

Wellington public meeting on tasers, 15 August 2006

Police will commence a trial of Taser stun guns in New Zealand in September (Police online magazine Ten-One, May 2006).

The Taser – what is it? The Taser is a hand held electrical weapon. When fired it propels two barbed darts with trailing wires that attach to the skin or clothing. Upon impact a 50,000-volt electric shock is discharged into the victim for a period of five seconds. Whilst the barbs remain attached this discharge can be repeated multiple times by pulling the trigger again (and again). The current causes immediate involuntary muscle contraction and extreme pain. The victim completely loses control over their body and falls to the ground until the trigger is released.

The whole experience is painful and degrading. In 1997 Robin Cook, then UK foreign secretary, considered such electrical weapons, amongst equipment “designed primarily for torture”, saying that the UK government would “press for a global ban.” Through skilful marketing to the law and order brigade post 9/11 such cautions have been pushed aside.

Police assure us that Tasers will only be used against threatening or aggressive suspects. Can we really believe this?

Earlier this year - the Fight for Life in Auckland – a man lying prone on the ground, handcuffed – was pepper sprayed by Police in complete non-compliance with Police General Instructions.

Last year in Rotorua, Judge Weir commented about Police in relation to passive protestors protesting lawfully at a forest when they were pepper sprayed by police his honour observed:

[46] Two of those basic principles, namely tact tolerance and restraint, and the use of powers reasonably and properly, appear to have been more observed in their breach than their compliance. The use of OC spray, in particular, raises more questions than it answers....

Police can't even get it right with OC pepper spray so we wish to give them something even more dangerous? The Government wants to arm the Police with electrical weaponry?

Usually when Police use their weapons the media are not around. If a member of the public complains about Police behaviour it is usually the word of one person against the Police.

The only reason we know about the Auckland or Rotorua abuses, was that they were caught on camera.

Many of you will remember the Rodney King incident that started off the LA riots a few years back. The King incident is relevant to the debate about electronic weaponry. What is forgotten is that Police used a Taser to shock that man twice as he lay on the ground.

All of us who remember that video of an African-American being brutally beaten by police, no one remembers how many times King was shocked and how much juice he received.

The Taser due to its relative invisibility can become an instrument of extreme intimidation. A baton leaves obvious bruises and it is obvious when it is being swung. The Taser can stun by being directly applied to the body of the victim and can leave very little in the way of obvious marks. This is especially so when the victim is in custody and wont be back in court for a few days. Is it any wonder that the Taser was a weapon of choice in U.S. controlled Iraqi prisons?

Experience shows that use patterns for Police weapons "**creep**" towards abusive lower thresholds. It's already happened here with pepper spray!

Our Bill of Rights Act is meant to give us protection against cruel, degrading or disproportionately severe punishment. Firing a harpoon into someone and zapping them with 50,000 volts is just that.

Our Bill of Rights also gives us the right not to be subjected to experimentation. As a result of this trial our population are being treated as lab-rats for Police. There is practically no independent medical or scientific research on the effect of its shock against vulnerable people.

Tasers can kill. If repeatedly administered the shocks can cause heart

spasms which can alter the heart-beat leading to cardiac arrest. According, to a recent Amnesty International report in America the number of people who have died following Taser encounters now tops 200.

According to Amnesty the greatest risks to life arise where the shock is administered repeatedly to highly agitated people and or those with pre-existing health problems

Simply put – Tasers are dangerous- we don't know their long-term health effects.

The potential for abuse is huge. The need for them has not been demonstrated.

Rules for misuse have not protected us against illegal use of pepper spray rules won't help us against illegal use of stun guns.

Taser stun guns represent a move to an ugly society where order and peace means compliance gained through fear and brute force. My grandparents' generation fought against the jack-boot lets not welcome a state that wants to bring back electrical shocking to enforce compliance.

Speaking notes

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