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# From Protesting the Protest to Pro-Protest: An Account of the Sydney Demos

## March 26th -

Grabbing my camera as I raced out the door to catch a train to Town Hall I reflected on why I was going to participate in the Books Not Bombs Anti-War demonstration. I'd decided to go as I felt disempowered as a young Australian and wanted to express my opinion about our nation's involvement in a war against Iraq, a sentiment I felt was shared by many other young people.

When I got there, I was immediately overwhelmed by thousands of students (primary to university) chanting anti-war slogans and parading placards. The scene was amazing and gave me tingles all over my body. But, as I moved deeper into the crowd my original impressions rapidly changed.

The atmosphere at Town Hall square was frightening. While some student "protesters" threw rocks, golf balls, bottles and chairs at the Police, others barraged them with verbal abuse.

The media couldn't escape the mob (... I mean the protesters) and were targeted for reporting on what was happening. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw four aggressive school boys attack a cameraman and his sound assistant, smashing their equipment in the process. Not long after, I was also pushed and abused by some "fellow" demonstrator's - just for taking photos!

At Hyde Park, protesters burnt flags, abused more police, and took control of the fountain, turning it into the local kiddie's pool (urine and all). Perhaps the highlight of the day for my girlfriend and I came as one girl shouted, "It's so warm!"

The demonstration was a failure. Plans for a peaceful protest had been sabotaged by deviant school kids who were only intent on causing trouble. I almost vomited out of embarrassment when a sizeable group of students ceased their cries for "NO WAR!" and started a mass sing a long to 'Old McDonald had a farm' with "comical" references to pigs in it. By the time people started to march down the streets of Sydney, the demonstration had lost all of its appeal to me so I hopped on the next train and went home feeling bitterly frustrated and disappointed.



## April 2nd -

Despite being somewhat reluctant about participating in another Books Not Bombs demo (particularly an illegal protest), my curiosity got the better of me and on April 2 I was once again at Town Hall.

Just like the previous week, I was greeted by anti-war protests and placards but this time I held my breath before passing judgement. I glanced around, looking for some sign of deviant, violent or threatening behaviour. Nothing! No police abuse, no bottle throwing. Rather, amid pictures of dead Iraqi civilians, and signs saying "We are peaceful, war is not" protesters debated pulling the troops home and addressed Iraq's looming humanitarian crisis.

Books Not Bombs had organised "legal observers" and strategically placed "Peace Monitors" in areas of potential conflict, desperate to avoid the violence that had marred the protest of March 26. Naturally, there were still a few trouble-makers, but overall, everyone was well behaved and well informed. I felt proud to be participating in this event and found myself chanting contagious slogans such as "The people, UNITED, will never be DEFEATED!" and "We are peaceful, war is not!".

# Perspectives on Student Protests

"How dare the politicians do this. I am very much against war but all the protests under the sun is not going to stop a war happening and our children are in school to get an education not be taught by the polities that protests are okay. Next we will have the kids campaigning against parents, teachers and society"

**Sue Kenyon**

"Leave our young people to focus on an education which in the long run shall make more of a positive contribution to the future of our country, but participating in these demonstrations shall cause unnecessary distractions to both young people and our educational institutions."

**Glenn McKenzie**

The recent conflict in Iraq was a highly politicised issue, not only in terms of its international legality, morality and consequences, but locally, at the level of Australian democracy.

In February, some politicians urged students to skip classes to voice their (negative) views on war. Federal Youth Affairs Minister, Larry Anthony countered by saying "politicians who advocated children wagging school to march in anti-war protests were terribly irresponsible."

Here are some thoughts we gathered from adults working in the Youth Sector, in response to an article in the Sydney Morning Herald on February 24 (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/02/24/1045935324056.html>)

"Remember Oscar Wilde;  
'I never let school interfere with my education'"

**George Davies**

"Demonstration and activism are crucial ways for all people, including young people, to express their views on what is happening in the political arena.

I think encouraging young people to be proactive about the future direction of the nation and the world, is cause enough to miss a couple of classes."

**Rena Singh**

"We should all be encouraging students to take a stand for their beliefs and opinions. If that means missing school, great. Our responsibility should be to encourage the thinking to occur that should surround such an action so that it is more than a day off school."

**David Mould**



We want to hear your thoughts about student demonstrations and protests in general. Contact us via the website <http://ipisimag.grokspot.com> or via email; [ipisi@212.com](mailto:ipisi@212.com)

**Perspectives on protest;**

**Books Not Bombs**

<http://www.booksnotbombs.org>

**Sydney Morning Herald Report (March 27)**

<http://ipisimag.grokspot.com/smh2703.html>

Have you ever been to a protest?

What did you think?

Should Students be allowed to protest?

Do protests actually achieve anything?

Why do some protests denigrate into violence?

What would you think of a pro-war protest?

## On Reflection

Political demonstrations are a great way to bring an issue into the public eye and encourage further debate and discussion. They also give people the opportunity to express an opinion when all other avenues have failed.

However, they need to be well planned with clear objectives and boundaries. Furthermore, those organising the protest need to have clear statements of what they want to see changed and why, and they need to be able to clearly articulate these messages to the media.

When a demonstration lacks these qualities (form, clear goals and appropriate leadership), they become nothing more than a public tantrum and lose any appeal that they may have had. The Books Not Bombs anti-war protest on March 26th demonstrated this. Organisers were not equipped to handle the size and disposition of the crowd and even failed to maintain the peace between their own protesters.

Finally, perhaps the most important lesson I learnt, was that if we want a world of peace, the only way of achieving it is by creating it in peace.

"Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved through understanding." **Albert Einstein**