessons of 1996 were not lost on the shooting organisations.

It is important to point out that the CFCV is only involved in political aspects relating to shooting. Its activities do not intrude into the day-to-day management roles of the various member organisations, such as the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia, Field and Game Australia, Victorian Amateur Pistol Association, Target Rifle Victoria, Victorian Clay Target Association, Victorian Rifle Association, Council of Muzzleloading and Blackpowder Shooters, Firearm Traders Association, Independent Pistol Clubs, IPSC, and Vintagers (Order of Edwardian Gunners) Inc.

As agreed at its inaugural meeting, political campaigns, activities, press releases and media responses would be handled by the CFCV to ensure a coordinated approach. This would eliminate the 'divide and conquer' approach that has been used against us in the past.

The CFCV went into the 2002 Victorian State Election with more than \$200,000 collected from shooters and shooting organisations, and an election strategy to support those candidates who supported the shooting sports, and oppose those who did not.

We ran full-page ads in all major newspapers two days before the election, advising Victoria's 200,000 shooters on how to vote. As you can imagine, this attracted considerable media attention - and even more attention from those candidates affected and their opponents.

Other activities included a mass mail-out in key electorates and utilising about 200 shooters to help man polling booths for independents.

The election result was a landslide to Labor. While this can be largely attributed to the ineptness of the campaign run by the Liberals, it is clear that the CFCV had a noticeable impact.

An independent analysis has confirmed that the strategy had a net impact of about 2.5 per cent. This did not take into account the fact that the campaign was candidate rather than party specific and the true impact is therefore likely to be significantly greater. In a closer contest, the impact of such a campaign could help change government.

At the very least, our campaign ended a number of political careers and won some deals by delivering seats to both the ALP and LP. It also ensured that the National Party remained a viable political force in the Victorian Parliament.

By tapping into the skill-base provided by the various shooting organisations since the election, we have been able to achieve significant coverage in the press through newspaper, radio and television.

We have also built workable relationships with politicians and the major parties - who want to keep us onside in the lead-up to future elections.

The fact the CFCV has worked so effectively is due, in a big part, to the personalities involved. Historical territorial differences have virtually disappeared. It has also helped that 'small' members have equal standing with the 'big' members so that we are all treated equally.

Confidentiality prevents me from explaining the true extent of help we have received from within the political parties. This help has been a major asset and a key reason why our campaigns and subsequent efforts have been effective.

I would encourage every state shooting organisation to discuss the formation of similar political bodies with their peers and other groups with a political interest in shooting. It is vital to ensure that no organisation is overlooked as suspicions can lead to them torpedoing your efforts - and overlooking valuable pools of experience and expertise.

The formation of the CFCV was years overdue. However, it is never too late to turn the tables on those who continue to attack us, if we put our minds to it in intelligent ways. It is not too late to promote the sport in the same light as all other sports. Before we can achieve this effectively, we need to stop the haemorrhaging of the political and media fronts.

Making and breaking political careers and working with select journalists are necessary ways to do this. This takes time and a lot of effort. Sometimes the results are obvious, sometimes they are not. However, it is necessary work, which I am glad to say we are undertaking in Victoria.

Information on the CFCV's ongoing activities can be seen on our web site at [www.cfcv.org.au](http://www.cfcv.org.au) ●