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In Praise of Protest: The Vietnam Moratorium

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In Praise of Protest: The Vietnam Moratorium

Abstract

Commemorating the moratorium campaign against the Vietnam war is a little like celebrating Anzac Day, with middle-aged former student radicals remembering past deeds of heroism and sacrifice for the cause, but perhaps it is also important in the same way for recognition of enduring, and important, values.

IN PRAISE OF PROTEST — THE VIETNAM MORATORIUM

**Hiroshima Day Dinner Address
Emperor's Garden Restaurant, Sydney
6 August 1998**

Ray Markey

Commemorating the moratorium campaign against the Vietnam war is a little like celebrating Anzac Day, with middle-aged former student radicals remembering past deeds of heroism and sacrifice for the cause, but perhaps it is also important in the same way for recognition of enduring, and important, values.

The late 1960s and 1970s were the apotheosis of radical student protest, against the Vietnam war and conscription. Although we participants tend to exaggerate how important it all was, political organisation seemed so important as an almost full-time occupation which didn't allow time for lectures, and so many students seemed to be involved. There doesn't seem to be as many radical students now because of harsher economic times and labour market conditions — at least according to former student radicals like myself who never left the university to seek gainful employment, but instead stayed on to become academics. And we like nothing better than to embellish our deeds in recounting them to those modern radical students we do encounter nowadays. They seem to enjoy the stories. I'm told by some of my students that they 'give me cred' — or perhaps they're just being polite.

A culture of protest was already well-established prior to the Moratoriums, with origins in the protests during President Johnson's visit to Australia in 1966. This movement against war, and then conscription, gained momentum especially during 1968–70.

- by then of course a number had been gaoled for refusal to comply with registration under the National Service Act;

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- in Sydney there were small almost weekly demonstrations at the former Commonwealth Centre at Chifley Square, with a few dozen participants at most growing to some 100s by 1970. As further momentum was gained there were larger demonstrations at various other Commonwealth government offices, as during the 'battle of Martin Place' in 1968. Sometimes government offices were occupied, sometimes preceded by a march down Broadway from Sydney University, which resulted on more than one occasion in sit-down occupations of the road, once our numbers were sufficient to justify this. In Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane similar events took place at this time.

Highlights of the period included:

- on 1 May 1969, NSW Governor Sir Roden Cutler was pelted with rotten tomatoes by anti-war demonstrators from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) as he reviewed the Sydney University Regiment, whose existence radical students had declared to be in conflict with the principles of a university.
- I was bayoneted by a member of the Regiment when demonstrating against their presence on campus. I was later brutally assaulted in Forest Lodge Hotel by the person concerned, admittedly after he'd been provoked by comrades of mine who then stood by.
- Louis Christophides in April 1969 sat on the train line — rather more bravely than I can imagine — to block a train carrying conscripts from Wollongong.

There were many other examples.

They were exciting, invigorating times, from which a genuine *culture* of protest emerged. Moreover, since there were so many academics and students involved, theorists of radical culture such as Raymond Williams were produced.

Significant elements of the radical culture include:

- its personification in the music of Bob Dylan, to which many of us are still attached;
- the beginnings of guerrilla theatre which can be traced to this time;
- a renaissance in political posters as an art form;
- the potent symbolism employed in tasteful depictions of a handsome Che Guevara on cloth hung in loungerooms with muted spot lighting;

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- witty slogans: Lynch Bury/Bury Lynch, [Les Bury, Minister for Labour and National Service; Phil Lynch, Minister for the Army];
- and less witty but certainly brutally apt 'Fighting for peace is like fucking for chastity';
- to the more existential French inspired ones such as 'be realistic, demand the impossible'.

The last indicates the importance of international influences, of which we were only too aware. Many of us saw ourselves as part of a broader international movement of protest against the injustices of bourgeois society itself. The role of the media was important not only in bringing to the loungerooms of average Australians the horrors of war in Vietnam, but also the heroism of the Paris revolution of May 1968, and the numerous demonstrations and pitched battles in Europe and America against war, and against bourgeois society itself. The origins of conservative hatred of the ABC also perhaps goes back to the emergence of a new critical news commentary in Bill Peach's 'This Day Tonight', where government spokesmen often endured close questioning of their assumptions.

In many respects the three moratoriums were the high point and final playing out of this broad movement, although more focused on the war and conscription. The historian in me wants to provide you with details of dates and numbers:

- Moratorium 1 (**M1**) — 8 May 1970
- Moratorium 2 (**M2**) — 18–20 Sept. 1970
- Moratorium 3 (**M3**) — 30 April, 30 May, 30 June 1971

These brought hundreds of thousands into the streets and marked the turning point in popular support away from the war. They mainly involved youth, with some unionists, but many from the middle class.

M1 was in many respects the most inspiring, and certainly the largest. Jim Cairns claimed 200,000 marched throughout Australia. 70,000 protesters were addressed by him in Melbourne after marching down Bourke Street. 20,000 assembled in Sydney at the Town Hall at 3.30 pm, sitting on George Street for 2 hours of speeches, folk singing, guerrilla theatre etc. 10,000 marched up Broadway from Sydney University chanting '1,2,3,4, we don't want your fucking war', behind a forest of red and black flags. There was an overwhelming spirit of militancy, solidarity, which may even have caught the authorities off balance. It represented the highpoint of protest.

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Demonstrations also took place in all of the other capital cities, plus Newcastle, Wollongong, Armidale, Townsville, Fremantle, Launceston, Devonport, and Burnie.

Notwithstanding all these numbers, and despite the presence of 1700 uniformed police in Sydney alone, the events were fairly free of violence and were well-ordered. ASIO considered that 'revolutionary students were actually out-manouevred and contained by other Moratorium participants, including CPA members'. There were exceptions: I was badly burned on the hand by a smoke bomb thrown by an anarchist towards the police, but which fell short of its mark. But the main outbreak of violence occurred in Adelaide, when a group of returned Vietnam veterans harassed demonstrators, and some of the returned soldiers were charged.

By any standards the first Moratorium was an enormous success. This was attested to by no other authority than ASIO, again, which concluded that 'it was a significant political demonstration'.

Another indication of success was in the response of conservatives:

- John Laws concluded his newspaper column for the day with a line from a poem by a soldier in Vietnam: 'I'll hate you 'til the day I die'.
- J.A. Cameron, a prominent NSW Liberal, feared that the new social movements were destroying society — 'I believe we have gone so far in innovation that the cement between the bricks of our society is weakening. ... Whilst there is license there is no creativity'.
- Billie Snedden took the prize for license and creativity when he described the Moratorium participants as 'political bikies who pack rape democracy'.

For the second moratorium, the lead-up was quite different and this had an impact on its nature.

In the first instance, there was greater disunity, as radical student groups tried to push Vietnam Moratorium Committees (VMCs which organised the Moratorium in each state) towards more confrontationist activity, largely resisted by moderates in the CPA and left of ALP so as to keep a broad-based alliance including professionals and members of the middle-class — including respectable folk such as clergy, academics, etc. This was the time of Albert Langer and the Maoists at Monash who kept their Students' Representative Council in constant session passing revolutionary motions, Brian Laver at Queensland, Bob

Gould, Resistance, Mike Jones and SDS and Hall Greenland in Sydney. There were a number of violent demonstrations. In response, the VMCs shifted to more overt support of Hanoi and the NLF.

Partly as a result the NSW branch of the ALP dissociated itself from the Moratorium, notwithstanding the efforts of Bob Gould and others. Elsewhere the ALP was not formally associated with the Moratorium although many of its left members were, such as Jim Cairns and Tom Uren, and ALP policy from 1969 sought full and immediate withdrawal of Australian troops. This had represented a firming up of ALP policy after a period of wavering following the greatest electoral loss ever experienced to that time in 1966, when under Calwell's leadership they had also campaigned strongly against Australian involvement in the war.

Trade Union support was also relatively limited. I remember a small group of us doing the rounds of union officials in 1970, and arrogantly lecturing Tas Bull on the need for greater displays of commitment to the cause.

The second factor affecting the lead-up to the second Moratorium was the conservative law and order campaign led by Premiers Askin and Bolte. The Moratoriums were represented as a 'challenge to democracy', in the sense that they usurped the sovereignty of parliament. However, it's worth remembering that because of the greatly unequal size of electorates at this time, especially the rural/urban disparity, the ALP was consistently denied government even when it gained a majority of votes.

Askin urged the NSW judiciary to 'make an example of lawless minorities', and prepared a Summary Offences Bill to make prosecution easier for disruptions to public order such as sit-ins. Bolte too legislated against violent demonstrations and gross obstruction, providing for a maximum penalty of two years gaol. When the state conference of the Victorian ALP supported draft dodgers the Federal President of the Liberal Party suggested that the ALP may be in breach of the Crimes Act.

But the government had a major problem with the growing number of non-compliers with the provisions of the National Service Act, and growing clergy and academic support. A Draft Resisters Union was formed which sponsored an underground system of support for non-compliers and confronted the government more openly with the extensive fact of non-compliance.

After the federal Attorney-General, Tom Hughes, claimed that there were only about fifty draft dodgers, thirty members of the DRU went to his home with a list of 182 non-compliers and their

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addresses. When he did not initially respond, they nailed the list to his front door and stuck posters on the windows, at which point Hughes emerged in whites wielding a cricket bat.

Against the background I've described the number of participants for the second Moratorium declined, with 50,000 marching in Melbourne and 15,000 in Sydney. There was also more confrontation, especially in Sydney and Adelaide. 173 were arrested in Sydney. Notably, the police confiscated flags on sticks or poles too, on the grounds that they might be used as weapons. This was in stark contrast to the first Moratorium march. The NSW government encouraged a hard line from the police, and both sides were more provocative than previously. Nevertheless in a by-election held on the next day there was a 9% swing to the ALP and from then the federal and state governments dropped their law and order campaign.

The 3rd Moratorium under the slogan 'Stop Work to Stop the War' attracted 50,000 participants again in Melbourne, but elsewhere numbers remained down on earlier. Nevertheless, it was more peaceful than the second Moratorium.

In many respects it was more of an anti-climax than previous demonstrations. This was partly because both government and press avoided controversy. More generally, however, the end of the war was now in sight. President Nixon had been committed to a gradual withdrawal, called 'Peace with Honour' and later 'Vietnamisation of the war', since 1969 really, and was also proceeding towards recognition of China (to which he was just beaten by Gough Whitlam as Opposition Leader). Australia also decided on gradual withdrawals from May 1971, promising all troops would be home by Christmas.

The sense of anti-climax pervaded notwithstanding the importation of Dr Benjamin Spock by the organisers. The ASIO report commented rather drolly that he was 'unlikely to have more impact by his presence than by his absence'.

Protests continued in 1971-2 but the broad objective of withdrawing from the war was already partially achieved. The focus now moved mainly against conscription, and in this regard they managed increasingly to make the government look silly. For example:

- in April 1971 five Save Our Sons women got 14 days gaol in Melbourne for distributing leaflets to men registering under the national Service Act;
- on 28 June 1971 over 100 Commonwealth police raided Melbourne University Union seeking four draft dodgers, all of whom escaped, but not before the police caused

- considerable damage to property;
- in November 1971 prominent draft dodger Mike Matteson went on air on the ABC's 'This Day Tonight' debating the federal Attorney-General, Ivor Greenwood, who was in a studio in another city. When police raided the Gore Hill studios of the ABC Matteson had already made good his escape;
- on 24 April 1972 Mike Matteson was arrested and handcuffed by Commonwealth police at Sydney University, but escaped after being freed with bolt cutters by a large group of fellow students.

It was particularly embarrassing for the government as figures were produced suggesting that 1% of those eligible, representing about 8–10,000, had not registered and it acknowledged that they were hard to track down, although not all of these were necessarily politically motivated non-compliers.

Demonstrations continued until the election of the Whitlam ALP government in December 1972. The new government acted swiftly to withdraw the remaining Australian troops in Vietnam, abolish conscription and release all draft dodgers. American involvement ended in January 1973.

What was the significance of the Moratoriums?

Their significance seemed great at the time. We felt we were participating in great historical events — that the revolution was 'just around the corner'. The Moratoriums at least coincided with a change in opinion in the polls, leading to the election of a government committed to withdrawal from the war and abolition of conscription.

For many radicals in the various student groups they symbolised the potential power of the 'worker/student alliance' with its broader revolutionary objectives, and the conservative response indicated the significance perhaps of the challenge to traditional authority.

However, as the great British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, has commented, 'shocking the bourgeois, alas, is much easier than overthrowing him'. As participants we can easily overestimate the significance of the Moratoriums. The major decisions for US withdrawal had already been made prior to the Moratoriums, and Australia would have had little choice but to follow suit anyway.

It is also worth remembering that NSW Premier Jack Lang attracted 100,000 to Moore Park in the early 1930s when the

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population of Sydney was considerably less than it was in the 1970s. This is chastening.

There was also a certain derivativeness of much of the protest movement, which took so many of its symbols and inspirations from overseas. The term 'Moratorium' itself directly copied the American movement, as did the title of an organisation such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

Nevertheless, at the very least we may say that the Moratoriums helped hurry up the end of the war, and especially Australian involvement. They were also clearly part of the groundswell which saw the election of the first reforming ALP government in 23 years, and helped deliver a new constituency of middle class youth to the ALP.

Of more enduring significance, the protest movement of this era also clearly linked up with older Australian radical and labour traditions, typified by the anti-conscription campaign of the First World War.

The protest culture also spilled over into or gave birth to other movements — women's liberation, aboriginal land rights, anti-apartheid, and green bans.

It is notable in this regard how quickly the same people who protested against the war in Vietnam quickly came out on the streets to protest against the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. One of my most enduring memories from this era is that of Bob Gould up a tree at the Polish embassy, chanting 'Dubcek, Dubcek — Ho Chi Minh', as a group of police tried to remove him by shaking the tree.

The protest culture of that era now lives on in the recent youth protests against the neo-fascist movement of Pauline Hanson, after an intervening period of apparent quiescence and single issue/interest protests. The anti-Hanson demonstrations by youth, reaffirming the broad and fundamental principles concerning social justice, racial and social equality and peace, should give us cause for great optimism for the future.

Reference

Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War*.