

# Stand up and speak out for what's right

## Mass protests have the power to bring about social change

BY DOUGLAS ROCHE, FREELANCE MARCH 24, 2010



The Coalition for a Nuclear Free Alberta held a protest here last year. Former senator Douglas Roche will be protesting nuclear weapons in New York on May 2.

**Photograph by:** Rick MacWilliam, The Journal, File, Freelance

So the Grant MacEwan swimming pool won't be closed, after all. Well, not at least for another year. And the words of the national anthem won't be changed. And the Canadian government's foreign aid programs will continue to include the teaching of family planning.

What binds these disparate topics? Each shows the power of protest. When the public gets mad, politicians (my definition of the word includes university presidents) back down. When the kitchen gets too hot, they run outside gasping for fresh air.

I have to disclose that, as a daily swimmer (though not at MacEwan), I took a particular delight in watching the university officials squirm under the waves (pardon the pun) of public protest against the announcement that, through some bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo accounting, money would be saved at some future date by filling in the pool and installing exercise machines.

Credit the authorities for recognizing a tsunami racing toward them. Similarly, Prime Minister Stephen Harper underwent a metamorphosis to instant wisdom when his political base rebelled against the

proposed de-sexing of O Canada. And while birth control programs have a built-in controversy, Harper, when he saw the backlash against proposed banning of them in foreign aid programs, quickly retreated to the status quo.

There are many more examples of the political decision-makers heeding the cries of an outraged public. When former prime minister Brian Mulroney tried to change the rules for pension benefits, all it took was one old woman shaking her umbrella at him and calling him "Charlie McCarthy" for him to dash into his office and rescind the changes. When the Alberta government tried to save some nickels and dimes by cancelling a few small benefits for the mentally distressed, public outrage turned that decision around in a flash. The power barons of the oil industry couldn't stomach public howls over dead birds in the tailing ponds and now there's some sort of inquiry into this mess.

Sometimes the effect of public protest cannot be seen so dramatically. Edmonton city council voted to close down the Edmonton Municipal Airport, and everyone thought it was being phased out -- or will it be rescued by court action until 2052? Hundreds of chanting protesters marched to the legislature last Saturday demanding the provincial government stop spending cuts to public services, but a government spokesman responded that cuts in areas such as youth services and employment enabled funding to be saved for seniors and the vulnerable. Who's right and who's wrong? The debt may go down, but student loans are sure to go up. People have been standing up for years to uphold Canada's publicly funded health-care system, but creeping privatization is leading us toward a two-tier system.

While there are ambiguous effects in some protests, it is clear that mass protests have brought great changes in the past. Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent marches obtained the independence of India. The U.S. civil rights movement became unstoppable when Rosa Parks wouldn't give up her seat on a bus and Martin Luther King Jr. marched to Memphis, Tenn. To stop apartheid, Nelson Mandela went to jail in South Africa for 27 years and came out a hero and future president. William Wilberforce, an otherwise obscure British politician, developed a worldwide following two centuries ago by exercising the simple notion that slavery is inherently evil.

Millions of people around the world marched in February 2003 against the impending war in Iraq. They did not stop that particular war, but there's no doubt that this global outcry against war has affected political thinking ever since. Many people have publicly protested against global warming but, even though the Copenhagen conference failed, governments now know they have to move together to protect the global climate.

Protesting against wrong policies does work. At least, it works often enough to recognize that, despite the cynicism that passes for much of public policy, the political establishment fears the effect of aroused voters. The interesting question here is: Who is aroused?

This might well be the subject of an interesting study, but my political experience tells me it is usually only the people directly affected by a particular issue who exert themselves to make their voices heard. If a halfway house or teenage shelter is being opened on a street, only the neighbours care (for or against) and not many others. Only the issues that affect our lives here and now occupy our

attention.

This nearsightedness blocks off protests on issues that truly do affect us all but which do not appear so in our daily living. Massive poverty is destabilizing regional societies with global repercussions. The existence of 23,000 nuclear weapons, many of them on hair-trigger alert, threatens the security of every inhabitant of the planet. The violations of human rights of men, women and children in many parts of the world are a blow against the intricately connected humanity everywhere.

Where are protests against politicians who treat foreign aid as but a trickle-down crumb for the undeserving? Where is an informed public opinion critiquing the so-called justification for the powerful nations to maintain their nuclear weapons while proscribing their acquisition by anyone else, thus producing a two-class nuclear world, which is unsustainable in the 21st century? Where is the outrage against the raping of women and assaults on children that have become a standard of warfare in such places as Africa and the Middle East?

We need to enlarge our sphere of interest, to say the least. In the age of globalization, humanity is no longer a set of different compartments. Governments need to be aroused against violations of social justice and human security that truly do affect us -- if only we realized it.

Many people are afraid to protest publicly because they fear being entrapped in violence. It is true that a fanatical element sometimes infects legitimate protests with some resulting violence. But this ought not detract us from the value of lawful non-violent protest. I'm not talking about civil disobedience here; I'll leave that to Greenpeace.

I'm talking about standing up and speaking out for what's right and wrong in the world. That's why I'll be joining thousands of protesters against nuclear weapons for a march in New York on May 2 to the United Nations Building from Times Square. One voice multiplied many times may get results.

Former senator Douglas Roche is the author of *Creative Dissent: A Politician's Struggle for Peace*.