

SIGN OF THE TIMES

By Sue Jackson

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The first Saturday in July I had a weighty assignment. I was the central pixel in the dot of an exclamation point for a 140 metre long code-red environment banner. I shared the responsibility with twin toddlers in scarlet beanies who only occasionally needed reminding by their mother to sit still, a woman activist whose wheel-chair was entirely be-decked with ruby red tinsel and a debonair Dalmatian in a crimson waistcoat.

We had all been participants at the Climate Emergency Rally in Melbourne's City Square, after which we'd marched to the Alexandra Gardens where there was the space to construct our human sign.

At the rally, many of my fellow protestors had worn their hearts on their sleeves... or on their hats, or waved them in their hands. Signs reflecting their worries and hopes filled the Square. Some struck a serious note: 'Kids against Channel Deepening: Save the Bay', 'De-sal Sucks', 'No Road Tunnel', 'Renewable Energy, Not Reactors', 'Transport Crisis', 'Desalination is Archaic, Draconian and Counter-Productive', 'Water Yes, De-Sal No' and 'Listen to the People'.

There was plenty of vinegar: 'Don't Bugger the Bay', 'You can lead a Brumby to water, but you can't make him think', 'Dumby's De-sal', 'Desal's Good, Brumby's Honest, Pigs Fly', 'D, S & E = Department for Screwing the Environment'. And some honey: 'Come on Kevin. You can do it. Turn the Tide'.

The previous week Ross Garnaut, commissioned by the Federal Government to examine the effects of climate change on Australia and the implications of an emissions trading scheme, had released his draft report.

Garnaut concluded that our arid continent is on the brink of disaster. If we don't act forcefully and quickly, we could well lose treasures like the Great Barrier Reef and the Murray-Darling Basin. In the coming years many lives could be lost to natural disasters and heat related diseases. And our national economic future will inevitably be imperilled.

As the speakers in the City Square summarised the Garnaut Report I became more and more dejected and prey to all too familiar thoughts: *It's all too hard, and all too late. Politicians have all the power, are in the pockets of the multi-nationals, and have no vision nor sense of urgency. And anyhow, what can one small person do?* From the dismayed faces all around me, I guessed I wasn't alone with those thoughts.

And yet...ironically, that Saturday the weather was glorious. The sun shone gently and the air was clean, cool and bracing. A mere half hour after the speeches, walking over the bridge to the gardens, amidst the chatting and chanting crowd, my spirits lifted and I began to really enjoy myself. Garnaut's dire predictions hadn't left me... but somehow I couldn't quite believe in their inevitability.

On the tram ride home, reflecting on the fickleness of my emotions, I recalled a book that had affected me deeply a year or so back. It was written by Rebecca Solnit, a San Franciscan activist, and is entitled *Hope in the Dark: The Untold History of People Power*.

As the title suggests, Solnit argues that hope and people power are intimately linked. She contests that the more you take social action the more hopeful you become, and the more your hope and optimism grow, the more likely you are to feel that action can achieve results. You become increasingly involved. And when individuals who operate this way come together they can be unstoppable.

I wondered if that explained why my dejection had lifted so rapidly. A wide and divergent range of community groups - Environment Victoria, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Your Water Your Say, National Tertiary Education Industry Union, the Public Transport Users Association and The Greens – was represented at the protest.

Numerous individuals, who didn't necessarily belong to an interest group, had taken time to compose heart-felt slogans and then construct and decorate banners and placards to communicate their hopes. Others might have come empty-handed but nevertheless felt strongly enough to sacrifice precious weekend time to make their presence felt. The crowd seemed to reflect a wide cross-section of Australian society. There were people of all age groups, different ethnic and religious groups, and while the majority of people were undoubtedly from Melbourne, country Victoria was also well represented.

Although we ambled along and into the gardens in a casual fashion, the dimensions of the human sign had been clearly laid out prior to our arrival, so there was no confusion as the marshals efficiently directed us to our positions. Once there, we sat on the ground in good-natured ease, waiting patiently for the

aerial photography to be completed. As I realised on the tram, what I'd just experienced was a healthy dose of people power. No wonder I was feeling better.

Solnit makes another point that I find heartening. She suggests that however static, short-sighted or downright wrong-headed the power brokers at centre stage are, centre stage is seldom where change originates. She suggests that it's in the margins where new and radical ideas emerge and get translated into action.

Nowadays, we are becoming more and more aware of the efficacy of the the internet in spearheading social change. The internet is one powerful marginal venue while rallies, where people assemble to share and voice their concerns, are another. In fact the themes at protests often indicate the directions in which a society is moving long before those concerns become mainstream.

By the time we had a prime minister willing to say 'Sorry' to Indigenous Australians in Parliament, millions of ordinary Australians had been meeting and marching for years to demand an apology. I'll use a sporting analogy - in rugby, by the time the catcher eventually pops out at the top over the line-up to catch the ball and receive the accolades from the crowd, the energy for his action has been brewing for ages beneath him. Mr Rudd proved to be a catcher extraordinaire, but the propellant for his action was undoubtedly people power.

Visionaries typically emerge from the margins of a society. Things they say can seem radical, unthinkable or even laughable to the majority of their fellow citizens when they first hear them. But in no time at all those ideas find their rightful place in the Zeitgeist and we forget that we may not always have shared them.

As Gandhi, that famous visionary, put it all those years ago: 'First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win.' Our own Bob Brown has always occupied the margins with aplomb. So when at the rally he argued passionately that climate change represents an opportunity rather than a calamity, it seemed important to pay attention.

He asserted that what Australia is good at in many spheres is being a world leader and that now is the time for us to lead the way regarding the environment. He also stressed that rather than a crackdown on emissions and other forms of environmental damage leading to a loss of jobs, it could open up the possibility of new jobs being created for generations of green collar workers.

I don't want to sound like a cock-eyed optimist. But it seems vitally important, particularly when the news is bad, to find a spark of hope. There's no doubt that experiencing people power up close is a great way of igniting that spark.

That night on the news when I saw the aerial photograph of our banner - *Climate Emergency!* - I appreciated how all those individual pixels working together packed a mighty wallop. And I couldn't help but admire the impeccable dot.