



---

## Dissent and Alternatives

*Jason Garred*

June 26, 2002

It was just another sunny Sunday in Calgary. A giant pirate ship floated through the streets. Colourful signs proclaimed 'Resistance of the Heart Against Business as Usual'. Radical cheerleaders and raging grannies egged on the chanting crowd. As the festive protest wound its way past lines of police, who were looking surprisingly innocuous on their G8 bicycles, the only signs of violence were in the Calgary Sun newsboxes on the side of the road. That day, the newspaper's cover featured a full-page photo of tanks in Kananaskis with the headline 'Armed and Ready'.

So far at the G8 summit, the distance between newspaper hype and street reality has been noticeably large. While there are still two days of protests remaining, and violence is not out of the question, G8 activism in Calgary has until now focused entirely on peaceful transmission of messages and ideas. However, the overwhelming emphasis in the mainstream Canadian media in the weeks leading up to the summit has been on security arrangements. Activists have been portrayed primarily as threats. The reasons for their choice to protest, and in many cases, their willingness to travel from other cities and countries to do so, have too often been glossed over, or even condemned without explanation.

Such caricature of anti-globalization protesters is nothing new. The media has for some time had a tendency to focus on the violent few at the expense of the peaceful majority. More generally, in recent years, too much media coverage of the anti-globalization movement has failed to look deeper than that monolithic adjective, 'anti-globalization'. Unfortunately for these activists, the word most often used to describe them is as vague as its well-worn root, 'globalization'. The reality is that just as globalization incorporates many different processes of change, the anti-globalization



movement includes a diverse set of people motivated by a wide variety of issues, using different tactics to get their messages across.

At the June 23 Community Solidarity March described above, the range of participants' concerns was evidenced by the signs they carried: 'Say No to GMOs', 'End Corporate Greed', 'Human Rights are Everyone's Business', 'Ratify Kyoto', 'Cancel Africa's Debt'. The famous chants at the 1999 Seattle protests, 'Teamsters love turtles' and 'Turtles love Teamsters', echoed the powerful anti-globalization coalition between labour unionists and environmentalists, two groups whose primary motivations for protesting differed greatly. In general, though many anti-globalization activists with dissimilar 'primary issues' share most of their views, some groups with contradictory ideas can be found at the same rallies. For example, many social activists call for developed countries to open their borders to more products from underdeveloped regions, while labour unions lobby for the protection of jobs that would be threatened by such reform.

The tactics used by anti-globalization activists to push their agendas also vary widely. Although violence gets attention, the overwhelming majority of groups condemn its use in protests. This debate was reflected in Calgary with the controversy among activists over the June 26 'snake marches', whose organizers announced that 'all tactics are welcome'. Many groups expressed displeasure that the door was left open for violence in this way. Sometimes, however, a small number of violent protesters can steal the spotlight and are willing to do so.

Peaceful street actions often use creative methods of demonstration or civil disobedience to draw public attention to issues. The June 25 "We'd rather wear nothing than wear Gap" rally in Calgary saw protesters strip to their underwear, and in some memorable cases, beyond, to draw attention to corporate irresponsibility. The Community Solidarity March incorporated street theatre, with, for example, an African 'referee' showing the yellow card to protesters dressed as G8 leaders in football uniforms. The message? G8 countries maintain unfair terms of trade with Africa.

While some groups choose to oppose institutions such as the G8, the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund on the streets, others seek to change them from the inside. Many activists do both. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often organize conferences parallel to international summits where activists discuss the same issues as global leaders, but from a different perspective. Often, ideas emerging from alternative summits are forwarded to the relevant intergovernmental meeting for consideration.

Case in point: at quiet and leafy University of Calgary this week, classrooms and lecture theatres have been filled to the brim with anti-globalization activists. More than a



thousand people have been discussing the policies of the G8 at the June 21-25 Group of Six Billion People's Summit (G6B), a meeting billed as an open alternative to the G8's closed doors. Like the 2002 G8 summit, the agenda at the G6B pays special attention to Africa and the global economy. Workshops at the G6B have seen an uninterrupted flow of informed presentations and a healthy measure of debate.

On the G6B's opening night, one of its organizers suggested that the anti-globalization movement should not simply be reactive, opposing policies it sees as wrong, but that it must propose and implement positive alternatives to the political status quo. In fact, this has already been happening for some time. In the last few years, anti-globalization NGOs have been instrumental in initiating the International Treaty to Ban Landmines, the Highly Indebted Poor Countries debt relief initiative and the Kimberley Accord on conflict diamonds. Activists are thus transcending the 'anti' in 'anti-globalization', making it an even less appropriate word to describe the movement.

Throughout its five days, the G6B looked at socially responsible alternatives to the policies of G8 countries. Workshops discussed initiatives such as international regulations to prevent labour and human rights abuses by corporations, reform of the government-sponsored arms trade, and opening G8 markets to products from Africa. On June 25, G6B organizers compiled the major recommendations emerging from the workshops, and forwarded them to the G8 leaders through the Canadian foreign minister, who was visiting the G6B for a question-and-answer session.

One G6B workshop had a particularly electric atmosphere: a panel on the criminalization of dissent. At that session, panelists and participants debated whether the tolerance of the law and police for protest and dissent was decreasing. The topic resonated with the participants; many of those who had come from abroad had been interrogated by immigration authorities suspicious about their G6B involvement, or knew the stories of those who had been denied entry entirely. People spoke of pre-emptive police actions in previous protests and the worrisome phenomenon of political profiling. The massive security operation for the G8 summit, and its accompanying media coverage, imply a deepening distrust in the anti-globalization movement and its democratic legitimacy. If the criminalization of dissent is to be avoided in the G8 countries, this situation must be addressed.

*This is the third in a series of five articles on the June 26-27, 2002 G8 summit in Kananaskis, Canada. These daily reports are sent from nearby Calgary, the focal point for media activity and anti-G8 meetings and protests.*