

Protest is stronger than ever

Far from fizzling out, the global justice movement is growing in numbers and maturity

Mr Bush and Mr Blair might have a tougher fight than they anticipated. Not from Saddam Hussein perhaps – although it is still not obvious that they can capture and hold Iraq’s cities without major losses – but from an anti-war movement that is beginning to look like nothing the world has seen before. It’s not just that people have begun to gather in great numbers even before a shot has been fired. It’s not just that they are doing so without the inducement of conscription or any other direct threat to their welfare. It’s not just that there have already been meetings or demonstrations in almost every nation on Earth. It’s also that the campaign is being coordinated globally with an unprecedented precision. And the people partly responsible for this are the members of a movement which, even within the past few weeks, the mainstream media has pronounced extinct.

Last year, 40,000 members of the global justice movement gathered at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This year, more than 100,000, from 150 nations, have come – for a meeting! The world has seldom seen such political assemblies since Daniel O’Connell’s “monster meetings” in the 1840s.

Far from dying away, our movement has grown bigger than most of us could have guessed. September 11 muffled the protests for a while, but since then they have returned with greater vehemence, everywhere except the US. The last major global demonstration it convened was the rally at the European summit in Barcelona. Some 350,000 activists rose from the dead. They came despite the terrifying response to the

MONBIOT | PROTEST IS STRONGER THAN EVER

marches in June 2001 in Genoa, where the police burst into protesters' dormitories and beat them with truncheons as they lay in their sleeping bags, tortured others in the cells and shot one man dead.

But neither the violent response, nor September 11, nor the indifference of the media have quelled this rising. Ever ready to believe their own story, the newsrooms have interpreted the absence of coverage (by the newsrooms) as an absence of activity. One of our recent discoveries is that we no longer need them. We have our own channels of communication, our own websites and pamphlets and magazines, and those who wish to find us can do so without their help. They can pronounce us dead as often as they like, and we shall, as many times, be resurrected.

The media can be forgiven for expecting us to disappear. In the past, it was hard to sustain global movements of this kind. The socialist international, for example, was famously interrupted by nationalism. When the nations to which the comrades belonged went to war, they forgot their common struggle and took to arms against each other. But now, thanks to the globalisation some members of the movement contest, nationalism is a far weaker force. American citizens are meeting and debating with Iraqis, even as their countries prepare to go to war. We can no longer be called to heel. Our loyalty is to the principles we defend and to those who share them, irrespective of where they come from.

One of the reasons why the movement appears destined only to grow is that it provides the only major channel through which we can engage with the most critical issues. Climate change, international debt, poverty, the hegemony of the G8 nations, the IMF and the World Bank, the depletion of natural resources, nuclear proliferation and low-level conflict are major themes in the lives of most of the world's people, but minor themes in almost all mainstream political discourse. We are told that the mind-rotting drivel which now fills the pages of the newspapers is a necessary commercial response to the demands of younger readers. This may, to some extent, be true. But here are tens of thousands of young people who have less interest in celebrity culture than George Bush has in Wittgenstein. They have evolved their own scale of values, and re-enfranchised themselves by pursuing what they know to be important. For the great majority of activists – those who live in the poor world – the movement offers the only effective means of reaching people in the richer nations.

We have often been told that the reason we're dead is that we have been overtaken by and subsumed within the anti-war campaign. It would be more accurate to say that the anti-war campaign has, in large part, grown out of the global justice movement. This movement has never recognised a distinction between the power of the rich world's governments and their appointed institutions (the IMF, the World Bank, the

MONBIOT | PROTEST IS STRONGER THAN EVER

World Trade Organisation) to wage economic warfare and the power of the same governments, working through different institutions (the UN security council, Nato) to send in the bombers. Far from competing with our concerns, the impending war has reinforced our determination to tackle the grotesque maldistribution of power which permits a few national governments to assert a global mandate. When the activists leave Porto Alegre tomorrow, they will take home to their 150 nations a new resolve to turn the struggle against the war with Iraq into a contest over the future of the world.

While younger activists are eager to absorb the experience of people like Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, Lula, Victor Chavez, Michael Albert and Arundhati Roy, all of whom are speaking in Porto Alegre, our movement is, as yet, more eager than wise, fired by passions we have yet to master. We have yet to understand, despite the police response in Genoa, the mechanical determination of our opponents.

We are still rather too prepared to believe that spectacular marches can change the world. While the splits between the movement's marxists, anarchists and liberals are well-rehearsed, our real division – between the diversalists and the universalists – has, so far, scarcely been explored. Most of the movement believes that the best means of regaining control over political life is through local community action. A smaller faction (to which I belong) believes that this response is insufficient, and that we must seek to create democratically accountable global institutions. The debates have, so far, been muted. But when they emerge, they will be fierce.

For all that, I think most of us have noticed that something has changed, that we are beginning to move on from the playing of games and the staging of parties, that we are coming to develop a more mature analysis, a better grasp of tactics, an understanding of the need for policy. We are, in other words, beginning for the first time to look like a revolutionary movement. We are finding, too, among some of the indebted states of the poor world, a new preparedness to engage with us. In doing so, they speed our maturation: the more we are taken seriously, the more seriously we take ourselves. Whether we are noticed or not is no longer relevant. We know that, with or without the media's help, we are a gathering force which might one day prove unstoppable. #