Active Resistance: We Shall Never Be Moved

Nonviolence is often confused with pacifism, misnamed ‘passive resistance’ or thought to consist only of principled nonviolence. It is widely misconstrued as consisting only of appeals to the conscience of its opponents – a simple type of ineffective, non-threatening action, like holding hands and singing ‘We Shall Not Be Moved’, before being swept aside by violent opponents. It is considered a nice idea but ineffective in the real world, an unchanging, outmoded philosophy rooted in past actions such as those of Gandhi or Martin Luther King.

However, we have already seen how effective and complex nonviolence can be. Far from being fixed in the 1930s or 1960s, it is a praxis which is continuously evolving, largely through being tested in action. In Chapter 2 we mainly looked at the Gandhian or ‘orthodox’ form of nonviolence, which is principled and revolutionary. The last chapter demonstrated, however, that other forms of nonviolence, pragmatic and reformist, have increasingly challenged orthodox nonviolence in recent years. A new and more militant form of nonviolence has emerged, particularly in forest blockades, involving tactical innovations to make blockading far more physically effective. Increasingly intricate (and occasionally ingenious) devices and methods were designed to hinder the removal of activists engaged in acts of civil disobedience. Tripods, ‘lock-ons’, burials, ‘going black wallaby’, tree-sits, and militant occupations of forests, mines, power stations, roads, city streets, offices and bulldozers (including moving ones) helped to secure the immediate goals of campaigns against environmental destruction and Aboriginal dispossession. This chapter summarises and elaborates on those developments, before discussing the ongoing ‘diversity of tactics’ controversy, a substantially different issue which, unlike ‘active resistance’, has impeded eco-pax movement development.

Extremes

In the last chapter, we saw how orthodox nonviolence was extremely successful in the Franklin River blockade. Compulsory, comprehensive training
prior to joining the action meant that everyone had a reasonable understanding of nonviolence and some preparation for it. Activists were organised into well-bonded affinity groups. They were becoming accustomed to consensus decision-making. There was minimal violence and bad publicity. The campaign had a great spirit (aided by natural grandeur as well as by ubiquitous music) and grew into an international and successful one.

Where nonviolence has been poorly implemented, however, conspicuous failures have eventuated. Although most activists at the 1996 Carrai blockade employed nonviolent strategies, there was no training and little discussion of nonviolence, and a professed disdain for nonviolence by some, who deemed it ineffective. The sabotage of a bulldozer created a backlash which led to the blockade’s collapse. The area was logged.

These cases illustrate two extremes of environmental action and the relationship that exists between them. Orthodox nonviolence has been widely used and has produced many successful outcomes. It has also been criticised for being imposed on grassroots activists from above, for being inflexible and dogmatic, and for not always being appropriate. These critics have developed new forms of action in-between the two extremes, forms that have also proven effective and which still should be regarded as nonviolent, under a broader and more realistic definition of nonviolence.

**Shift From Orthodoxy**

The Roxby blockades showed that even if many activists are trained or experienced in nonviolence, a minority with violent or dangerous tactics can create atrocious publicity for the whole blockade. A spiral of violence was created at Roxby by these violent tactics, whether physical or psychological; protest vehicles crashed through gates and careened around police roadblocks, lives were endangered, police were verbally abused and accused (often with justification) of brutality, and many people were injured. The resultant media coverage focused on the violence, the dualistic opposition of the protesters versus the police and miners, and law and order issues, with little mention of our environmental, peace and social concerns.

Amidst such an atmosphere of anger, fear and mistrust, there was little dialogue with opponents, and few conversions. Rather, there were a number of assaults on blockaders by irate miners, while two local women interviewed in the Andamooka hotel said that ‘the demonstrators were dole-bludging drug addicts paid to come out into the country to stir up trouble’.¹

Admittedly, such attitudes will not be changed quickly, and a violent response to protests is sometimes unavoidable, but disciplined nonviolence may minimise the violence, as the Franklin case shows. The Roxby campaigns failed to grow as had the Franklin, and there was little political support. Although other factors were involved (such as the difference in the issue, opponents, timing, location, and attitude of the ALP), the failure of