

THE POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS OF PROTEST

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Canberra

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One of the main problems facing those of us willing to protest with our feet on subjects that all of us grumble about or feel angry about is that we find ourselves caught between the popular ratbag image of all protesters as Rent A Crowd and paid agents of the Soviet Union, and divisions in our own ranks between those who are committed to the non-exciting forms of protest such as letter writing and lobbying backed by public awareness and education, and those who either prefer mass rallies reminiscent of the Vietnam War era or "Direct Action."

Those who deride all forms of protest in their Letters to the Editor are usually equally politically motivated; when it comes to the point what they usually mean is that they don't like the politics of anyone to the Left of their own position. Protest is not however a monopoly of the Left and doubtless these more conservative groups and individuals would be quite happy to endorse protests by farmers, many of who must vote for the National Party, is a good example. Even in Queensland, the Premier was always willing to support the March of the Captive Nations each year. Here in Canberra a similar group of East European exiles with the Young Liberals ^{organised} a protest outside the Soviet Embassy in July 1985 on the tenth anniversary of the Helsinki agreements while the Croatian community demonstrated outside the US Embassy this year against the extradition to Yugoslavia of a ^{former} Nazi war criminal. The Friends of ANZUS held a Protest outside the Australian Nuclear Disarmament Conference public meeting in Melbourne in August 1985 with several members dressed as political Prisoners in the Soviet Union; they too have their differences because they subsequently had to move down the road to get away, from another demonstration by the Moonies which the organiser of Friends of ANZUS said had quite ruined his demonstration! Anti-abortion groups and the Festival of Light hold regular pickets outside establishments they want to close down. More recently the

Liberal Party or certain members in South Australia was urging its members to take part in the 1986 Palm Sunday peace march and various right wing groups turned in other cities like Melbourne and Canberra calling for Peace Through Strength.

It would therefore seem more useful to examine different forms of protest in Australian society and their different forms of effectiveness, Considering the art in the widest sense of the word. There are many organisations -whose supporters are quite content to write letters, either to politicians or those in positions of power and influence, Or to the papers. The National Civic Council and the League of Rights excel at this strategy and we could learn a lot from them in this respect. Those of us whose various causes Will get nowhere by just putting pen to paper are then divided over how far beyond to go. I have always argued that a campaign has to go through very definite stages. A group needs to be very Clear about its goals and not only what it is against but what it is for, what Mahatma Gandhi called the constructive alternative. On the other hand I doubt if many people would think of the constructive alternative as a form of protest although I believe it is integral to the success of any good campaign. Thus the emergence of Environmentalists for Full Employment was vital to the success of a conservation movement which had gained the image of being middle class and out of touch with the fear of unemployment in forest areas. It is interesting too to note that after several years of marching, the peace movement has realised the need to develop ideas on Alternative Defence for Australia. It was not simply enough to say NO to warship visits, NO to U.S. bases, and NO to ANZUS unless you were able to meet the population's real or perceived security needs. While it is easy to demonstrate for peace and: disarmament, it is not so easy to demonstrate for Alternative Defence!

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An organisation then needs to know what it is talking about. For that reason I have always urged protest groups to hold skills sessions and education evenings to involve new activists. You can go to see a board of directors or a politician full of righteous indignation but come away feeling completely flat if you were not prepared for the Stonewalling tactics or smoothness you are likely to encounter! It is crucial to take into account your opponent's point of view beforehand Which is why I use role play or socio-drama as an integral part of preparation for this kind of protest.

CREATIVITY. THE ART OF PROTEST

The real art of protest lies in creativity and that is why so many demonstrations by the Hard Left are completely sterile. As a passer by you would have a job even knowing what the subject of protest was. I went on a march about Central America in Melbourne in 1984 when the chants were the same as fifteen years ago during the Vietnam War. The protest seemed more connected with expressing boiled up emotions and hate than changing anyone's mind or building political support. Greenpeace since 1971 has probably had the greatest impact on public consciousness because of its imaginative approaches to protest, whether it is climbing onto the Sydney Harbour Bridge or taking boats out to sea to confront the object of protest. Other protests have caught the imagination first time round but rarely work twice. The Aborigine Tent Embassy and the Women's Peace Camp at Pine Gap in 1983 come to mind. As a result, largely of this camp I believe, far more Australians have heard of Pine Gap than North West Cape or Nurrungar. Yet few Australians were aware of the second camp in 1984 at Cockburn Sound; by then the novelty had worn off. Indeed it has always been a major problem for the peace movement that its main targets of objection have been so far from the big cities while about 70% of US warships

come into Western Australia which doesn't exist for most of the rest of us unless we are reading about the America's Cup or the latest takeover bid for BHP.

RELATING TO THE MEDIA

At this point I come to the eternal problem of whether protests are held to attract public attention through media coverage or for some other reasons? Many activists find themselves in the dilemma of desperately wanting media coverage to make their action worthwhile yet distrusting the media because of previous encounters when they were ridiculed. This applied particularly to women's actions in Australia and also to purely peaceful protests; sometimes you almost have to be violent to get media attention!

Very few groups I know ever sit down and sort out this problem before a protest action so dealing with the media is usually handled very badly. There are many sympathetic journalists who would gladly give advice on how to get the maximum media coverage for an event but usually they just face abuse from people they try to interview. The journalists can rarely decide themselves what will finally go into the article or programme, but they can offer advice on a number of concerns which would help enormously if they were listened to. The whole success or failure of many actions can hinge on the time and place of the protest in terms of media coverage, especially television, although there are some factors you can do nothing about in advance: a Royal engagement on the other side of the world is going to crowd out your item but no-one could have foreseen that beforehand!

It is perfectly true that some journalists are not concerned about the issue they are covering but that is a risk we have to take. For them, like the police, it is just a job. The media

is under constant pressure from those in our communities who take the line that "if they get no publicity, then they'll go away" and there have been times when local papers have obviously decided to deny all coverage of certain protest activities on somebody's instructions from above. It is also frustrating to see how a small protest can get front page coverage while a big rally is ignored. Perhaps that is the genius of Greenpeace; that they always seem to come up with those small and imaginative actions so beloved of photographers and camera teams with their aversion to "talking heads" and dreary backdrops.

I recall an occasion some fifteen years ago when I was a member of the Manchester Nonviolent Action Group (MANVAG) in England and we had a campaign for Free Public Transport- Instead of marching through the streets shouting "CARS OUT! BUSES IN!" we made a model bus one weekend and four of us waddled along inside it around the city centre in the Christmas shopping traffic. People came up asking for our leaflets contrary to the usual refusal you face on a conventional march, let Alone downright hostility. We also made bus-shaped biscuits and offered them to people queuing for public transport in the rush hour. In the United States I marched behind the Trident Monster, a rope some 560 feet long with 408 Black Streamers hanging from it and carried aloft on forty poles. It symbolised the length of the Trident nuclear submarine and the 408 nuclear warheads it will be able to carry after deployment of the Trident II missile after 1989. If you walked along shouting "TRIDENT OUT!" most people would think you were talking about a television cable system or a non-smoking programme with the same name; with the Trident monster they wanted to know What it was and were never likely to forget it!

A relevant focus for protest is always useful; sometimes I wonder if embassies choose their locations based on distance from a main thoroughfare. Demonstrations outside the US Consulate in Sydney are always a bit flat when the office is on the 39th floor of a tower block while the Soviet consulate is

tucked away in Woollahra. The picket outside the South African Embassy, in Canberra at least had the advantage of being on main road where people could see it every day on their way to work!

Street theatre, music, clowning and dance are always more attractive and will interest many who wouldn't go on an ordinary march, shouting slogans and chanting. Colourful banners are a great improvement and involve many people in making them.

Groups like the Fellowship of Reconciliation in Sydney were involved in making pieces for the Ribbon which was wrapped around the Pentagon in Washington DC on August 6th, 1985, on the fortieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. Protest groups in Japan have always been strong on theatre, banners and music even if it is the amplified kind on wheels! People need to enjoy taking part in a protest if the campaign is an extended one so it's no good just expecting people to endlessly march around like the men under the Grand old Duke of York in the children's nursery rhyme. Other groups like Quakers and church organisations seem to prefer silence so you might get a situation as on Fremantle wharf in September 1985 when the noisy people met at one end of the USS OKINAWA and the circle of peace and quiet sat for two hours by the bow. Both were effective in their own right.

FEVOLUTIONARY CREDIBILITY

Living in a society geared to instant satisfaction, those of us With a serious longterm commitment to change and protesting injustice have to accept that there are many people who, while quite prepared to come on a march once a year, are not prepared to do anything else like doing a paste-up for a newsletter or mailing it out every month. Equally there are those who will write letterset home but would never be seen on a march especially in a small 'town where everyone knows them. It is interesting to note how long it has taken for the Palm Sunday

peace rallies to become socially acceptable in small towns in Australia. Now the big city organisers want to drop them, the suburbs and country groups want to go on with them!

There are those tiny political organisations who would quite happily keep marching every weekend. Many seem to believe that the only Way forward is through mass action by the working class or mobilisations like the Vietnam War marches. I suspect that they are also interested in political control as a hidden agenda underneath their constant demands for more marches and rallies! The political reality is that such a tactic won't work in Australia except over a short period of time and for a popular cause, locally or nationally, and there are few such issues of that kind today. Most people are not prepared to live out the seven day a week commitment of a "Red Cell" and the media -get quickly bored. Most Australians are cynical about politicians and local councils, and believe that they will not respond to protest; it is a waste of time.

GO WITH THE FLOW

Another difference that has arisen in Australia in the last few years is the clash between those groups who are committed to an ongoing community campaign on an issue like woodchipping and those who feel that the spirit moves them to "Direct Action". They will descend on the scene of injustice, get themselves arrested in a confrontation situation, and then move on to the next scene of action. They despise other aspects of campaigning as well as organisation. These actions have caused a great deal of debate around Australia since 1983, reflecting a difference in style between old time political organisation and a new, more cosmic approach to social change associated with New Age groups.

GROUNDSWELL

Training and preparation for protests is another contentious , issue that has divided many groups. There are those who believe that training makes a protest movement personally and politically more effective; others say it smacks of

- .authoritarianism and hierarchy. Those committed to some kind of training before a protest can point to events like the occupation of the Seabrook nuclear power plant site in New Hampshire, USA, in April 1977 when 1,414 people were arrested in one day, and the forerunners of this kind of prepared action during the days of the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War protests. Here in Australia, the Franklin blockade was well-planned and thought out beforehand though the same tensions arose

In both cases the effectiveness of such a tactic soon wore off and attempts to develop similar actions involving training at other sites like Roxby Downs were eventually abandoned.

There was genuine disagreement over the nature of organisation, let alone the question of commitment to nonviolence, and it became clear that such a mass action required a sound organisational base and consensus on the style of organisation itself. Training did prove a help to many individuals who could see that their activities would be met with repression. It assisted them at a personal and a psychological level as well as at a tactical level when dealing with authority. There is little so counter-productive as the front page picture of a "peaceful protester" punching a police officer and any campaign that starts to become politically effective may get provocateurs who urge the use of violence which can then be used to discredit the cause of protest.

Radical Christian groups in Australia associated with Pax Christi have been attracted by the Holy Disobedience model of direct action from the United States, particularly involving the use of blood and ashes as a symbolic witness. This seems to be

partly a personal expression of dissent in a Christian framework and partly aimed at those who encounter the protest. Publicity is useful but as it is more a prophetic form of witness there is not so much concern about it. The concept of civil disobedience and radical Christian witness seems more appropriate in the US context where it has a long history; the Roman Catholic church in Australia seems to lack this tradition.

MEANS AND ENDS

Most forms of public protest are designed to draw attention to a particular injustice and thus mobilise public opinion so that the situation is changed through the political process. There are also spontaneous protests which are an expression of outrage like those that followed the US raids of Libya or the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl; visits by representatives of unpleasant regimes are also seen as an opportunity to register displeasure. I suspect that most forms of longterm protest fail because they are not well thought out and protest groups usually fold up as a result of internal problems rather than as a result of continued ineffectiveness. Some organisations are by their nature shortlived, as for example a campaign to stop the construction of a Freeway. Others are sadly long term like the letter writing protests of Amnesty International over the last 25 years.

Many groups could become more effective if they were prepared to look harder at the tactics of protest used by countless others before them, if they were prepared to use their imagination, and if they were to think more -carefully about why they were protesting and what they hoped to achieve. In a society which is basically reknown for its apathy yet riddled with injustices, protest has to be well thought out. We saturate the media with our press releases, the Vast Majority of which get ignored; to most of the public all protests are the same and they feel very

negative about their. Even signing a petition is frowned upon by many citizens, though for all kinds of odd reasons and one or two rational ones!

THE LAST RESORT

The last specific area of protest I want to examine is Civil Disobedience. The main difficulty here is that although civil disobedience has a long and honourable tradition in our society and the world where most of us come from, the majority of Australians are still sufficiently law-abiding that they will stop short of breaking 'a bad law even when they know the law is wrong.

Our basic rights in a democratic society were gained by those who were prepared to break an existing law to achieve a higher standard of law. Such rights include religious freedom, the universal franchise, and the right to form a trade union. In our region there are those who broke colonial laws to gain political independence. Today we are told that we live in a democratic society so there is no need to break the law any more; we have to work through the political process. A quick inspection of the roots of political and economic power in this country, the control of the media, the nature of the legal system, the existence of legislation in states like Queensland which is blatantly discriminatory, would soon give rise to second thoughts, even if we are fortunate enough not to live under totalitarian systems like those found in the Soviet Union, South Africa, Chile Or South Korea, where the penalty for breaking the law or even not breaking it - can often be death.

However I do want to stress that I consider civil disobedience a last resort. It can only be justified when all other constitutional forms of protest have been explored and tried out. It is not lightly undertaken, it needs to be well prepared, and the legal consequences have to be accepted.

the past I think people have got themselves arrested rather too lightly and some activists seem to measure their commitment by how many times they have been arrested which is most unfair to people who for various reasons cannot afford to get arrested. A good civil disobedience campaign like the Franklin Dam blockade or the New Zealand Peace Squadron can be politically most effective; a bad one can be disastrous and counter-productive.

CONCLUSION

If we are to be politically effective in our protests we can learn much from others who have protested before us. Evaluation is the key to learning. There is much room for creativity and imagination even in a society which has largely learned to ignore protest and classifies all protesters as ratbags and weirdos. Clowning for Peace may not seem as effective as a big march yet small groups of people clowning in suburban shopping areas will probably gather more public sympathy than one big march in the city centre. Perhaps the most effective form of protest is still one-to-one conversation! This would have to be followed by some kind of empowerment as many will agree on things that are wrong but think it is impossible to do anything about it. Often we wait till after the disaster, a child knocked down through lack of a pedestrian crossing, a forest chopped down, a building destroyed, or workers laid off.

Then there are different forms of protest that will appeal to different groups in our society. Peter Garrett with Midnight Oil along with Greenpeace have had the greatest impact on young people in our society in regard to the peace movement in a way that would not appeal to an older churchgoer or a retired servicemen. They need to be reached in other ways. You need to be something of an extrovert to take part in a public protest too; it's not for everyone! If you want to build a campaign you must explore quieter, more personal forms of protest for some who would support your cause. In the end protest is simply

saying "NO" to something we believe to be wrong and that affects us all. We cannot afford to get bogged down in the populist image of protest that seems fixed in the minds of those who have already decried this seminar as a waste of public money. If someone had not once protested many years ago, our critics would not even enjoy the right to rubbish this seminar today.

* A poll a few years ago showed that 35% of those asked could name Pine Gap as a U.S. base / Joint Facility; 18% could name North West Cape and 1% could identify Nurrungar.

