

## Being counted

By Rosemary Bechler,  
Created 2003-02-20 00:00

The anti-war demonstration in London on 15 February, which converged on Hyde Park from all directions, has posed a problem for Tony Blair and the spin merchants who have characterised his era: the sheer number of people in Britain and around the world who are thinking for themselves.

Size matters in terms of public impact, and this was the largest political demonstration in British history; well over a million people, for certain. Size matters for the nature of the event itself. A very large public assembly is something akin to the self-moderating mechanism of a good online debate. In September last year, even this January, the tripartite character of the coalition organisers – the [Stop the War Coalition](#) [1], [CND](#) [2] and the [Muslim Association of Britain](#) [3] (MAB) – meant an uneasy alliance of lefties, peaceniks, Palestinian sympathisers and Muslims.

Unlike [Douglas Murray](#) [4], I really enjoy these discontinuities, the cultural miscegenation which is ultimately the only way to counter enemy images. It is much more of an opportunity for peacemaking than a threat.

One thing the peace movement does with a minority of very angry young men – the kind of anger which always emerges from any politics of impotence – is walk beside them for as long as it takes to discover what if anything is behind the rhetoric, and what you might be able to do to shore up an alliance against fixed hatreds and the descent into the use of force.

It's a small enough gesture, but better than nothing – and if it is sometimes unpleasant, this is not a very high price to pay, in these difficult times, when there is so much fear, impotence and anger.

By this month, such a strategy had paid off. All credit to the organisers, whose eve-of-demo debate on 14 February in London, entitled 'The War on Terror at Home: How anti-terrorism effects migrant communities and refugees', reflected an ongoing domestic and internationalist commitment which may hasten the much-needed rapprochement between the peace and anti-racism movements.

The sense of tolerant and relaxed ethnic diversity on this march was stronger than ever. There were noticeably more black faces than in September adding to the ranks of Asians, peaceniks, lefties and the ordinary middle class citizens – the Middle Englanders of the Daily Mail.

No doubt the usual suspects were there – the fundamentalists and the ultra-leftists – but they were hugely outnumbered by 'the majority of good natured people who were demonstrating, not only because their emotions were engaged, but also their brains', as my companion, Parimal Desai, put it.

Thanks to turn-out on a scale which deals with most forms of excess – not just these differences but many others, North and South, men and women – previous peace generations and thoroughly contemporary young men and women found themselves on the whole in the midst of companionable difference.

## **The gender of war**

For someone who remembers women being described as a minority it was heartening, following evidence that it is mainly we who are not convinced by the drive to war, to discover quite so many men willing to stand up for peace. Important as well as heartening, since Jack Straw's message to Britain's European partners that we must not appear 'weak' in the eyes of evil dictators signals that the British have reached a recurrent pre-war moment, when men are particularly challenged to show what stuff they're made of.

I have kept a cutting from the last time men were energetically so mobilised – during the Kosovan conflict, when Andrew Marr, now the BBC's chief political reporter, wrote:

'Since World War I, the arrival of TV in battlefields, authentic accounts of how war brutalises, increasingly realistic war films have all helped to make us feel that war is bestial... We have become feminised a bit... We have, like the late Romans, decided that risk is for others... This dependency culture is shameful and embarrassing... We are a kindergarten of sullen children... It is time for the European countries to stagger out of America's shadow and start to take some responsibility in a still-dangerous world that cannot be kept safe without bloodshed... Like the Serbs, we are undignified prisoners of our own history, but soft and flabby in our case... War is bad – but it isn't the worst thing of all.'

No, the worst thing of all was being feminised or rendered decadent, soft and flabby, dependent, shameful and embarrassing and not 'real men'.

Gender relations have, thankfully, moved on.

## **Make Tea Not War**

It was a family day out, and on the whole good manners prevailed. A ragged fellow who looked like one of London's homeless sat on a lion in Trafalgar Square with a piece of torn cardboard saying 'Blair's a Cunt'. Many grinned. But a tall woman reprimanded her companion who tried to photograph it, saying 'No, that's not fair'.

Meanwhile, Douglas Murray will have to forgive me if I rather relish the female slogan, 'Fuck me, not Iraq', that confirmed him in his bad humour. It does not rise to the classical heights of 'She is all States, and all Princes, I/ Nothing else is', but it has something of the generosity of John Donne's glorious, 17th century conceit.

Nor are such moments insignificant in an impressively internationalist event. Of course it is carnival – the upending of order, the reversal of power – which is our reward for all that walking, preparing, clambering on buses, packing into underground trains and buttoning up against bitter winds.

The carnival element is the creativity and self-confidence of people freeing themselves from official respectability. In this event, it had two important meanings: thumbs down for our political masters, these hundreds of thousands of people were not impressed; and something even more telling, a cheerful if sometimes grim refusal to be panicked.

'Put the gun down, George' read one large yellow banner in red lettering, while a similar and unanswerable message carried by a very small boy patiently spelt out the sentiment, 'I'm small: you're big. I'm right: you're wrong'.

And this time, there was a new factor, call it charming, call it full of delight, a sense of being within a global space which required us – if only out of a sense of self-preservation – to assert our *local* character as a triumphant contribution to a *world* day.

'Make Tea Not War' was one of the top slogans in London. It was closely followed by my personal favourite, blood dripping from the base of its lettering, 'Keep Off the Grass' – a local reference to Tessa Jowell's short-lived attempt to stop this event happening, on the grounds that it would trample the fragile early grass shoots of London's Hyde Park. A very English affair. (The same attempt was made in New York and Budapest, in markedly different styles.) I'm glad Murray liked it too.

### **Not convinced**

What was it that had moved the million plus? This was more than a single act of protest. It was a mass witness, far bigger than the imagination of the organisers or indeed the peace movement hitherto, far more representative of the diversity of views and backgrounds which make up the UK population; in carnival mood certainly, but also serious, tolerant and determined, with something it had come from far and wide to say.

We are not convinced that bombing can bring about the liberation of Iraq. 'Democracy my arse', as one poster pithily expressed it. We are not convinced that invasion will cope with effectively and conclusively end the wide proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). We are not convinced by the muscular Christian, moral righteousness which seems to cover a multitude of past sins, both of omission and commission. We are not convinced that the pre-emptive use of massively superior military force is the way to run the world, or that people who think it is should be making the decision.

Many marchers may not have thought about all this in these terms. Again it is the particularisms which count and which add up to this strong common conviction: the disappointed Labour party voters; the mothers and sisters who know from experience that violence breeds violence, that it arises from humiliation and fear and doesn't help, and who can apply this, for example, to declining empires as well as to disadvantaged young Muslims; the members of ethnic minorities with their experience of the bitterness of stereotypes, and the difficulty of rising above that bitterness; even the conservatives who oppose spending money and risking British lives on improving other countries.

### **Answers? No, but the right questions**

I believe that when these sorts of knowledge come together, they can challenge our best intellectuals. Whatever it was, the movement on Saturday 15 February has gone one step further in asking important questions.

Steven E. Miller's careful weighing up of the pros and cons of war for the [American Academy of Arts and Sciences](#) [5] notes that the pro-war case includes the attraction of the successful application of force, thus making America's ability to 'project' it more credible.

Many of us on Saturday were asking why is it so important to use force in order to demonstrate the plausibility of force?

It is not enough to state as does Paul Hirst [6], that 'US force ultimately protects the international economy from which Europeans are huge beneficiaries...The USA cannot be bound by the rules that apply to lesser states...since it must act if necessary to uphold the actual international system and its unwritten rules.'

There is far too much of a mismatch between the war on terror and the war on Iraq, too much proliferation of WMD to speak reassuringly about our 'ultimate protection', or to grant any power, any regime carte blanche, in the use or abuse of such force.

Many of the people who marched on Saturday and who will march again for as long as there is a chance of a better world, did so because in many different ways they have glimpsed the inadequacy of the old resort to force. They have peered over the brink and contemplated a world in which – even as a last resort – massive superior force may not always be effective. It is a fearful thought. It is a very new thought. But it is not going to go away.

And next? Another show of strength like last Saturday's? I doubt it. Protests are not the best place to find answers to complex questions. People were not avidly discussing the details of a possible second United Nations resolution. I admit, they were not attempting to answer the challenging questions of how else to set about disarming Saddam Hussein.

The organisers, in their very moment of triumph have created a challenge which may well be beyond them. For now the need is to answer some of these most complicated questions. We need to work out a way of responding to Mary Kaldor [7]'s challenge that we place human rights concerns alongside peace.

She has been among the proponents of humanitarian intervention. We need a new debate on when the use of military force is effective, and when it is not; equally, to work out how best to strengthen our own race relations and democracies; especially, we need to find more ways of linking local wisdoms to the global.

Something irreversible may have been achieved. The unique and peculiar character was its global nature. Of course we can understand Iraqi voices [8]. They rightly want to see an end to the suffering of their benighted country and its people. But the issues at stake in the prospective use of force are issues which touch on the security of everyone, and future generations. We are now engaged in the beginning of a global response to one of the most pressing global questions of all.

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/article\\_996.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/article_996.jsp)

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.stopwar.org.uk/> target=\_blank

[2] <http://www.cnduk.org/welcome.htm> target=\_blank

[3] <http://www.mabonline.net/> target=\_blank

[4] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=3&debateId=33&articleId=994>  
target=\_blank

[5] <http://www.amacad.org/publications/occasional.htm> target=\_blank

[6] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=8&debateId=88&articleId=988>  
target=\_blank

[7] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=2&debateId=88&articleId=974>  
target=\_blank

[8] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/debate.jsp?debateId=73&id=2> target=\_blank



This article is published by Rosemary Bechler, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.