

## The Human Face of Political Dissent

### What we know about the anti-war marchers of February 2003

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Dissent from the planned invasion and occupation of Iraq has been a global phenomenon on an unprecedented scale. The anti-war marches and demonstrations of 15 February 2003 have no obvious precedent in history. Never have so many ordinary citizens united across all divides of nationality, religion, political and cultural systems, in passionate but non-violent democratic opposition to a war.<sup>1</sup> So impressive were these demonstrations that the *New York Times* was moved to comment on its front page that “there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion”.<sup>2</sup>

Given the uniqueness and the political significance of the anti-war movement, it is of considerable importance to understand as much as we can about who actually joined these marches, and what motivated them.

A number of research projects have been initiated on this topic. These include interviews with 400 participants of the Glasgow march<sup>3</sup> and also an international comparative survey on participants in USA, Britain, Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Germany and Italy.<sup>4</sup> This article draws on these studies, but focuses on a survey we carried out in Autumn 2003 on 69 UK residents, mainly based in the Midlands of England, 48 of whom attended the major anti-war demonstration in London. Fuller analysis of these data will appear elsewhere.

The purpose of this short article is to outline key characteristics of the demonstrators suggested by the data, and to reflect on some of the implications of these data for the political process, particularly within the UK. The participants in our study were recruited from a list held by a local organiser who had hired several buses to take participants to the demonstration. The list contained the names and addresses of all those who purchased tickets for the bus.

### What we know about the anti-war marchers

#### **1. Participants were not a cross-section of society, and the majority were already involved in progressive activism of some sort.**

Participants were mainly left and centre in voting patterns (e.g. Labour, Liberal Democrats, and smaller parties including the Greens, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru). They were mainly experienced demonstrators, but with a significant minority (20 – 35%) of people for whom this was their first political rally.

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Demonstrators tended to be highly educated, with over 60% either studying for a degree or already possessing one. 60% of the participants were in professional employment, and the majority worked in the public or voluntary sectors, rather than the private sector. The UK (and Northern Europe) data differed in this respect from data collected in Spain and Italy, where a stronger working-class participation was observed. Young people (17-24) were over-represented in the demonstrations (except in the USA). Muslims were also over-represented in the UK – though constituting a small minority of participants overall (13% in the Glasgow survey).

We found that many participants were members or supporters of organisations associated with key issues related to human rights, disarmament, and the environment (e.g. Amnesty International, Campaign against the Arms Trade, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Greenpeace were each mentioned by more than 25% of the sample).

## **2. Most participants had supported the Kosovo war. This is a post 9-11 movement.**

Only just over a quarter of the participants in our sample said they had opposed the US/UK military action in Kosovo. Their level of opposition was no greater than in the non-participants we sampled. Opposition to the Afghanistan war rose to 78% among participants, and opposition to the Iraq war was, of course, 100%. It is nevertheless important that the participants in these demonstrations were not against all the wars that the UK has recently been involved in. It is possible that there was a strong ‘anti-Bush/Blair alliance’ or ‘anti-neo-con’ aspect to the engagement of many participants.

## **3. British participants displayed strong identification with personal and family networks, or local peace groups, rather than groups reflecting traditional campaigning politics (e.g. trades unions, political parties).**

Many participants reported being at the demonstration “on behalf of” friends and family at home who could not attend, and a majority of participants judged that “a lot” or “most” of the people they knew opposed the war. Most participants went with others, rather than on their own. The most common companions were friends and neighbours (63%), fellow members of a local peace group (63%), partner (38%), other family members (42%). In contrast, only 6% said that they went with fellow members of a political party, and nobody claimed going with a fellow member of a trade union (although 8% said they met up with fellow trade unionists at the rally). Religious groups and work-based groups claimed a significant minority of the participants (12 – 20%).

## **4. Participants shared a high level of conviction and moral outrage.**

We asked participants to say what were the key factors that made them decide to attend the demonstration. The largest category of responses centred around “wanting to be heard”. One participant wrote:

*“Despite the probability of being ignored, I had to make my voice heard - succinctly reflected in the “Not In My Name” slogan. I was convinced that the UK was about to enter into an unjustified war that would result in the death and injury of thousands of innocent people.”*

Almost all responses were peppered with terms such as “utter necessity”, “depth of my anger”, “disbelief”, “outrage”, “profundity of the mistake” and a oft-repeated belief that Tony Blair had “lost his senses”.

The main reasons for opposing the war fell into two major categories. The first category centred on the belief that the case for war had not been made, either evidentially, or legally. The second category focused on the feared consequences of war, particularly for loss of innocent life. Many also believed that they were being lied to by the political leadership of the USA and the UK.

**5. Participants experienced strong positive emotions as a result of their participation, followed by equally strong negative emotions when the war started.**

The great majority of participants found the day uplifting and memorable, citing the sheer numbers, and the extraordinarily peaceful and united atmosphere. Typical comments were:

*“One of the most rewarding experiences of my life.”*

*“I felt great. I felt proud to be British for the first time in a long time.”*

*“The day gave everyone a sense of unity and hope.”*

*“Amazement at the number that attended. Enjoyment of the wonderful atmosphere.”*

However, most participants linked this directly to the sense of disillusionment and anger felt when the war started. A few typical comments follow:

*“I now feel more cynical and disillusioned about the government. I have no respect for Tony Blair.”*

*“Disbelief that it made no difference to government actions. This, in itself, has made me more cynical about government, and more politically active.”*

*“Increasing frustration at what our government has done and is doing – feelings of powerlessness.”*

**6. Participants reported that subsequent events strengthened their principled and well-articulated opposition to the war and occupation.**

Participants were asked whether events since February 2003 had changed their view towards UK and US policy. Without exception participants reported that unfolding events had hardened their views, and made them, if anything, even more opposed to the war. Many individuals presented multi-faceted justifications for their views, often as organised lists, showing a high degree of awareness of key issues and findings. Responses focused around three main issues: the Saddam threat discredited, the aftermath, and “neo-cons unmasked”.

Failure of the occupying forces to discover weapons of mass destruction was the most frequently cited reason for post-war hardening of views. This was closely followed by effects of the revelations of the Hutton Enquiry into the use of information on this issue by the Government and BBC, and the progressive discrediting both of “intelligence” and the use made of it by governments.

On-the-ground failings of the Occupying Authority in post-war Iraq were also frequently cited by respondents. The lack of security, the failure to restore infrastructure, and the mistreatment of Iraqi civilians were all referred to (data was collected in October 2003, well before reports of prisoner abuse became widespread).

Finally, several respondents cited the favouritism shown by the CPA to USA companies, and the general prioritisation of securing Iraqi oil installations, as evidence of the true intentions of the US-led invasion.

## **What are the implications of February 15<sup>th</sup> 2003 for the political process and the future of anti-war activism?**

These comments are focussed principally on the UK, about which the above data reveal most.

### **1. February 15<sup>th</sup> re-activated existing “dissenters” more than it recruited new constituencies.**

With the (notable) exception of the Muslim community, the anti-war movement may not have mobilised large new constituencies. It remains largely a movement of higher-educated left-leaning professionals working in the public or voluntary sector, plus young people, likely to be of similar background. This is the same social profile that is seen as the core social base for activists in the ‘new politics’ movements such as the more radical forms of environmentalism, feminism and the peace movement of the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the 1980s large peace demonstrations, political parties and trade unions seem to play a much smaller role, perhaps reflecting the decline in the significance of the day-to-day work of large-scale organisations in securing mass mobilizations. Now the mobilization of temporary coalitions for episodic public performances has taken the place of the more institutionalised movement organisations. The substantial votes for the Greens and Respect in the June 2004 European elections, in which both these parties stressed their anti-war credentials, may signify a greater willingness among these new middle class activists to look beyond Labour. This, combined with the lessons of the 2001 General Election, when many traditional Labour voters stayed at home, may give Labour leaders cause for concern if the numbers who were present on

February 15<sup>th</sup> represent a wider and continuing current of anti-war dissent on the left. Yet, given Blair's strong commitment to the war and the barriers that the electoral system places for new parties in a General Election, a change of strategy by Labour is unlikely. The anti-war movement therefore needs to consider how it can increase the political costs of Labour's Iraq policy across the political spectrum, drawing on the unease about British policy evident in the opinion polls. Its weakness in this respect is the lack of active support on February 15<sup>th</sup> from the right of British politics. Making inroads into the readership of the Mail, the Telegraph and the Sun would be difficult if not impossible for this coalition as it would require a different discourse on nation and obligation than has been seen from UK anti-war movements in the recent past,<sup>6</sup> and would very probably split the movement.

## **2. Failure of governments to heed civil dissent may encourage citizens to disengage from democratic politics.**

In modern democracies, elected representatives act according to their consciences and beliefs, and are not constitutionally required to act according to the views or representations of their constituents. Nonetheless, for trust to be maintained in the democratic process there must be some circumstances in which there is a prima-facie case for representatives deferring to their constituents. David Beetham has recently proposed five criteria for such deferral:<sup>7</sup>

1. The issue is one of major importance: an issue which people feel is sufficiently important for them to become politically active and mobilize around, through petitions, attending meetings, public marches and demonstrations.
2. The issue should be a national one, in the sense of not representing merely a local or sectional interest.
3. The campaign should involve large numbers, and a wide range of organizations from across the social and political spectrum.
4. The organized mobilisation of opinion should be supported by a clear majority in public opinion polls, preferably over time. This condition is necessary to meet the objection that intense minorities should not necessarily be given preference over less intense majorities.
5. The issue in question should have been subject to extensive public debate, in which different aspects and viewpoints have been raised for consideration, so that expressions of public opinion cannot be written off as knee-jerk reactions.

British public opposition to a war on Iraq during late 2002 and early 2003 easily satisfied all of these criteria. Beetham concludes that "if there was any case in which Government and Parliament should have not only listened to organized public opinion but deferred to it, this was it". He warns that governments who go against the public will in this way (giving more weight to the views of a foreign president than to their own people) "intensify the alienation of substantial sections of society from the political process".

### 3. Anti-war campaigning may be diversifying.

Since May 2003, when George W. Bush declared “an end to major hostilities”, Western civil society (the press and media, faith communities, politicians and activists, NGOs, lawyers and academics, among others) has managed to maintain a remarkably persistent and effective campaign of attrition directed principally at the administrations of George W. Bush and Tony Blair. These administrations have increasingly been forced onto the defensive, even if to a lesser extent and for different reasons in the USA compared to the UK.

Since May 2003, anti-war dissent has been increasingly characterized by a wide variety of actors and activities, working in different ways to expose and challenge a whole variety of weak spots in the Coalition’s actions and policies, and operating from a broad spectrum of ideological and political perspectives, with a broad range of techniques and organisational forms. This change is part of a wider pattern in which public and civil contention is complemented by ‘project-based’ dissent. High-profile projects include challenges to the legal basis for coalition action, both national and international;<sup>8</sup> challenges to the evidential basis for the action, including the role of the intelligence services and weapons inspectors;<sup>9</sup> analysis of the negative effect of the action on international institutions such as the United Nations;<sup>10</sup> exposure of the relationship (if any) to the success or otherwise of the ‘war on terror’;<sup>11</sup> exposure of the way in which the appropriation of Iraq (both its peoples and its resources) can be understood primarily as a means of furthering US economic and geopolitical interests in the region, without reference to the will of the Iraqi people,<sup>12</sup> and finally the exposure of the cost of the war and occupation in human life and suffering.<sup>13</sup>

While the relatively diffuse approach of project-based dissent lacks the immediate impact and symbolic unity of mass demonstrations, it has other strengths for the long haul. A broad single-message mass movement is vulnerable to both external attack and internal politicking. Governments and media can undermine such movements by well-targeted attacks on key leaders and concepts. In contrast to this, a dissenting impulse which manifests itself through a range of project-based activities, with differing messages, leaderships, lifespans and outlets, is much less vulnerable to simplistic neutralizing attacks; the failure of one project does not compromise the effectiveness of the remainder. It is also possible that individuals can find enhanced motivation and empowerment through specific time-limited projects, at times when there is no obvious focus for mass political action.

Studies of other movements have shown that when protest begins to decline, movement networks now often shift into this kind of activity. What is perhaps most interesting is the cumulative capacity created by repeated waves of mobilization by successive cohorts of activists in overlapping movements such as the peace, green and feminist movements. Longitudinal research on the careers of 1960s New Left activists show many went on to work in subsequent ‘new politics’ movements.<sup>14</sup> One possible explanation for the scale of February 15<sup>th</sup> was that there were enough participants who knew from previous experience what to do, without needing the encouragement or sense of obligation to a membership-based movement organisation. This also means that they are unlikely to be disheartened by short-term failure and will again be available for mobilization at times of particular opportunity.

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## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> J. Vidal, 'Global marches ... are thought to have attracted more than 15 million people in 75 countries on February 15', *Guardian*, 4 March 2003.

<sup>2</sup> P. Tyler, 'A New Power In the Streets', *New York Times*, 17 February 2003

<sup>3</sup> W. Rudig & C. Eschle. 'Who demonstrated on February 15?: Some preliminary results of a survey of anti-war protesters in Glasgow'. Department of Government, University of Strathclyde.  
<http://www.strath.ac.uk/government/awp/demo.html>

<sup>4</sup> S. Walgrave & J. Verhulst. 'The February 15 worldwide protests against a war in Iraq. An empirical test of transnational opportunities.'  
<http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=cache:BYvrO9DEQ2YJ:nicomedia.math.upatras.gr/conf/CAWM2003/Papers/Verhulst.pdf+Walgrave+Klandermans+15th&hl=en>

<sup>5</sup> There is a significant literature on the political identities of the welfare-state and humanistic professionals: see among others, Rootes, C. (1994) 'A New Class? The Higher Educated and the New Politics', in Maheu, L. (ed.) *New Actors, New Agendas*, London: Sage; Kriesi, Kriesi, H.P. (1989) 'New Social Movements and the "New Class"', *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, 1:1078-1116; Cotgrove, S. and Duff, A. (1980) 'Environmentalism, Middle-Class Radicalism and Politics', *Sociological Review*, 28:333-51; Cotgrove, S. and Duff, A. (1981) 'Environmentalism, Values and Social Change', *British Journal of Sociology*, 32, 1: 92-110; Betz, H.G. (1992) 'Postmodernism and the New Middle Class', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 9, 2: 93-114; and Frank Parkin *Middle Class Radicalism*, Manchester: MUP, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> J. Hinton (1989). *Protests and Visions: Peace Politics in Twentieth Century Britain*, London: Radius.

<sup>7</sup> D. Beetham, 'Political participation, mass protest and representative democracy'. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2003, vol. 56, pp. 597-609.

<sup>8</sup> Public Interest Lawyers (<http://www.publicinterestlawyers.co.uk>) are one of several legal organizations that have been collating evidence both on the legality of the war and potential war crimes committed by US and UK governments.

<sup>9</sup> An early demolition of the evidential basis for the existence of WMDs was made in S. Ritter and W. Rivers Pitt (2002). *War on Iraq*. New York: Context Books.

<sup>10</sup> S. Zunes, 'The Bush Administration's Attacks on the United Nations', 13 February 2003,  
<http://www.commondreams.org/views03/0213-05.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Oxford Research Group (ORG) is one of many NGOs analysing the effects of the Iraq War on the progress of the 'war on terror'. See P. Rogers, 'The War on Terrorism: winning or losing?', ORG Briefing Paper, 2003.  
<http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefings/winningorlosing.htm>

<sup>12</sup> A good example is the powerful 'Statement on Iraq' by the World Council of Churches, 2 September 2003, <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/newsstories/wcc-iraq.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> See [www.iraqbodycount.net](http://www.iraqbodycount.net)

<sup>14</sup> S. Tarrow (2000). 'Mad Cows and Social Activists: Contentious Politics in the Trilateral Democracies', in Pharr, S.J. and Putnam, R.D. (eds) *Disaffected Democracies*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.