

Do public demonstrations make a difference?

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If protests, rallies, petitions, and strikes didn't work, we would all still be working 10 hours a day, six days a week. There would be no holidays, no EI, no healthcare, and women wouldn't have the vote. These, and much more, were won using those same tools.



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How should we judge the effectiveness of protest? We can see some effects already. The government has promised to restore bus passes to disabled seniors, and even Liberal backbenchers are asking pointed questions in the house as their constituents turn up the heat. Small things, perhaps, but it would be a mistake to think that protest was a failure just because the government hasn't resigned yet.

Protest is first intended to make the government aware that its policies are not popular. While the premier is joined at provincial breakfasts, lunches, and dinners by the 10 per cent of the population who are employers, the vast majority of the people of BC do not have such access to the government. Yet that majority too must be listened to in a democracy, and they have the right to be heard outside of election years. Extra-parliamentary protest is a crucial part of our democracy. If the government chooses not to listen, that in itself will indicate something important about the premier and the Liberal party, and the protest will have served to make that lesson clear.

Demonstrations held February 23 in Victoria and around the province have other purposes. They show everyone who is alarmed by the government that they are not alone and that together they have more impact

than they do as individuals. The protests are a way for people who have never met to tell each other that they share a common sense of injustice and outrage. It is a way to educate people about the issues. It is a way to begin to build a movement and an opposition.

In that sense, the recent rallies are the beginning, not the end, of popular protest and participation. The rallies show people how they can fight back and inspire them to take the initiative in creating their own forms of protest and action. Rallies and demonstrations bring people together in a common purpose and there they form new alliances and create new strategies. Undoubtedly one of those strategies will be to begin the work of defeating the Liberals in the next election, just as Operation Solidarity in 1983 led to the destruction of the Social Credit party and the political careers of three premiers.

What other forms of protest will we see? It is impossible to guess, because people are very creative. Certainly people in unions will think about strikes, picket lines, walk-outs, and similar tactics from their own past. Other people will devise new forms of protest appropriate to their strengths and level of organization. Historically, these have ranged from marches to street theatre and beyond. People will always find ways to make their point.

One complicating factor this time is the government's decision to impose settlements, rip up contracts, and attack union and non-union workers alike. The collective bargaining process that has evolved in BC over the last 100 years is like a peace treaty. Through negotiation and agreement, both sides have sought to limit their struggle and to limit the tactics they use when solutions are hard to find. The Liberal government, however, has declared that it will no longer fight according to the rules.

It would be naïve to think that people will continue to play by the rules if their government won't. Few people would argue that they have to obey the Marquess of Queensbury rules when their opponent hits below the belt and the referee sticks his thumb in their eye. When the government abandons the process, it forces people to think about civil disobedience and expanding the forms of protest. Again, it would be folly to guess what those forms might be. Historically, it has ranged from secondary pickets to sit-ins, blockades, and the like. In 1938, for example, scores of unemployed people occupied the main post office, now the Sinclair Centre, for six weeks, to make their point. Most British Columbians will recall many more recent actions.

What will the result be? It is too early to tell. It is clear, however, that Saturday's protest is the beginning, not the end, of protest over the next few years. 

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