

## INTRODUCTION

16 February 2003. An estimated 500,000 people take to the streets of Sydney to protest against Australia's involvement in the proposed US-led war in Iraq. Despite the day's intense humidity, people flood into Hyde Park from all directions. Even when the buses are full, people keep coming. They walk. They push their small children in strollers and they carry their babies in packs on their backs.

All sorts of people come to protest. Workers gather under trade union banners. Schoolchildren gather with their friends. A large contingent of lesbians and gay men have chosen to leave the annual Mardi Gras Fair Day and walk into the city to join the protest. People of all ethnicities, all ages – sometimes three generations of one family – gather together.

There are homemade signs and banners: 'There's no such thing as a smart bomb'; 'No killing in our name'; 'Listen to the people'. Protesters wear badges and t-shirts that echo these sentiments. Children have painted their faces with peace signs. Everywhere, there are signs and banners and the chanting of the slogan 'No war! No war! No war!'

People listen intently to the speakers at the rally. There is applause and cheering as ordinary people hear their own thoughts and feelings articulated by the orators on the stage. Through these speakers, a deeply held sentiment is given voice.

## ( 2 ) *Activist wisdom*

When the march finally starts the streets are jammed. There are so many people that the city streets become completely blocked. Sections of the march have to be diverted in order to keep things moving. Some people never even leave the park; the head of the march catches its own tail and the procession grinds to a halt.

Around Australia these scenes are repeated: two days earlier the streets of Melbourne had been brought to a standstill by an estimated quarter of a million protesters; 100,000 protested in Adelaide and Brisbane; 20,000 in Perth; 10,000 in Hobart and Canberra. And in rural centres too, the message is the same:

In NSW for example, between 18,000 and 20,000 marched in Newcastle, 500 in Forster, 1500 in Tathra, 400 in Bega, 5000 in Armidale, 2000 in Byron Bay, 5,000 in Lismore, 1000 in Nambucca and 300 in Kempsey. And others attended rallies in Taree and Broken Hill.

At Wagga Wagga the president of the Cootamundra branch of the Liberal Party, Arthur Schofield, told a contingent of 1000 that Prime Minister Howard is in contempt of Liberal Party values because of his subservience to Washington.

At Bellingen, Vietnam War veteran Bob McCloud told a rally of more than 3000 people (more than town's entire population), that he had sent his war medals back to Canberra (*The Guardian* 2003).

Everywhere, emotions run high. There are tears and shouts of anger. There is despair at the thought of impending war. There is elation and excitement in coming together in protest.

For the activists who had organised these protests, amid the thousand and one problems that loomed and had to be solved during the course of the day, there was satisfaction that it had all come together. There was confirmation of their faith that Australian people cared enough about peace to demonstrate. There were already thoughts about the next actions.

And there was tension – with the media, with politicians and with each other – about the goals, direction and shape of the move-

ment. In the case of the Sydney peace movement these tensions were to prove cataclysmic. Elsewhere these tensions created new alliances, new strategies and new knowledge.

### social movements, social change and australian society

Events such as the peace protests in 2003 have long been an important part of the Australian social and political landscape. Since the European invasion of this country and the emergence of a democratic system of governance, Australian people have sought to have their voices heard in that system on the issues that matter most to them. Women have fought for (and won) the vote, and continue to struggle for full equality. Green activists have struggled to protect our environment: to preserve our forests, our waterways, our biodiversity and our fauna from the ravages of industry and development. Lesbians and gay men have fought for equality and justice and for an end to sexual vilification and homophobia. Workers have demanded better wages and improved working conditions. Pacifists have sought to maintain peace in our region and around the world. Anti-capitalists have gone into battle for economic justice and an end to the inequalities caused by globalising capital. And Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have fought for land rights, reconciliation, recognition and justice.

These examples suggest the focus of this book. While Australian history has also produced a number of reactionary movements – for example the religious conservatism of those currently fighting to limit women’s access to abortion, the racism of extreme right-wing organisations such as National Action, and the misogyny of much fathers’ rights activism – these groups have not found a place in these pages.

This is a deliberate choice. In recent years the Left in Australia has been under attack, as it has been in much of the western world. Progressive activists have been rebadged as an intellectual elite, out of touch with what Prime Minister John Howard refers