

The Sydney Harbour Bridge protest: an insight into the level of social frustration

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A one-man protest on Friday morning that closed Sydney's iconic Harbour Bridge provided an insight into the level of frustration and anger that exists among broad sections of the Australian population.

The man, initially identified only as "Mick", parked his truck on the multi-lane motorway crossing the bridge just before 5a.m. Undetected by security, he used a ladder to scale a security fence, then made his way up to the pedestrian walkway just below the arch. High above the harbour, he attached two hand-written banners to the walkway, reading "Plz Help My Kids" and "Kids First." In his truck, he left a note advising police to close the bridge for safety reasons.

The police did so, shutting down all vehicle and rail traffic in both directions. Mick, meanwhile, proceeded to call various popular Sydney radio stations and news channels to explain the reasons for his actions.

While the drama unfolded over the next two hours, many of the main arterial roads into Sydney's central business district were choked to a standstill. Train services to and from much of the city's north shore were halted. Tens of thousands of people were delayed getting to work, taking their children to childcare or school, or making early morning appointments or airline flights.

The protest and the closure of the bridge quickly became the subject of discussion—on websites, Facebook and Twitter, talkback radio programs, on crowded railway stations and gridlocked roads. While there was no shortage of rage among some people over the disruption to their daily routine, the dominant reaction was curiosity, sympathy and even solidarity with the lone protester.

Many people rapidly started commenting on the information they could glean from Mick's comments to the media. It became apparent that he was deeply

distressed over his lack of access to his children. In an interview with Triple M's morning show, he implied he was a victim of "parental alienation syndrome"—where children become hostile to one parent as a result of the actions of their estranged partner.

Mick told Triple M that he had "asked for help so many times" and "been pushed and pushed and pushed". He wanted, he said, to "see some policy changes". Most of all, he said, he just wanted the police and other authorities "to talk to him."

Shortly after, the protester told Channel Nine TV: "Most fathers and mothers that are victims of this sort of stuff have not got anyone to turn to. At the end of the day I have got the ability to stage a peaceful protest and make people stand up and pay attention."

Mick, who said that he was "ex-military", eventually came down from the bridge at around 7.00 a.m. He dramatically abseiled to the motorway below and was immediately arrested.

Discussion on the incident continued throughout the morning. A report on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) news website, which concluded by asking its readers "did the bridge closure affect your plans this morning", provoked dozens of comments.

One stated: "A man protests on a big bridge, stops the traffic for a couple of hours, what do they ask, 'how did this affect you'? How about trying to look into the reason? How about asking some real questions? Has anyone else had issues or problems with their kids around some government system? Let's find out why he stopped traffic!"

Another person wrote: "How interesting that there is obviously a very desperate person wanting help and the ABC are more interested in whether the bridge closure affected your plans. I think this is how a lot of people

are feeling at the moment about different matters... It would be good if our society could all stand together on these matters and cause a riot to let the damn legal systems and politicians know that there are unfair policies and it is adversely affecting people.”

“I agree with this man,” another writer stated. “The mainstream media doesn’t give a stuff about the real issues facing our Australian families, so this is what it takes to be heard these days. Good on him for doing this. It gave us all a little time to slow down and reflect.”

Another declared: “Shouldn’t you be asking what pushed this man to do this instead of how terrible it may be for someone to be late for work? While I don’t agree with his methods of protest, it is obvious that something is terribly wrong and no one is listening. Perhaps he had his regular visits to a psychologist cut under the Gillard budget... We may be seeing a lot more of this desperate behaviour from other victims of this budget cut. So much for helping the mentally ill.”

Similar responses streamed into other websites. Regardless of the particular background to the protest, many identified with someone who had been pushed to breaking point.

The reasons are not hard to find. Millions are trying to cope with immense financial and personal stresses—paying hugely inflated prices for housing and meeting ever-increasing utility bills, transport, childcare, education and health costs. Any crisis, such as losing a job or a major family illness, can rapidly plunge ordinary working people into desperate circumstances. At the same time, the entire political system is indifferent to their problems, providing them with no voice or avenue to articulate their concerns. People want change but do not how to bring it about. More and more are concluding, however, that something dramatic and radical will have to be done.

“Mick” was later identified as 38-year-old Michael Fox. He told a Sydney court that he had been unemployed for the past 12 months. He decided to make his protest because the house where his former partner was living burnt to the ground 10 weeks ago and he has not seen his three children since. He told journalists he had made multiple attempts to speak with the Department of Community Services, the government agency responsible for child welfare, but had not been contacted. The police had also ignored

him.

Fox also told the media that he had served with the Australian Army in East Timor and was discharged from the military after injuring himself during a training course for membership of the elite Special Air Service. He has claimed he subsequently went to Iraq, possibly as a private contractor, and suffers Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The court banned him from making any contact with his ex-partner or his children and from using the Sydney Harbour Bridge. He was released on bail and will appear in court again on June 10 to face prosecution for obstructing traffic and climbing on a public building.

As usual, the media has already largely dropped the episode and moved on to the next sensation. The broader discontent and alienation it reflects, however, will only continue to mount. At a certain point, sooner rather than later, it will begin to take political forms.



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