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The Parkin backfire

by Chris de Conscience

Scott Parkin, a teacher and peace activist from Houston, Texas, came to Australia in June for a holiday and to exchange insights about nonviolent action with local activists.

The locals hoped to learn from Parkin's long experience in making protests powerful. Little did they know that Parkin's visit would invigorate the Australian nonviolence movement beyond its wildest dreams, courtesy of the government.

Parkin is part of a worldwide network of nonviolent activists who promote and use methods such as rallies, vigils, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and fasts in order to challenge repression and oppression.¹ Nonviolent action has been instrumental in toppling repressive regimes such as in the Philippines in 1986, in Eastern Europe in 1989, in Indonesia in 1998 and in Serbia in 2000.² Sometimes called people power, nonviolent action is a tool that those with less formal power can use against injustice of any sort.

Parkin, to his surprise and dismay, was arrested by federal police on 10 September, jailed for five days and then deported. Why? The government won't say except that it involves a threat to national security.

To lots of people, the government's treatment of Parkin was transparently unjust. Outrage has been apparent in letters to the editor.³

The Australian nonviolence movement sprung into action, holding protests in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Cairns.⁴ For example, activists in Brisbane marched to the police building offering to be arrested as threats to national security.

¹ For the Australian node see Nonviolence Training Project, <http://www.nonviolence.org.au/>.

² The classic treatment is Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973). See also Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 2005).

³ For example, 13 letters under the title "War on terrorism morphs into a war on dissent," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 2005, p. 12; five letters under the title "Deporting a peace activist shames a nation," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17-18 September 2005, p. 36.

⁴ Bryan Law, message on the list nonviolencenet@yahoo.com, 18 September 2005; Michael Martin, message on the list nonviolencenet@yahoo.com, 13 September 2005.

It is fair to say that the arrest and deportation of Parkin has backfired against the government.⁵ It has generated negative media coverage for the government in Australia and internationally,⁶ alienated many members of the public and thrown into question the rationale for new terrorist laws. Furthermore, it has given new energy to the Australian nonviolence movement, presumably the very opposite of what Parkin's deportation was intended to achieve.⁷

Whenever a powerful group does something potentially perceived as unjust, it predictably uses various techniques to inhibit public anger, which can be conveniently grouped into five main methods.⁸

The first is to cover up the action, such as when torture is carried out in secret.

While Parkin was detained, government officials prevented media from contacting him. But he was able to contact a friend who told others and organised publicity and protests. Cover-up failed miserably.

The second method to inhibit outrage from an attack is to denigrate the targets, for example by labelling them terrorists. Attorney-General Phillip Ruddock said that ASIO, which made the decision about Parkin, was supposed to protect Australia against political violence, thus tarring Parkin by association. But this wouldn't wash — Parkin was too well known as committed to nonviolence. Devaluation also failed.

The third method is to reinterpret the action, such as when civilian casualties are said be accidents, exaggerated or someone else's fault. The government's main reinterpretation was

⁵ The two key conditions for backfire are a perception of injustice and communication to receptive audiences. Both these conditions are satisfied in the Parkin case.

⁶ For a comprehensive account, see SourceWatch, "Australia revokes Scott Parkin's visa", <http://www.sourcewatch.org/>.

⁷ The idea of backfire is based on Gene Sharp's concept of political jiu-jitsu. Sharp says that there are three groups that can be affected: the grievance group (in this case the nonviolence movement, civil liberties groups and others potentially targeted by the government's anti-terrorism laws), the attacker group (the government and its agencies) and third parties (the general public). There is evidence that the treatment of Parkin definitely aroused concern among the nonviolence movement and the general public. Whether it caused any concern within the government and its agencies is unknown at this stage.

⁸ The backfire model is presented in a number of articles, including Truda Gray and Brian Martin, "How to Make Defamation Threats and Actions Backfire," *Australian Journalism Review* 27 (July 2005): 157-66; Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, "Making Censorship Backfire," *Counterpoise* 7 (July 2003): 5-15; Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, "Exposing and Opposing Censorship: Backfire Dynamics in Freedom-of-Speech Struggles," *Pacific Journalism Review* 10 (April 2004): 29-45; Brian Martin, "Iraq attack backfire," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39 (17-23 April 2004): 1577-83; Brian Martin and Steve Wright, "Countershock: mobilizing resistance to electroshock weapons," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 19 (July-September 2003): 205-22. The more recent articles have a clearer and slightly different formulation of the five methods. The usual term for individual and collective reactions to injustice is "outrage" and the process by which an action becomes counterproductive for the perpetrator is "backfire."

to pass the buck by saying ASIO had made an independent decision. Observers could easily interpret it as a blatant abuse of power.

The fourth method is to soothe concern by using official channels, such as inquiries or courts, that give the appearance of justice but seldom with much substance. Inquiries into issues such as Aboriginal deaths in custody give the appearance of official action, but when the recommendations languish the main effect is to diffuse public concern through lengthy procedures.

In Parkin's case, official channels were the very means by which he was attacked. He was offered the possibility of appeal, but while remaining in detention and being charged for the privilege.⁹ Furthermore, in an appeal, the government could use its powers to prevent giving reasons for its actions, for security reasons.

The fifth and final method to inhibit outrage is intimidation.¹⁰ Parkin was arrested by six officers, held incommunicado for days and pressured during this period. But this didn't stop the protests by his supporters

The government thus tried several techniques to minimise outrage from its treatment of Parkin, but they all failed, with the result that the whole affair has become an embarrassment for those who initiated it.¹¹

The Australian Nonviolence Network contains quite a number of home-grown activists with tremendous skills and commitment. They received a boost from Parkin's visit, but ironically an even greater boost from his exit.

[Text of article, 700 words exactly]

⁹ Parkin was charged \$11,000, including his fare to the US and fares for two agents to accompany him.

¹⁰ Actually, the fifth method includes both intimidation and bribery, but for reasons of space discussion of bribery is omitted from the text. According to a story in *The Age* (Melbourne) on 13 September 2005 (cited in SourceWatch), lawyer Julian Burnside said that "immigration officers had informed Parkin that the date of his deportation would be brought forward if he dropped his appeal." This could be classified as attempted bribery.

¹¹ I spoke with Iain Murray, a worker for the nonviolence group Pt'chang in Melbourne, about this on 16 September 2005. He said that the government had used all five methods, except perhaps for reinterpretation, because no sensible justification was offered. He also told me about additional methods used to intimidate Scott.

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Deport the government!

The government has revealed its true authoritarian colours in deporting peace activist Scott Parkin. But has this actually backfired on the government, as claimed by Chris de Conscience ("The Parkin backfire", *Unpublished Daily*, September 20)? Methinks not.

After all, ASIO and its government mates have got away with this outrageous abuse of power. Parkin is gone, never to return. Furthermore, a precedent has been set: anti-terrorism powers can be used against peaceful protesters.

If I were a US peace activist, I wouldn't be coming to Australia soon. A real backfire would be when Ruddock and his ASIO mates are deported instead.

Rebe Lion South Communeville¹²

Scott Parkin, a nonviolent activist, has been turned into a martyr by the government. But this is nothing new. Leading nonviolent activists of the past century have regularly encountered the wrath of governments.

Gandhi, the pioneer of nonviolent campaigning, spent years in prison courtesy of the British Raj in India. Martin Luther King, Jr., the figurehead of the US civil rights movement, was spied upon by the FBI in an attempt to find dirt to discredit him. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the Burmese nonviolence movement, has spent years in home detention.

Parkin has not yet achieved the eminence of these figures, but the government seems to be doing all it can to help. Backfire indeed!

Satya Graha Meditatown¹³

It seems the government has launched a "war on peace," starting with Scott Parkin. Where do I enlist? The peace side, of course. I'm part of the backlash ("The Parkin backfire").

Pace Durer Nowville (ACT)¹⁴

¹² Rebe Lion insists on looking only at whether the government got its way in the short term, ignoring the impacts on the nonviolence movement and the general public.

¹³ Satya Graha places the Parkin affair in the wider context of struggles between nonviolence movements and repressive governments.

¹⁴ Pace Durer implicitly draws a comparison with the "war on terrorism" and also hints at George Orwell's novel *1984*, in which the government deploys "doublethink" such as "war is peace."

Parkin backfire dialogue

22 September 2005

Sam: Why'd you decide to write about Scott Parkin? There are so many strong examples of backfire. We've been looking at My Lai and Abu Ghraib.¹⁵ There's a lot more material about them.

Chris: Scott's case was in the news and I thought I could write something about it while it was still topical.

Sam: I heard a few radio reports about the case. It's absolutely outrageous that the government could treat a peace activist that way.

Chris: Yep. I figured that lots of people would feel that way, so it might well fit the backfire model.

Sam: But it seemed like the government got away with it. After all, Parkin was deported. The protests didn't seem to have much effect.

Chris: Well, as you know, you can apply the backfire model even if the injustice doesn't backfire in practice. As long as plenty of people feel there's an injustice, then you can do an analysis in terms of the five factors.¹⁶

Sam: Okay. Let's start with cover-up. That didn't seem to work, given all the publicity. Did the government actually try to cover up what was happening? Maybe they wanted to deport Parkin to set an example for other activists: beware!

Chris: That's possible, but I doubt it. Why pick on Scott, when the pretexts are so weak? It would be better to target someone who looked more shady. That would set a better precedent.

¹⁵ On 16 March 1968, US troops in Vietnam killed hundreds of nonresisting Vietnamese civilians, most of them women and children, in the hamlet of My Lai. Some of the villagers were herded into ditches and shot. The massacre was covered up but eventually revealed to the US public in late 1969, causing a scandal. See for example Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin, 1992). In 2004, abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison was revealed through digital photos, causing a parallel scandal. See for example Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review Books, 2004).

¹⁶ Chris distinguishes here between backfire as an outcome and backfire as a process. Backfire as a process can be called "backfire dynamics" or "outrage dynamics." The five factors are the five methods of inhibiting outrage, as outlined in "The Parkin backfire," and five general ways of countering the methods of inhibition.

Sam: So did ASIO stuff up?¹⁷

Chris: Quite likely. There was one report that Scott was the organiser of the Forbes protests in Sydney.¹⁸ This was incorrect but ASIO might have accepted it.

Sam: So ASIO thought that Parkin was a big-time protest organiser — an outside “agitator” — and went after him. But they got their facts wrong.

Chris: That’s certainly plausible, though we don’t have any easy way to check it.

Sam: Maybe ASIO thought Parkin actually was involved in preparing activists for violent or subversive actions. ASIO is not known for its understanding of nonviolent protest.

Chris: Whether they did or not, their treatment of Scott blurred the difference between nonviolent and violent protest. They treated a nonviolent protester as if he’s a terrorist.

Sam: It ends up criminalising dissent.¹⁹ But let’s get back to cover-up. Did the government actually try to hide any of its actions against Scott?

Chris: Yes. When Scott was arrested, he was on his way to a workshop organised by the Melbourne nonviolence group Pt’chang. He had stopped for a coffee and was alone.

Sam: So instead of arresting him at the workshop, in front of other activists, they picked him up away from obvious sources of support. So publicity would be less likely.

Chris: Exactly.

Sam: How’d you find out about where Scott was arrested? I don’t remember hearing about that.

Chris: After he was arrested, the first person Scott contacted was Iain Murray, a key member of Pt’chang. After I wrote my article [“The Parkin backfire”], I emailed it to Iain for his

¹⁷ ASIO, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, is Australia’s premier spy agency. It provided the assessment that led to Parkin being arrested and deported.

¹⁸ Parkin participated in the protests against a meeting of business leaders in Sydney, but he was not an organiser.

¹⁹ This is a way of saying that dissent from government policy is treated as if it’s criminal behaviour.

comments. He emailed back a bunch of information that supports the backfire analysis — including the information about where Scott was arrested.

Sam: So is Iain the main source of your information, aside from media stories?

Chris: The media have reported quite a lot. I mainly relied on the *Sydney Morning Herald*. But I also received information from postings on an email list called "nonviolencenet."

Sam: What's that? Or, rather, who posts on it?

Chris: It was set up by members of the Australian Nonviolence Network, a loose linking of people committed to nonviolent action, with lots of activists. The postings on nonviolencenet were especially good for information about protests in support of Scott and against the government agencies involved in his arrest.

Sam: So basically you relied on three main sources: media stories, nonviolencenet and comments from Iain Murray. Right?

Chris: Right. What else would you suggest?

Sam: How about contacting Scott himself?

Chris: It's a good idea, but he was out of contact while in detention and since returning to Houston he's been overwhelmed by requests for interviews and messages of support, not to mention getting over jetlag.

Sam: That's according to Iain? Or nonviolencenet?

Chris: I think Iain sent a message about it through nonviolencenet.

Sam: What about contacting ASIO? Or the police? Or Immigration?²⁰ Well, I don't suppose you'd get much out of them — just the official line. Although that could be useful as an example of how the government reinterprets the story.

Chris: I don't think I'd get much from ringing any of the agencies. I could write a letter to Ruddock and get a response, but that would probably take months.²¹ Anyway, it's more

²⁰ ASIO did the assessment of Scott as a threat to national security. Officers from the Australian Federal Police and the Department of Immigration were involved in Scott's arrest.

relevant to look at reinterpretations that are offered in public, since that's where the struggle over outrage occurs, primarily.

Sam: Back to the methods of inhibition. Is there anything you've found out about devaluation aside from what's in your article? I heard that Ruddock had accused Scott of "inciting political violence." Why didn't you mention that?

Chris: Some media reported that, but Iain told me that it wasn't correct. He emailed me that Ruddock "merely said that it was ASIO's role to protect Australians from political violence, including violent protest, and ASIO had made a decision in relation to that."²²

Sam: So Ruddock in effect smeared Scott through guilt by association. He didn't directly accuse Scott of inciting political violence but by his comments led people to believe that's what was involved.

Chris: Iain also told me of how supporters of Scott tried to counter devaluation, for example by referring to Scott as a friend and telling about his commitment to nonviolence. They tried to humanise him.

Sam: You should have put that into your article.

Chris: Yes, but I wanted to keep to 700 words.

Sam: At least you must be confident that the backfire model works. In the other cases we've studied, such as My Lai, there's vastly more material about cover-up, devaluation and so forth than we're able to include. I'm somewhat surprised that you had so much material about a fast-breaking case.

Chris: It helps to talk to someone close to the action! But strangely, there's not so much material on reinterpretation. The government didn't do that much to justify its actions.

Sam: Surely subtly suggesting that Scott is a terrorist is a reinterpretation ... though that probably counts as devaluation. Is it part of reinterpretation too?

²¹ Philip Ruddock is the Minister of Immigration. Letters to ministers and to government departments are almost always answered.

²² Iain Murray, personal communication, 19 September 2005.

Chris: Let's examine it by looking at the obvious interpretation: Scott, a peace activist, is being treated like a terrorist threat, which is a gross abuse of power against legitimate dissent. When Scott's credibility is attacked, that's devaluation. Other explanations are reinterpretation.

Sam: Such as saying that he overstayed his visa, or had broken a law. But they didn't say that, did they? Another type of reinterpretation is to blame someone else.

Chris: Ruddock seemed to do that by saying the decision to deport Scott was a matter for ASIO, which was independent — as if ASIO would take an action like this without consulting with the government.

Sam: But aside from putting the onus on ASIO, did the government really offer any justification for the deportation?

Chris: Not anything that had much impact on the public debate. That's one reason why the public reaction was so strong.

Sam: Without a decent pretext, the action looked heavy-handed. It *was* heavy-handed. What about official channels? Because there's been so much protest, wouldn't you expect the government to set up an inquiry?

Chris: If the government can ride out the storm, then they don't need an inquiry. But according to media reports after I wrote the article, there is going to be an in-house ASIO inquiry.

Sam: That of course is the weakest sort of inquiry: not public and run by the people who committed the injustice. Only if protest became much stronger would there be a public, independent inquiry.

Chris: That's what the backfire model predicts, anyway. Bob Brown²³ has been blasting the government over the affair, but Kim Beazley²⁴ — who has been briefed by ASIO — has fallen in behind the government. If Labor had made an issue of this, the government might have set up an inquiry to reduce the heat.

²³ Greens Senator from Tasmania.

²⁴ Leader of the Labor Party.

STS390, "Media, war and peace," 2005: sample project report

Sam: One of Scott's options was to appeal the decision to deport him. According to the backfire model, you'd say that it wasn't necessarily a good idea.

Chris: No, not if you want to maximise outrage. However, Scott's legal supporters in Australia may be putting in an appeal, even though he's returned to the US.

Sam: What about intimidation and bribery? The arrest would have been pretty intimidating, and then Scott was held in solitary confinement.

Chris: After his arrest, Scott was told he'd be held longer if he went to the media or appealed.

Sam: Surprise, surprise! It's another example of how intimidation and cover-up are linked.

Chris: But in this case it failed. What I didn't have space to describe in the article was all the innovative protests held in support of Scott in several different cities. The case really has triggered a lot more interest in nonviolent action.

Sam: The more protests there are, the greater the backfire. The saga isn't over yet. So is there anything from this case that reveals something new about the backfire model?

Chris: What's new is that Iain and others in Pt'chang knew about the backfire framework and used it — plus examples such as Otpor,²⁵ and his activist instincts — in developing some of their actions.

Sam: So it's the first case in which backfire analysis has been used to create a bigger backfire.

Chris: It's good that the model is helpful. Anyway, the main thing is to learn from experience. There's some theoretical work to be done: when a theory is consciously used by activists, how does that affect the way we understand the subsequent developments?

Sam: Let's finish our paper on My Lai first.

[Text of dialogue, 1651 words]

²⁵ Otpor was a movement in Serbia that led the nonviolent campaign that in 2000 ended Slobodan Milosevic's rule, as shown in the film *Bringing Down a Dictator*.