

NATIONAL

Students protest war on Iraq

March 6, 2003 – 5.05pm

Thousands of Australian primary and high school students ditched classrooms and took to the streets in sometimes wild protests against a war on Iraq.

Prime Minister John Howard was critical of the protests, saying the students should have been in school instead of "running amok through the streets".

Traffic was left in chaos as about 5,000 students from 70 private and public schools rampaged through central Sydney chanting "Howard's a wanker" and "books not bombs".

Unruly elements appeared to take over as organisers lost control of the protest and students ran along the streets jumping on cars and causing at least one accident before converging on Hyde Park and falling into its fountains.

Despite many facing expulsion for attending, Sydney's streets were brought to a standstill by the student protesters who waved placards like "Stop this Bloody War" and "Don't Attack Iraq".

Three people were arrested in what police described as "a disappointing event", because organisers had not stuck to the approved route.

In Victoria, about 4,000 young people joined the national day of action, aiming their anger at Mr Howard for not listening to the will of the people as they marched through Melbourne streets.

A similar turnout was held in Adelaide, hundreds marched in Brisbane and Perth, while in Hobart, about 500 Tasmanian students staged a peaceful protest.

Mr Howard said: "Most Australians, whatever their views are on Iraq, will believe, as I do, that school students should be at school during school hours ... and not running amok through the streets of Sydney causing inconveniences to the police and citizens going about their normal business."

Organisers of the Books not Bombs coalition in Sydney admitted they were overwhelmed by the turnout, saying they believed at its height there were 10,000 protesters in central Sydney, although police said the number was less than 5,000.

Year 11 student and event spokesperson Lauren Carroll-Harris said while the protest didn't go as planned, police criticism was uncalled for.

"I think that the protest today was very passionate, very energetic, and very angry but I think that actually on the whole, I have to say, well-behaved," Ms Carroll-Harris said.

"It was hard to tell what was going on at some points, and it didn't go as planned, but I think it turned out fine."

Ms Carroll-Harris said the Books against Bombs coalition was proud of all those who had turned out in the face of punishments from teachers and parents.

"Frankly, it's a really big decision for students to walk out of school, a lot of students were threatened with expulsion or suspension ... and I think if the government doesn't take notice of this they won't take notice of anything at all," she said.