# Framing and Agenda Setting following the Mass Shooting Terror Attack in Christchurch, New Zealand

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## Abstract

Despite thousands of gun-related deaths and injuries in the last decade, the United States federal government has yet to enact comprehensive gun reforms. Meanwhile, New Zealand recently experienced the deadliest mass shooting in its history, and within one week, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had announced major reforms. This paper analyzes the Prime Minister's response and her power in shaping the discourse of the event in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. It focuses on her public statements in the six days that followed the event, and analyzes them with the concepts of framing and agenda setting.

In 2008, my high school in a commuter town outside New York City was put on lockdown because of a potential shooter. For three hours, I hid in a library closet with six other students and a librarian. We had no cellphones and no idea what was happening outside. While we had experienced post-9/11 anthrax and bomb scares, this was our first gun- related lockdown and it has haunted me since. While no one was hurt that day, I now see that I was coming of age in an epidemic of mass-shootings.

America has an enormous gun problem, which is a complex tangle of interconnected social, political, and economic issues. On the policy side, federal legislation related to guns is weak and riddled with

loopholes; state legislation varies widely; lobbyists fund politicians (Gambino, 2018); and an 18th century war-time constitutional amendment is the principal argument for unrestricted access to 21st century technology. The results of this complex tangle are clearer to see. Each year some 136,000 people are shot in the United States (Giffords Law Center, 2019). The firearm homicide rate in 2015 was 25 times higher than the rate in 28 high-income countries combined (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2019). According to 2017 figures, the US civilian population of 326 million people owned a total of 393 million guns—almost half of the world's supply (Ingraham, 2018). And between 2009 and 2018, there were at least 180 instances in which at least one person was shot on the property of a K-12 school (Walker & Petulla, 2019).

According to the website Everytown for Gun Safety (2019), mass shootings are defined as those in which the shooter murders four or more people. Between 2009 and 2018, there were 223 such shootings —killing 1,280 people and injuring 937 others. Mass shootings tend to take place in homes, but were deadlier when in public places such as schools, concerts, shopping malls, synagogues, and nightclubs (Everytown, 2019). After mass shootings, the phrases "thoughts and prayers," "more guns," "lone wolf," and "mentally ill" saturate public discourse, but "terrorism," "toxic masculinity," "domestic violence," "hate crime," and "racism," among others, do not. Mass shootings such as those at Sandy Hook Elementary School (2012) and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (2018) sparked major advocacy campaigns, protests, and increased claims-making and political action by the public. Some states and retailers have made small policy changes, but the federal government has yet to agree to any kind of comprehensive reform.

This paper, therefore, turns to New Zealand to present an alternative approach for social workers seeking to mitigating the terror of gun violence. Comparative practice and global perspectives are important to social work because in order to learn about ourselves

and our social environments, we must also look at others around the world in theirs.

In this case we look carefully at the words of New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern following the March 15, 2019 mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, where an Australian national entered the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre during Friday prayers and killed 51 people and wounded 49. The gunman, who eventually pled not- guilty to over 90 counts of murder and attempted murder, had used social media both prior to and during the attack, and his accounts have been linked to various white supremacist ideological groups (Hollingsworth, 2019). The event captured the world's attention and reignited debates about global far-right extremism, islamophobia, white supremacy, internet subculture, mental health, and gun reform.

It was in this context that Prime Minister Ardern issued seven public statements: March 15 at 4:00 p.m. (2019a); March 15 at 7:00 p.m. (2019b); March 16 at 9:00 p.m. (2019c); March 16 at 3:30 p.m. (2019d); March 17 at 4:00 p.m. (2019e); March 18 (2019f); and March 19 (2019g). She gave a press conference with Minister of Police Stuart Nash about their reform decisions on March 21 (2019h), and then together introduced further reforms on September 13 (2019i). Individually and collectively these demonstrate clear deviations from the American pattern of political response and highlight her strategies of framing agenda-setting. In her remarks she focused on the Muslim, immigrant victims and their trauma; she narrated the story of New Zealand as a welcoming, diverse, cooperative community for all with no tolerance for extremist terrorism; and she immediately enacted reforms such as a ban on military-style assault weapons and the establishment of a government buy-back program. In September, six months after the shooting, further gun reforms were introduced, including the creation of a national registry and shortening the length of firearms licenses to five years (Ardern & Nash, 2019b).

## Framing the Events

Prime Minister Ardern broadcast or released at least seven formal statements in the week following the shooting. While local and international media reported and interpreted the events in numerous ways, Ardern was clear and consistent. She framed the event as an extreme tragedy; incompatible with their New Zealand's values. Moreover, she set a strict deadline for introducing comprehensive policy reforms that would reduce chances of a reoccurrences, and subsequently announced those reforms.

We can understand the approach and impact of her statements through the works of Benford and Snow, who explain that collective action frames are "intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (2000, p. 614). That is, such frames inspire actions for social change and "negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change" (p. 615). Diagnostic framing identifies the social issue, its causes, and who should be blamed for it. Prognostic framing proposes strategies to solve the problem. Motivational framing "provides a 'call to arms' or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive" (p. 617).

Prime Minister Ardern's speeches began with diagnostic framing and then increasingly turned prognostic and motivational. She emphasized that the mass killing was "an act of extraordinary and unprecedented violence" (Ardern, 2019a) and a "clear ... terrorist attack" stemming from "extremist" ideology that will not be tolerated in New Zealand. She also described her sadness and the act of violence as extreme, further diagnosing the situation to be unsuitable with New Zealand's values: we do not "condone racism" nor are we "a safe harbor for those who hate" (2019b). She then framed the Muslim and immigrant communities as part of New Zealand's identity: "New Zealand is their home. They are us," and "the person or people who [did this] are not. There is no place in our home for them" (2019a). She lauded New Zealand's diversity and inclusion, portraying the country as welcoming and compassionate and one that respects cultural and

religious diversity and “will not, and cannot, be shaken by this attack” (2019b).

Ardern (2019b) highlighted that the shooter had publicly identified himself as Australian and that “people ... [with] extremist views .. have absolutely no place in New Zealand and, in fact, have no place in the world.” It is here that she began to place the terror attack in a global context. Rather than solely framing it as an exceptional, domestic event, she connected the event with broader patterns of white supremacy terrorism and stressed collaboration between domestic and foreign institutions and governments, which reflect her running prognostic and motivational themes of collaboration.

Prime Minister Ardern’s prognostic framing appears when she called for thorough investigations into the attacks and failed security mechanisms, and then laid out action plans for the coming days, which included respecting the privacy of grieving families (Ardern, 2019c; 2019g). Within this framing, she also emphasized public safety, the need to provide logistical and financial support to the mourning families, and the necessary healing of the entire community and provided more strategic updates to develop a picture of the government’s response, such as raising the national security threat level and strengthening intelligence and police investigations. Ardern’s (2019b) offered the “strongest possible condemnation of the ideology of the people who did this” and insistence that “[We] utterly reject and condemn you.” Both utterances are prognostic and motivational since they promote solidarity amongst New Zealanders.

Prime Minister Ardern reiterates the values that make New Zealand an inclusive society and by repeating them, she reinforces their importance as a foundation for moving the country forward. She modeled these values of diversity and inclusion a number of times, such as when she wore a headscarf when visiting Christchurch in mourning and by incorporating Islamic prayers into her Parliament speech (Ardern, 2019h). Ardern also acknowledged respect for Muslim burial customs and announced various forms of support for

the affected, like deployment of social workers (2019d); advice for explaining the news to children (2019e); multiple reminders about the crisis hotlines (2019e; 2019f; 2019g); and significant financial assistance (2019e). She established various forms of supports for healing and care to show that solidarity, collaboration, and community are both prognostic and motivational frames for the aftermath of the attack.

Ardern also included motivational framing in her speeches by declaring that extreme violence would not be tolerated and that the affected communities are in fact the true New Zealanders, unlike the shooter (2019b; 2019e). By restating New Zealand's values in this manner, she called on the public to reject the extreme violence and to use compassionate solidarity with their Muslim neighbors as a form of collective action. Also, as both prognostic strategy and motivation for action, Ardern brought the gunman to justice not by spotlighting him, but by centering the victims and the community in mourning. In her March 18 speech to Parliament, she shared the names and acts of bravery of some of the victims and declared:

He is a terrorist. He is a criminal. He is an extremist. But he will, when I speak, be nameless. And to others, I implore you: speak the names of those who were lost, rather than the name of the man who took them. He may have sought notoriety, but we in New Zealand will give him nothing. Not even his name. (2019g)

It is here that she constructs a "vocabulary of motive" for collective action, choosing the language of moving forward with compassion for the victims over that of notoriety and revenge for the past (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617).

Over the course of her speeches, Ardern's prognostic framing seems designed to prevent further tragedy. She referred to the need for gun reform, investigating intelligence institutions (2019f ), interrogating the role of social media (2019g), and confronting racism and extremist ideology (2019b). This is, however, also motivational framing because it acknowledges the public's thoughts and emotions

in response to hearing solutions. In her speech to Parliament (2019g), Ardern worked “to mobilize potential adherents” (government officials, the gun industry, social media platforms, etc.); “garner bystander support” (e.g., the New Zealand public, the gun lobby, and people around the world); and “demobilize antagonists” by reinforcing the idea that extreme violence and bigotry are not tolerated in New Zealand (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614).

Prime Minister Ardern’s frames in the aftermath of the Christchurch massacre have been inclusive and flexible, acknowledging and encouraging dialogue amongst various interest groups and being transparent about successive updates. Instead of calling for revenge, she focused on healing and progress to support New Zealanders now and protect them more thoroughly in the future.

## Agendas and Windows for Action

Kingdon (1995) defines an agenda as “the list of subjects or problems to which government officials ... are paying some serious attention at any given time” (p. 3). When a specific item has proposals that are actually being considered, they become part of the decision agenda (Kingdon, 1995). The day after the Christchurch shootings, Prime Minister Ardern announced that gun reform would be foremost on the agenda and that “gun laws will change. There have been [previous] attempts ... [but] now is the time for change” (Ardern, 2019c). To understand the potential impact of Ardern’s call for swift reform, one should look at previous occasions when gun reform was on the government’s agenda.

Previous attempts at gun reform in New Zealand have been largely unsuccessful and consistently slow to develop. In 1992, two years after its then-deadliest mass shooting, in Aramoana, New Zealand amended its Arms Act, creating a new license category that covered military-style semi-automatics (MSSAs) but did not account for the easy, illegal conversion of other semi-automatics into MSSAs (“Australia,” 2019; Lopez, 2019). According to Lopez (2019), there is no constitutional right to own firearms, though many in the gun lobby

view any reforms, including the creation of a firearms registry or shorter license validity, as violations
of their legal rights (“Australia,” 2019). After 1992, the gun lobby successfully blocked both major and minor attempts at reform. In 1997, after the previous year’s Australian Port Arthur massacre, and a massacre and two police shootings in New Zealand, the Thorp Report was released with 60 comprehensive recommendations, but there was no legislative action that followed. Much smaller reforms, Arms Amendment Bills Nos. 2 (1999) and 3 (2005), also failed due to increased pressure from gun lobbyists (“Australia”, 2019). A “largely technical and minor” amendment was passed in 2012 (Lopez, 2019). In 2016, after a police raid discovered large caches of MSSAs, another investigative committee was formed and produced a report with 20 recommendations. The next year saw seven of those recommendations were followed, and the conversation on gun reform was renewed and back on the government agenda (“Australia,” 2019).

Policy windows, according to Kingdon (1995), are urgent, time-limited opportunities for political action, usually after a significant event or change in power. In Australia, the Port Arthur massacre did in fact open a policy window during which the country was able to institute major gun reforms. Within twelve days, the National Firearms Agreement (NFA was introduced, instituting a firearms registry, banning semi-automatic weapons, and establishing two rounds of government buy-back programs. Since the establishment of the NFA, there have been zero mass shootings (“Australia took action”, 2019). The urgency generated by the Port Arthur massacre elevated the status of gun reform on the government’s agenda and has subsequently protected the Australian people.

In New Zealand, it took the Christchurch massacre to open a similar policy window for action on comprehensive gun reform, an opportunity which Prime Minister Ardern seized. Within two days of the massacre, Ardern declared the need for change and that gun policy would be on her immediate agenda (Ardern, 2019c; 2009e). Within three days she had met with her cabinet to discuss “a range of

weaknesses in [our] gun laws" and stated that "within 10 days of this horrific act of terrorism, we will have announced reforms which will, I believe, make our community safer" (2019f). On the Tuesday following the Friday attack, Ardern spoke in front of Parliament to honor the victims and also to reiterate these changes and explore the need to investigate social media platforms: "they are the publisher, not just the postman. There cannot be a case of all profit, no responsibility" (2019g). After Ardern's confirmations that gun reform would be on the priority agenda, the media began to discuss her alternatives, many of which had been considered in previous reform attempts. These included a buy-back program, bans on all semi-automatic arms, and the creation of a comprehensive registry (Watkins, 2019).

On March 21, six days after the massacres at Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre, Prime Minister Ardern and Minister of Police Stuart Nash moved on to the decision agenda: immediate bans on all military-style semi-automatic and assault rifles, high capacity magazines, and parts that can convert other guns into these styles; amnesty for turning in illegal weapons; an Australia-style buy-back program; and tighter regulations, licensing, and registration processes (Ardern & Nash, 2019a). To dissuade the gun lobby, they also acknowledged that not all gun owners are potential criminals:

To owners who have legitimate uses for their guns, I want to reiterate that the actions being announced today are not because of you and are not directed at you ... [they] are directed at making sure this never happens again (Ardern & Nash, 2019a).

Ardern took advantage of the policy window by announcing these decisions quickly, while the nation was still in mourning and attention had not been diverted elsewhere.

## Conclusion

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has been praised across the world for her leadership and commitment to healing in the aftermath of a terror

attack (Fifield, 2019; Roy, 2019). She framed the killings in Christchurch as a tragedy and vowed to prevent it from happening again. She shunned the mass media's obsession with bringing the gunman notoriety in favor of centering those in mourning, offering opportunities for healing and compassion in the community. She was consistent and transparent and came to be seen as a credible source, given her position of authority. Ardern also acted with urgency on the policy window that had opened, so that the country could finally pass the comprehensive reforms it needs. In just one week, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern became a global leader in the fights against extremism and gun violence and in supporting the people in times of tragedy. The United States should take note.

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