

The Story of the Australian Nonviolence Network

By Peter Jones, Margaret Pestorius and Bryan Law

Early Years

The concept of nonviolent action in Australia was first documented by a Quaker researcher in 1979 (Ro Morrow, *Pax Pacifica*, only existent in draft manuscript form) with a series of case studies dating back to resistance to conscription during the First World War and including more recent Aboriginal actions, such as the Tent Embassy outside Parliament House in Canberra. There was also the series of boat protests directed against French nuclear testing in the South Pacific in 1972-74. Nonviolence educators from the United States inspired resistance to the South African rugby team, the Springboks, in 1972, but the more recent interest in nonviolent action was largely inspired by the successful campaign to Save the Franklin, the last wild river in Tasmania, in 1982-83.

In the late 1970's, nonviolent action was focused largely around environmental issues, particularly the campaign against uranium mining and actions to save native forest. NvA was largely viewed as a useful tactic and there was little interest in the philosophy or the concept of nonviolence as a way of life. Activists felt that the dominant conservative culture in Australia would be alienated by any perceived violence on their part and there was a lot of emphasis on creative actions to raise public consciousness through media coverage.

Blockades were a well-used tactic, both to halt the transport of yellowcake from the mine to ships in the harbour, or to stop logging operations in native forest. Role-playing was invariably built around this kind of action as well as actions in or outside company offices where there was a connection with the uranium industry. The overall result was a partial success because these actions did build a public awareness of the issues which has been maintained to this day. However the Labor government which has been in power in Canberra since 1983, has chosen to sit on the fence by opting for a middle of the way policy on both issues, satisfying neither the environmental movement or the industry.

Other NVA ideas were borrowed by groups like those trying to block the construction of urban freeways, as well as the anti-apartheid movement (CARE) and development groups: concepts like group process, building a campaign, consensus decision making, and brainstorming ideas caught on quickly.

The skills acquired served conservationists well when activists in Tasmania called in support from all over Australia, and beyond, in the summer of 1982-83. Their aim was to prevent the Hydroelectric Commission continuing their construction operations in the South West Wilderness where they sought to harness the state's last wild river for more hydroelectricity. Over a thousand people were arrested through the summer months but in the long run the campaign was only successful when linked to political pressure on the mainland.

With a Federal Election due in March 1983, the Labor Party sought to build up electoral support by promising to over-rule the state government in Tasmania if they were elected. They were elected and when the case was taken to the

High Court, it ruled in favour of stopping the dam construction. Nonviolent action became the flavour of the month but also provoked strong antagonism, not only from industry and political conservatives, but also from within the Left.

The Second Wave

When the second wave of the peace movement developed after 1983, the focus of nonviolent action shifted more to the three main issues in Australia: closing down the US bases, halting the visit of nuclear warships to Australian ports, and stopping the mining and export of uranium, the front end of the nuclear fuel cycle. (There are no commercial nuclear reactors in Australia although there have been calls to construct them; however there is a research reactor near Sydney which has been the target of an ongoing local and largely political campaign for almost twenty years.)

Project Iceberg was born out of a nonviolent action workshop in Perth, Western Australia, and focused on direct action aimed at stopping the visit of US warships to the port of Fremantle (two thirds of US port calls were to WA in the early 1980's). Subsequent actions took place on the warships in port as well as water-borne actions to try and stop the ships coming in. Peace Fleets in other ports also organised workshops in nonviolent action to help improve their tactics while women who had been to Greenham Common inspired a series of peace camps outside major US bases after 1983.

Perhaps the best known action was the week long Women's Peace Camp outside the secret US spy satellite base at Pine Gap, near Alice Springs in the desert centre of Australia. Affinity groups formed the basis of many of these actions, with consensus decision making central to their process, to the disgust of groups on the hard Left who felt frustrated that they could no longer "take over" the new movements.

There was an attempt to build a national network, Groundswell, as well as local groups, with much more emphasis now on personal change as well as political action. Most of these ideas had emanated from the United States as a number of activists had visited the Movement for a New Society and bought back some of their literature as well as their ideas. Opposition developed, partly to the dominant US culture that was perceived by some activists, but also from a more "anarchist" (in the negative "individualist" sense of the word) as well as hard Left perspective.

Resistance to Nonviolence

There was bitter criticism of having to buy the whole nonviolent package as well as the concept, particularly from those who were driven by a deep anger directed against the state and all its institutions. One such movement, known originally as the Nomadic Action Group, travelled around different actions in Australia, charging into ongoing campaigns with little if any respect for those already involved, and usually causing havoc, before moving on as the self-appointed saviours of the Earth. Their actions caused much pain and heart-searching among groups deeply committed to nonviolence.

This disruption came to a head at peace camps organised outside the US satellite base at Nurrungar in South Australia around 1984-85 and served to

discredit the idea of nonviolent action for several years.

Historically, Australia's social change movements have been largely "leftist" - socialist, communist and union based. This has had a strong influence on the thinking of people working in or moving toward social change work. This together with distance and sparse population have been obstacles in developing new and creative methods of organisation and action.

It must be said also that nonviolent activists in Australia as elsewhere have had to come to terms with and move away from dogmatism and self-righteousness, and learn to express ourselves through our own practice. We have had to grow a bit more humble at times and develop/experiment with new systems of communication and exchange.

Intentional Affinity Groups

The more recent history of the Network (1988-1995) can be traced most clearly through the experience and learning of a series of affinity group experiments. Several individuals were still determined to increase the knowledge and skill base in Australia in the use of nonviolent action and formed groups with this intent.

While not all participants in these projects had this intent, enough did to extrapolate and pass on lessons. Lessons were then systematically passed on by activists travelling and living interstate.

Many of these experiments are recorded and analysed in depth in the Australian magazine *Nonviolence Today*. Our intention here, however is to give an overview of the history and lessons learned.

In 1988, more than fifty warships, many nuclear armed and powered, from fourteen navies visited nineteen Australian ports to "honour" 200 years of invasion. This became the focus of water-based action in many ports and a chance for individuals to experiment with direct action.

Out of these actions came Nuremburg Action Brisbane (NAB), an affinity group set up by a coalition of Brisbane activists from different backgrounds and philosophies. Many of the NAB activists had previous experience of warship actions between 1982-88 (through People for Nuclear Disarmament, Catholic Workers, and Peace & Environment Fleet). This experience had pointed to the need for good coalition politics based around discreet events.

A specified limited time period, a code of ethics and clear agreements about roles meant that people were able to work together in a way that had been hitherto impossible. People committed themselves to being involved right through court hearings, which were organised collectively, and jail sentences. Nonviolence training was a key part of NAB. This experiment gave a chance to experience a closed group with limited achievable aims.

Melbourne Rainforest Action Group

Melbourne Rainforest Action Group (MRAG) used the experience of water-based "ship actions" as the basis to build a longer term campaign. A strong core group of people spent 1989 and 1990 organising over twenty-five nonviolent

actions aimed at stopping the people of Melbourne's complicity in the rainforest timber trade. The campaign also included community education work and served as an intensive training ground for large numbers of young activists.

Skill sharing processes meant that over 100 people did weekend nonviolence workshops, and many different people took various organising roles doing police liaison, facilitating, speaking to the media, running stalls, preparing actions.

Probably the most intensive learning phase of this period came when a sub-group of Melbourne RAG that took part in the national anti-US Bases Actions at Nurrungar 1989. Dubbed cynically, the "Church of Nonviolence", this group promoted its principled version of nonviolence to a camp of mixed philosophy (analysis) peace movement participants, assorted students, and hippies.

Through the process of the camp we were forced to clarify our thinking about why we thought particular strategies effective. This was especially in relation to secrecy and police relations. This resulted in us extending our creative energies to devise an action that fitted our thinking about effective action but included the camp energy as well.

While for most of us, this experience led to a reaffirmation and strengthening of our understanding of nonviolence, it also moved us to look at how we related to other social movements and activists who had different analyses and different perspectives on conflict and power.

Forest Defence Campaigns

This period (1988-1990) also saw Network members take part in various Australian Native Forest Defence campaigns (SE Forests of NSW, East Gippsland, Fraser Island. Later there was the Long Hot Summer in Tasmania, SW Western Australia). Usually this was done through network members offering nonviolence education after being approached. We tried hard to have an empowering effect on group and organisational processes but had insufficient skill, support and numbers to significantly effect campaign outcomes.

These experiences, though growthful learning experiences most often resulted in disappointment, frustration and burn out for nonviolent activists. Organising bodies (and forest participants) have rarely been willing to take on empowering group process and community-based models of social change (where communities are involved in solving their own problems directly). It has been difficult for nonviolence activists to figure out how to work without being attacked and/or disrupted by the individual hero, the chronic urgent despairee, or the controlling bureaucrat.

Participation in these Forest Defence Actions has also given Network members a greater understanding of the need to work within a framework of a long term nonviolent action campaign. In the case of Forest Campaigns this would clearly include elements of community participation and problem solving instead of parliamentary solutions imposed on communities from outside.

Outside imposition has further alienated, angered and disempowered indigenous, working class and rural populations.

The first deliberate Australian Nonviolence Network (ANN) forest defence experiment, the "SAFE" action group has recently been completed. This group worked hard at working with the mainstream conservation organisations, but still with little effect, despite three years of establishing bona fides. Mainstream conservation organisations are not social change organisations, and can't bring themselves to wholeheartedly and practically support grass-roots power-building. They exploit the grass-roots (community-education ability, donations, visibility) for their own political lobbying "power".

People have learned it can be more effective to work, for at least a large proportion of the time, within a group of people who have common analysis and resulting process. We need to work in the ways that we choose, where we have considerable influence over the processes we use. We need to work in small groups where this is possible.

Developing Country-Wide Perspective

In 1990, the Gulf Peace Team project assembled a collection of activists from around Australia to either join or support an international group to directly position themselves between the warring parties. This initiated and furthered relationships across Australia and became informally the first project of the ANN.

In Melbourne, the Gulf Peace Team Support Group provided a chance for people to experience just how efficient and effective an affinity group of twelve to fourteen could be when it shared similar values, philosophy and analysis.

AIDEX 1991 was another National camp at which a self-conscious ANN had a presence. This time we were protesting the arms-trade. This camp is famous mostly for reminding us of what we shouldn't do, of how we shouldn't organise.

However, it was at this camp that the nonviolence mob explicitly separated from the masses with a clear "we want to do it this way because it works, you can join us if you want to, but only if you agree to do things this way". It became clear that unified mass action (as espoused by the Socialist, and generally youthful lefty contingent) was not appropriate. Though we already knew this, in the context of the camp it had been hard to keep clear focus and strong identity.

Ten months later the Network held a ten day course for people who wished to facilitate nonviolence workshops. This holds an important place in ANN development. It helped create strong relationships between people who ordinarily live far apart. It focussed on higher levels of skill development using our wide range of experience as the basis on which to build.

This Mega-Workshop contributed to us becoming clearer about how much of our work is directed by unresolved feelings and experiences from our pasts. We undertook to incorporate work on feelings in everything we do.

We also became more open to the spiritual elements of our political work. The Rainforest Timber movement had always had an element of this as did the Quakers and Catholic Workers (albeit from a different direction!) but we were able to bring it more into focus and recognise the strength it had already brought us.

Another Anti-Bases camp at Nurrungar 1993 offered the "Spanner Action Group" a chance to implement learning. The group was a mixture of people who between them had been involved in several of the afore mentioned projects (NAB, MRAG, NURRUNGAR 89, AIDEX 91, Forest actions) plus new people.

This closed group again adopted the use of a code of ethics (which had been lost for southern activists in the closed and explicitly nonviolent culture of MRAG). Spanner Action was proud of, and secure in, their nonviolence philosophy. The experienced members offered their leadership openly. The code of ethics defined the boundaries, and the group spent little energy trying to convince other camp members about nonviolence. They just got on and did what they wanted as an affinity group.

They were well organised (always an extremely attractive feature in the social change movement) and designed a nonviolent action that was creative, positive and inclusive of those wanting to be involved. This drew attention and respect and resulted in more links being made around the country. The SAFE Affinity group in October 1994 was a similar exercise, this time in forest defence, with similar effects among the grass roots.

Strategic Nonviolence

In the last couple of years there has been a pronounced move toward thinking more strategically and long-term about how best to apply our energy. This reflects our frustration with the "random event" in isolation - a film night here, an action there, a national camp to get media attention now and again - the method of campaigning that is adopted by most social change campaigns in Australia.

What we are calling "strategic nonviolence campaigns" attempt to outline political objectives (what we want to achieve in the medium term) and strategic goals (groups that we need to change) that are realistic and that will make a noticeable difference to structural violence. It is crucial that individual nonviolent actions are designed to achieve particular and carefully chosen strategic goals to be effective. Campaigns are designed through an analysis of community involvement and empowerment. The overall context is always nonviolent social revolution.

The Australian Humanitarian Aid for Bougainville (AHAB) campaign is a campaign attempting to take a longer term view. AHAB has been operating for over three years. It is presently a single closed group (with a trickle turnover of members) that spends significant energy on researching and developing a strategic plan that identifies and seeks to change the nature of military links between Australia and Papua new Guinea. Each individual action is designed to serve these goals.

Women

Women continue to play prominent roles in the Network. In Adelaide, Network members have been responsible for the Reclaim the Night march, doubling the numbers, and transforming the atmosphere through giving singing and song a central place.

Typically women have organised into groups that have oscillated between action and support work. Some groups such have tried to do both. "Real Women on Billboards" was a group of six women who tried to balance support with strategically focussed action. Organised as a four month project, Real Women gave a closed affinity group experience but functioned somewhat like a workshop or course providing intensive learning for the activists involved.

This year another National (this time women's) Peace Camp is giving women of the Network a chance to build on the experience of the past six years, this time incorporating the strategic element. Using the strategic thinking of the Bougainville campaign, two ANN affinity groups will organise two actions and a ritual. They will be joined at the actions by newer women who have undertaken three days of preparation exploring the meaning and consequences of nonviolence, strategy, arrest and debriefing.

Australian Nonviolence Network Forms

The last six years has seen the ANN move from an informal collection of people with similar philosophy to an organised, identifiable entity. The Network resumed annual Australia-wide Gatherings in 1992. The organisers' stated purpose was "getting organised".

In the three meetings since then we have grappled with establishing structures that meet activist's needs, that remain decentralised and that can be run with minimal resources.

Networks, to be effective and functional have to serve the activist base. They have to grow out of a desire to make action more effective, and function by providing services that better equip and enable activists to carry out their work.

The Gatherings and the Network Centre have been established at Commonground Cooperative in Victoria. Commonground is an intentional community serving as a model for social change. It has played a positive role in the Network's development.

At the 1992 Gathering we spent some time defining aims of the Network. The aims are:

1. To maintain and develop the Network
2. To Outreach to other social change groups
3. To Develop a Culture of Nonviolence

We have set up our first Centre for Nonviolence (c/- Commonground) as a resource, education, contacts and information base. And we have a Network facilitation collective to aid communication and encourage support and accountability amongst activists/participants sparsely spread through a wide land.

In the last two years strong nodes have developed in Western Australia and South Australia. It is heartening to see lessons learned here being incorporated into people's work there as a matter of course.

Our intent to organise by affinity group is under way. We are in the process of establishing a set of principles that to some extent will express our philosophy, our bottom lines. And we will continue to share and record our lessons as a gift for each other so that we don't have to keep learning the same lessons over and over and over and over and over and over.

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Non-violence Today