

Protests greet Bush in Australia

Our correspondents
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The 21-hour visit by George Bush to Australia was greeted with protests around the country. On October 22, the day Bush arrived, demonstrations were held in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Hobart, as well as smaller regional centers. The following day, over 5,000 people gathered in the national capital Canberra to protest while the US president addressed the federal parliament.

In Canberra, 450 federal police and Australian Protective Service Officers, some in riot gear and with attack dogs at their side, kept the demonstrators behind barricades and well away from Parliament House. Students, professional people and members of various protest groups chanted “Go home Bush” and “You are not welcome here,” booing when Bush arrived at 10am. Many shouted “Bush, war criminal” and chanted “Bush, Bush, CIA, how many kids have you killed today”.

Some 1,000 protestors who marched to the Australian prime minister’s residence to demonstrate when Bush’s motorcade arrived there were confronted by large numbers of armed federal police. Some demonstrators were injured and five reportedly arrested when the police suddenly moved forward to herd people off the roadway. One protestor was dragged through the police line, thrown to the ground and handcuffed. He narrowly escaped being bitten in the face by police dogs.

In Sydney the evening before, some 5,000 protestors gathered at the Town Hall and marched to the US consulate in Martin Place. The crowd carried banners such as “No Howard, No Bush” and “Regime change, Bush and Howard you’re next”, and chanted “George Bush, Uncle Sam, Iraq will be your Vietnam” as they weaved their way through the city.

The protest was organised by the Anti-War Coalition—a grouping of protest, peace, and human rights groups. Representatives of the Greens and the

Australian Democrats also took part. A high proportion of the demonstrators comprised young people not affiliated to any specific political organisation.

Speakers at Town Hall criticised the illegal character of the war on Iraq, Israel’s attacks on Palestinians, the Bush administration’s incarceration of Australian citizens’ David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib at Guantanamo Bay and the Howard government’s cuts to education.

Brian Gore, a Catholic priest who has worked in the Philippines and South America, condemned the human rights record of both George Bush and China’s Hu Jintou, who was also visiting Australia. He indicted the imprisonment of hundreds of people without charges in Guantanamo Bay.

David Barsamian, a visiting American journalist, told the crowd many Americans had opposed the war and denounced the US media for concealing this from the rest of the world. He said that the people had to create their own media. He recalled the *New York Times* comments after millions took part in February’s global demonstrations that “the next superpower is global public opinion”.

Bob Brown, the leader of the Australian Greens, limited himself to calls for the US to leave Iraq, without making any reference to the foreign troops moving in under the auspices of the United Nations. He did not call for the release of Hicks and Habib, only that they should be transferred to Australia for trial, as Bush had “repatriated the Americans to America”. He finished with nationalist agitation against the proposed US-Australia free trade agreement, saying Australia did not want to be “dominated” by the US.

Kylie Moon, a representative of the radical group Resistance, sought to bolster illusions in protest politics with claims the February demonstrations had “not failed” and that what was needed was simply more protests. This position serves to prevent any political

lessons being drawn from the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in complete disregard of the largest antiwar protests in history.

Protestors at both the Canberra and Sydney rallies spoke to the WSWS about their concerns over the war and democratic rights.

At the Sydney rally, George, a 15 year-old high school student, stated that the motivation behind the war in Iraq was America's desire to seize Iraq's oil: "Bush shouldn't be in Iraq or stay in Iraq. He is ruining the world, pandering to big corporations to make money." He also expressed concern about religious zealotry playing an increasing role in politics, describing Bush as a "religious fundamentalist".

Brooke, a Technical and Further Education teacher attended the protests to show "that a sizeable minority is against Bush". Brooke also maintained that "the Bush government was motivated by a desire to export Christian fundamentalism into the Middle East". He rejected the official rationale for the war in Iraq, saying "The war had nothing to do with WMD, never had".

James, 25, an engineer from Britain, said he was against the war in Iraq: "The war was a waste of lives and a waste of money." He was sceptical about the Hutton inquiry into the war as it had refused to deal with "the heart of the matter, the lies being told by Blair. They are only discussing Kelly and personal circumstances".

Kelvin, a 28 year old student from Singapore said he was opposed to the war in Iraq with or without a UN mandate. He said opposition to the war was widespread in Singapore. "The war was immoral and the doctrine of preemptive strike sets a precedent."

Zeeshan, 27 from Bangladesh, was concerned about media disinformation: "People have a totally wrong idea of what's going on. Their understanding depends on the media. They understand that something is going wrong but the media are playing a very bad role."

Ben, a Canberra high school student, said: "I do not appreciate the US invading and dictating to other countries. It is not just the most recent acts of aggression I disagree with, but with 50 years of US policies. I am Australian, but my parents fled Chile after the US installed a military dictatorship there that murdered thousands of ordinary people. My friend's family in Cuba has suffered enormous hardships because of the US sanctions on the country."

He denounced the security arrangements for Bush's visit as "over the top" and intended "to intimidate people and to stop opposition".

Frank, an international relations graduate student at the Australian National University, said Bush's visit showed the increasingly undemocratic behaviour of governments. The "appalling" and "disgusting" war on Iraq was being followed by an even more aggressive and "closed mind" approach.

He said: "The security precautions have been right over the top. I have been to some protests before, especially on the war, and none of them have been overly aggressive. The amount of police here today is ridiculous. And last night I couldn't get to sleep because of the planes and helicopters flying overhead. If anyone flew within a certain distance of parliament house last night, they were to be shot down on sight."

Asked why governments felt so insecure and unpopular, Frank pointed to the attenuated state of democracy: "We have a democracy like the US, for example, where Bush had only 25 percent of the nation voting for him, and Australia, where John Howard got in because there is really no-one else to vote for. Democracy at the moment has a pretty sad existence. It is not democratic at all."



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