

DON'T FENCE ME IN

By Sue Jackson

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On my bike path, I frequently cycle over the painted sign, *Think 4 yourself*, and then, *But only because I told you to*. This seems to me to encapsulate the modern dilemma. It is becoming more and more difficult to think for ourselves and to make our own choices. Freeing up our minds, when we are bombarded from every direction by ideology, advertising and governmental and media spins, is no mean feat. Because I believe participation provides an antidote to this, this essay is partly a paean to rallies, where the opportunity for direct person-to-person contact provides unique and rich food for thought.

Because rallies require large public spaces, we need to be vigilant about any threats to one of the hallmarks of a democratic society, namely the freedom of assembly. This may seem an odd or alarmist concern in a country like Australia. After all, we usually think of attacks on freedom of assembly as occurring in totalitarian regimes where people are forbidden, under pain of imprisonment or worse, to meet in other than small groups. The three incursions I will be outlining are not of that order. Nevertheless, I believe, they are still of concern.

I always used to carry a pen and paper on my walks so that I could note upcoming rallies, talks and public meetings. I knew I'd find these advertised on those traditional, accessible, free community hoardings – light poles. I particularly appreciated the poles' light because information came to me rather than me having to seek it out and also because a fellow citizen had taken some trouble to reach me. This mode of communication was particularly effective for events such as rallies, that often by their very nature, are organised quickly

and have a short lead time – too short to be advertised in more conventional ways, even where these are available and affordable.

Recently, when I began to notice the poles' increasing greyness, I felt alarmed and rang the Council. I was directed to the Litter Prevention Officer, who explained that the Environment Protection Authority was behind this change. She said that in the interests of the environment and on aesthetic grounds there is now only one legal place to display posters in the City of Yarra – outside the library in Carlton. Anybody caught putting up a poster elsewhere is liable to a hefty on-the-spot fine.

On visiting this holy site, I discovered an eyesore. At first glance, it looked like a particularly large and amateur piece of papier-mache sculpture. On closer inspection, which I don't recommend, I found a pillar covered with a multitude of torn and layered posters, some obscuring others, some coming adrift. To avoid confusion, the pillar was labelled at its top, at each compass point, 'POSTERS'. In the late '70s, in Beijing, quite near the former Forbidden City, many people took to putting up written protests on a section of blank wall. I've seen photos of 'Democracy Wall', with crowds of people craning to get a view. In Carlton, as I watched two people jostle for the best position for their posters, I was reminded of that wall.

The second incursion was reported recently in our local press. Security guards were pressuring peaceful protestors to move on in Melbourne's most recent marvel, Federation Square. A small group, ironically, People Against Repressive Legislation (PARL), had been targeted. In the article, the photo of a group of middle aged people holding banners exhorting us to *Defend and Extend Medicare* was juxtaposed with the photo of a public sign from the Square headed *Private Property*. The police had been called in twice to deal with this menace, presumably by the guards or their employers. On both occasions, the police had taken no action, were hesitating to do the bidding of big business, saying that

the law was grey in this area. Sometimes grey **is** beautiful. Alison Dean (2003), writing in the Melbourne Times, wondered, 'So what is going on in Melbourne's public spaces? Are they growing for corporate events and shrinking for protesters and lobby groups?' Perhaps the public is welcome at Federation Square as long as we come as customers and not citizens.

I experienced the third incident when, as one of several thousand people, I attended the first Melbourne Peace Vigil after September 11th. It was held the following Sunday in the concrete and exposed City Square. The Square is bounded on its eastern perimeter by the Westin, a huge, multi-story hotel that dominates the streetscape. The Square could easily be mistaken for its off street car park. The Westin casts such a long shadow that it would probably be difficult for anything living, like trees or plants, to flourish in the Square. At the Vigil, people perched uncomfortably on cement walls, stood in small groups or alone. There was also a contingent in wheel chairs, some of whom had their children in their laps.

The mood of the crowd was shocked and subdued. I was unable to hear the names of the speakers because the sound equipment faded in and out. A Muslim religious elder, who was greeted with loud applause, made the point that as an Australian national of 50 years, he was probably more Australian than the majority of the audience, particularly if nationality is measured in taxes paid. The colours of the Catholic Church were flown by a Melbourne Bishop. Even the United Nations was represented, by a local delegate, himself a former immigrant from South America. A visiting Israeli rabbi from an organisation, which, I think, was called Rabbis for Peace, made an impromptu speech about the support in the Torah for peace. A Buddhist practitioner described the Buddhist commitment to pacifism and how in that religion love takes precedence over all else. At one point, as the sound equipment faltered, the crowd joined hands and sang, 'All we are saying is, *Give peace a chance.*' As icy winds funnelled through the City Square, I felt warm.

The sound equipment finally gave out. The MC, possibly from Friends of the Earth, alternately shouted and tried to use the megaphone. He said that this was a temporary measure because the Westin would shortly provide power for the microphone. However, after a lengthy delay, they refused. It felt wonderful as we booed them in unison.

On the way home, on the tram, I wondered, 'Who could have made that decision? Was it the hotel manager, acting alone, or did he confer with his Boss? Perhaps conferring was unnecessary because there was a directive already in place to deal with such a contingency. If so, what protocols could possibly dictate that they refuse assistance and silence a peace vigil organised in response to a calamity, and attended by thousands of citizens in a public space?' That day the corporate shadow fell long and dark.

Incursions into the public realm by the privileged are nothing new. After all, this was essentially what the Enclosure Movement, which began in twelfth century England, was all about. In 'No Logo', Naomi Klein (2000), the young Canadian activist and journalist, provides an update on this phenomenon. The book is divided into 4 parts, the first of which is entitled *No Space*. In that section, Klein demonstrates clearly how the multinationals are infiltrating space, previously deemed public, at an alarming rate. Hospitals, research centres, tertiary institutions, schools, pre-schools, and of course public parks and squares – areas that were previously seen as sacrosanct – are no longer. The blitzing of public space via advertising is an integral aspect of this process. And while our heads are full of advertising, it is difficult to think for ourselves. For that reason, perhaps freedom of assembly now needs to include the notion that not only is access to public space necessary, but also that that space needs to be uncontaminated by outside influences – an increasingly difficult call, I know.

Over the last few years in particular, people have become increasingly sceptical about the veracity and biases of the media. But with the recent war on Iraq much of the television coverage hit an all time low. The obfuscating language used, the time grabs, the division of protagonists into goodies and baddies – often made it look just like a video game. At other times, the format, the voices over and even the over-confident jocularity of the presenters had exactly the feel of an utterly partisan sports event commentary. I couldn't watch it. I prefer a different sort of news coverage. Recently, at the Refugee Action rally on a Sunday afternoon outside the State Library, a statuesque woman in a bright blue sari moved through the crowd, like a determined tug boat amongst unruly ocean liners. She stopped and stood alone at a range of elevated vantage points. Wordlessly, she held up for inspection a handmade board displaying photos of current scenes in Iraq. I can't stop thinking about her or her display. But if I hadn't been there, I wouldn't have seen her.

In today's high tech world, where it is possible to access information and communicate easily without leaving home, it may seem retrograde to be extolling the virtues of participation in public meetings. But watching news coverage on a screen, that you can switch off at will, from the comfort of your arm chair, can fuel detachment, desensitization and the notion of *them and us*. I am reminded of the wonderful scene in Orson Welles' classic 'The Third Man'. Harry Lime, a profiteer in post-war Vienna, takes his American friend on a ferris wheel ride high above a fairground. Lime had been selling fake penicillin on the black market, a practice that had led to the death of many people, including children. He rationalises his involvement, pointing out the people milling about far below, by saying, 'Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever?'

By contrast, once, at a rally, I accepted a flier for a public meeting at the Capitol Theatre, where Vandana Shiva, the Seedkeeper of India and founder of Ecofeminism, was scheduled to speak. To my knowledge, her visit went almost unremarked in the press.

Amongst other things, she talked about the high rate of suicide of farmers saddled with debt from paying the multinationals for their seeds and then for the herbicides and pesticides to protect these imports. Typically the suicides occur not in the first, but the second year of debt. In the first year the farmer can sell a kidney to survive.

At rallies, although the political speeches do have an immediacy and directness typically lacking in their air-brushed TV counterparts, they are a secondary source of information for me. What I treasure is the wealth of information I glean from a range of less obvious sources. At the Refugee Action protest there was, as usual, a range of people circulating in the crowd, collecting money and distributing pamphlets and notices. That day, I accepted two items: a form letter to send to my Federal member asking him to agitate for citizenship for the refugees and a notice of a meeting where Aleida Guevara, Che Guevara's eldest daughter, was soon to speak.

People offer you their pamphlets at rallies, and you can accept or reject them. They talk with you. Information isn't just imparted. We are involved in a personal exchange. And just because it's personal, it fuels my motivation and hope that citizens acting together can make a difference. I did send off that form letter, the very next day in fact. I also attended the meeting with Aleida Guevara.

Many political activities never see the light of day in the mainstream media or are reported after the event, and so people who do not know how to access notices in advance, miss out. Over the last few years, I have felt that Melbourne is a Mecca for activists quite simply because I have been part of this vigorous, alternative, sometimes subterranean, communication loop.

On the Valentine's Day peace march, I found myself between a group of bikers, all leather, studs and piercings, and a lean, taut trio of greyhounds - bicyclists in designer gear with designer bikes to match and behind a couple of very young and animated women in burkas. As I shuffled between the Public Library and Federation Square, pressed up

against my neighbours, I could fully appreciate the weight of community feeling. Who will ever forget the image of Sydneysiders meeting in the middle of the Harbour Bridge for Reconciliation, or of Jim Cairns at the head of a Moratorium procession flaring out behind him the length of Collins Street? Events such as these, where citizens opposed to government policies have voted with their feet, have deservedly developed iconic status.

At first glance, my concerns may well seem petty - drab lamp posts, a stingy hotel, a couple of over-zealous security guards. These don't necessarily add up to much. However, because I value so highly the personal connections that are a feature of public meetings and rallies, especially in assisting me to think for myself, I am particularly alert to any encroachments on these. For that reason, freedom of assembly and threats to it, have been the focus of this essay. So tomorrow I'm off to Federation Square to see how PARL is faring. I also live in hope that one day the light poles will return to their former brilliance.

REFERENCES

Dean, Alison (2003) 'Picky about picketers'. *The Melbourne Times*, 14 May, p. 8-9.

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