

Mass Nonviolent Protest, Australia

Citizens invoke mass nonviolent protest when they are blocked from successfully communicating their messages to government, either because of a government's hostility to the message or because governments feel that such ideas are not supported by a sufficiently large section of the population. Mass protest serves either to pressure the government to change policy or to heighten awareness of the issue among the general population in order to effect policy changes.

This has been a regular characteristic of new social movement activity in Australia during the past 40 years. These movements include those against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early '70s (especially the Vietnam Moratorium movement in 1970 when 100,000 people marched in Melbourne alone), the campaign against the Franklin Dam in the early '80s, the anti-uranium and nuclear disarmament campaigns of the '70s and '80s, the Reconciliation movement culminating in the Sorry Day marches by one million Australians in the year 2000, and large protests of a similar scale against the Iraq War in 2003. Despite the spectacular successes of campaigns like the Franklin, the fact that some protest movements are able to mobilize very large numbers does not, however, guarantee their success. Both the Sorry Day and anti-Iraq War campaigns failed to move the conservative Howard government away from existing policies.

Many Australian nonviolent protest actions are influenced by the teachings and practice of Gandhi. The campaign against the damming of the Franklin River, for example, specifically adopted such Gandhian techniques as training activists in nonviolent theory and practice despite its scale of more than 1,000 participants.

Mass protest actions are seldom controlled by one organization, however, and are usually coalitions of many different groups that tend to find common ground around several key demands. When mass protest actions incorporate nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience, these are usually carried out by autonomous or semiautonomous groups within the overall framework of the movement. There is sometimes a degree of tension between the movement leadership seeking legitimacy and the direct action groups, not all of whom embrace nonviolence, such as in the antiglobalization protests at the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000.

Mass protest activity has become an important component of democratic practice in Australia and many other countries. Despite its long historical antecedents in the Western tradition, the right to protest had to be reasserted in Australia following the Cold War; nonviolence was essential to public and governmental acceptance of this expression of dissent. Mass protests are a dynamic part of civil society and mobilize the energies of many thousands of people. If their activities are accompanied by appropriate media coverage, lobbying of decision makers and the dispassionate analysis of the merits of the protesters' demands by government, then they can consolidate and deepen citizens' identification with democratic values and democratic governance.

— Libby Connors and Drew Hutton

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