WORLD   MIDDLE EAST   FLASHBACK

From the Archives: Sydney protests the Iraq War

Over several days from February 15, 2003, the people of Sydney joined millions of people in over 600 cities around the world to protest the looming war with Iraq.

By **Neil Mercer**, **Sean Nicholls**, **Ellen Connolly** and **Valerie Lawson**
February 15, 2019 — 12.00am

Vast crowds gather in Hyde Park, Sydney, to protest the imminent Iraq War on February 16, 2003   BEN RUSHTON

Published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on February 17, 2003

The centre of Sydney came to a standstill yesterday when more than 250,000 people crammed into Hyde Park and the surrounding streets to protest against the looming war with Iraq.

The peace rally, thought to be the biggest in the country's history police put the crowd at more than 200,000, while organisers put it at about 300,000 took the total number of Australians who have marched since Friday to more than 500,000.

In Sydney there were babies, toddlers and teenagers, the middle-aged and the elderly, and they came from all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds.

They arrived from all directions, mostly on foot, but also in strollers, on dad's back, on stilts and in wheelchairs, although many were left stranded when the bus and rail network was unable to cope.

Thousands carried banners, paper doves, United Nations flags and placards.

"Kill Bush, Blair, Sharon and Howard," said one, but it missed the mood of the rally, which was serious but good-natured.

Closer to the mark was the popular "Somewhere in Texas a village is missing its idiot."

"No war" signs were everywhere and "No war" T-shirts sold by the Greens were disappearing fast even before the rally started just after noon.

Tom Uren, the former Labor Party minister who first took part in an anti-war march in 1969, said: "I've never seen anything like it."

As the crowd grew, it was difficult to move in parts of the park.

Peter Baume, Bob Brown, and Laurie Brereton lead the march. RICK STEVENS

Dozens sought a vantage point on the roof of the entrance to St James station in Elizabeth Street and the nearby coffee shop, while others climbed trees.

Applause and laughter greeted an effigy of George Bush towing an effigy of John Howard as a dog with his nose regularly making contact with the US President's backside.

Thunderous cheers and applause greeted speakers, including the Greens' Senator Bob Brown and the journalist John Pilger.

Just before the rally got under way, Senator Brown told The Herald: "This is going to send a message to our Prime Minister that he cannot ignore. This is democracy on the move."

The former Liberal minister Peter Baume, now chancellor of the Australian National University, said backstage: "We have never started a war. Why start now?"

Commenting on the crowd, he said: "There's a message there, and if they [the Government] don't listen to it they are mugs."

A few metres away from him the NSW Deputy Premier, Andrew Refshauge, stood talking to members of the crowd.

At 1.10pm the march got under way, or at least it did for those in Elizabeth Street. For those near the stage, making the 100 metres to the street normally covered in a minute or so took the best part of an hour.

Just before 2pm a decision to divert the march down Art Gallery Road and into the Domain was taken by organisers on the advice of the police, who believed the numbers made it impossible to steer them back into Hyde Park.

Once there, the marchers collapsed onto the grass in the heat, many seeking some shade under trees.

"It was beyond everybody's expectations," said Bruce Childs, a spokesman for the Walk Against the War Coalition.

"We knew it was going to be big, but didn't realise it was going to be as big as it was."

He believed about 300,000 people had "walked the route".

A spokesman for State Transit said it had underestimated the size of the crowd, many of whom were forced to walk many kilometres into town when bulging trains, buses and light rail left thousands behind.

Extra services were added in the afternoon as people left.

Adding to the chaos, the North Shore line was closed yesterday due to track work.

Buses were brought in to replace the trains.

War of the words

Placards spotted among the marchers yesterday:

Somewhere in Texas a village has lost its idiot

Howard is Bush's fridge magnet

Fight plaque not Iraq

War is so 20th century

Stop mad cowboy disease

War begins with Dubya

Axis of Weasels

That's Oil Folks

If it's not UN it's not ON

How Many Lives Per Gallon?

Not in my name, not with my taxes

Weapons of Mass Distraction

Crowds in Market Street, Sydney. RICK STEVENS

City throbs to drumbeat of peace

The Grim Reaper came, and girls in tutus, all passionately against the war, Valerie Lawson writes.

The people's army marched as one, with one voice, one heartbeat, through the streets of Sydney.

To the insistent rhythm of the chant "No war, no war," punctuated by three hand claps, they marched as they sang as they whistled as they cheered.

"No, war, no war," cried the little girl in a pink fairy dress, the pregnant woman with a peace sign painted on her belly, the man chattering on his mobile dressed as the Grim Reaper, the 33 members of the Wayward Wanderers bushwalking group, the Quakers, the Palestinians, the Peace Angels, Masaya Arellano, a schoolgirl in a frangipani necklace and with a peace banner wrapped round her head, and Chloe, nine months, on her first march.

As the bushwalking leader, Mike Heffernan, said: "It makes you proud to be a Sydneysider. The city, and the state, rallied in Hyde Park, then marched through four streets, as about 250,000 joined in a show of anti-war unity not seen in Sydney for 30 years.

Nancy Gill, 82, of Newport Beach, was one of the thousands who stood shoulder-to-shoulder at noon, blanketed in 30 degree-plus heat in Hyde Park. "I've been through one war, and that was enough," she said. "I'm dead against wars, and especially this one."

Graeme Morgan and his wife, Heather, had come down from Killcare, on the Central Coast. Before yesterday, Mr Morgan had "no need to protest against war. But what we are talking about now is the most inhumane form of killing people. That's bombing."

With freewheeling spirit, some marchers went round and round the route, while others mapped out their journeys backtracking, branching off, many ending up in the Domain, where the first band of marchers was sent by organisers to avoid a dangerous, heart-stopping crush back at Hyde Park.

At noon the paths round Archibald fountain were an unofficial parade ground of protest groups such as the bushwalkers, each bearing aloft a polystyrene white dove, and the Sydney Anti-Bases Pine Gap Coalition, wearing white paper lantern hats shaped like the domes of Pine Gap.

"Is this where the Society of Friends are meeting?" asked one woman. No, they were assembling elsewhere, near the white satin-gowned, white-winged Peace Angels, among them the model Julie Healy.

The colour of the day was purple, with many marchers sporting purple satin ribbons, and others dressed top to toe in shades of lavender, mauve or deep purple.

As Alexander Theroux once wrote, purple combines blue (spirituality and nobility) and red (courage and virility) symbolising wit, intelligence, knowledge, religious devotion, sanctity, humility, sobriety, penitence and sorrow.

One woman tottered in purple mules, stiletto-heeled, while Peter Wright, a Korean War veteran from Springwood, wore a purple ribbon on his blue shirt.

He had journeyed from the Blue Mountains with other blue-garbed travellers, and sat on a kerb in Park Street when the marshals cried out, "If you're against the war, sit down."

Mr Wright, a retired electrician in his 70s, was marching alone. His wife was at home. "She's a Howard supporter, right or wrong. Our family are polarised." And his children? He brought out some family photos wrapped in a white tissue. "All deceased."

"White-winged peace angels" join the protest.
PETER RAE

We marched on, under the face of Picasso, smiling ruefully down on the crowd from banners advertising an exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW.

The Grim Reaper, holding a sign saying "Overworked. Pay Rise Now", asked for directions. He could not see clearly through the black veil covering his face. Few were eager to help.

"I seem like a bad omen, which it [the war talk] is." His name was Mark Anderson and he had found his costume, complete with rubbery skeleton gloves and shoes, in a costume shop. Where was he from? "England. All dark, and miserable things come from England, don't they?"

A woman said: "This march shows the multi-cultural nature of the city," and it did, as groups assembled with national flags at the front of the march. They cheered the prancing Friendly Fire street theatre actors on stilts dressed as George Bush and his marionette, John Howard. Another puppet pair showed Bush, trailed by Howard as a dog, sliding back and forth near the President's rear.

Down Elizabeth Street, down King Street, where the steady rhythm of commerce continued in the jewellery stores, where shop assistants stood at the doors, bemused by this interruption to normal trading.

The chant continued, "No war, no war," a message echoed on a small cardboard sign worn round the neck of a whippet named Mr Percy, and a woman in a mauve hat holding a placard, "Bugger off Bush."

Up George Street, and Patricia Cahalan, 72, said: "I hope the message gets through." Did she march against the Vietnam War? "No, I was too busy looking after children." Her four grandchildren were alongside her, two in strollers.

"What do we want? Peace. When do we want it? Now."

We arrived, at last, at the Domain, where seven police sat by the closed public toilets.

"It's good to see so many cops guarding the dunnies," one woman shouted, not really upset. The police laughed. Other marchers flung themselves and their banners onto the grass, bringing out lunch, looking lost. There was no full stop to the day.

Others ended their long afternoon in the Royal Botanic Gardens, trailing after a band of drummers, the beat on the steel drums waking the bats from their Sunday slumber. Finally, the people's army had come to rest.

As marcher Jackie Woods had said earlier: "Who knows if it will achieve anything?" She had to march, though, like the 250,000 others. "I feel like it's out of control and this is the only way I can express how I feel."

Sean Nicholls

Sean Nicholls is the State Political Editor of The Sydney Morning Herald.

Ellen Connolly

Ellen Connolly is a journalist for The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald, based in New York.