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Part 1

The Editorial with Gigi Madigan

“Forward this message to everyone you know”

Sad but true. It’s now cheaper to buy a litre of Coke than a litre of unleaded fuel. The price of petrol - arguably the most discussed topic in Australia today. The news headlines say it all. We’re angry and want something done about the price hikes of late¹.

I for one want to know why my four cylinder Charade has suddenly turned into a petrol guzzling machine that costs an almost an extra \$20 dollars to fill up than a year ago.

And while we’re beginning to feel less of a strain on our hip pocket today after last month saw the price of fuel climb above a dollar forty a litre, hardly a day passes without a new problem arising from the heightened cost to fill up our cars.

We’ll save more at the bowser with unleaded now hovering around the dollar twenty a litre mark, but will feel the strain elsewhere.

Major airlines have increased fares², the price of milk has risen³, and even the local pizza joint has increased delivery prices due to the cost of fuel⁴.

Why? John Howard has thrown up his hands and said he is powerless to stop the price rises at the pump⁵. Then maybe it’s greedy oil companies looking to profit at

¹ For example, seven reports under the title “Enough is enough say angry drivers”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 September, p.p 4-5; Chenevier, C

² Chalmers, E, “Couriers join airlines with fuel surcharges”, *The Courier Mail*, 22 September 2005, http://www.thecouriermail.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,16676332%255E3122,00.html

³ Report, “Dairy Company to increase milk prices”, *ABC Rural News Online*, 3 October 2005,

⁴ Chalmers, E “Couriers join airlines with fuel surcharges”... http://www.thecouriermail.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,16676332%255E3122,00.html

⁵ Prime Minister John Howard “Powerless to resist price rises at the pump”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 2005,

our expense⁶, or international oil prices? Or perhaps hurricanes that hit the U.S such as Katrina force prices up in Australia⁷? Who knows? Nobody seems willing to give us a straight answer. The passing the buck game is up, as the people of Australia join ranks and say ‘enough is enough’⁸.

Over such an aggravating issue that makes so many of us very angry, it’s good to see that we Australians can keep our heads and vent our frustrations in a non-violent fashion. Showing the true potential of technology to get the message across to the government and fuel companies that motorists are sick and tired of paying through the roof for fuel, are the ‘No Petrol Day’ organisers.

It’s the price of petrol that ignited a call from this protest group to motorists asking us to engage in a non-violent struggle by not buying petrol on a particular day⁹.

The call was sent out to Australians via an email, and while this may be a new way to drum up support, non violent actions are not something we haven’t seen before. We’ve all been witness to such methods as petitions, slogans, boycotts and sit-ins¹⁰.

The ‘No Petrol Day’ boycott can be categorised as non-violent protest and persuasion which includes such actions like protests against an oppositional force, which in this case is oil companies¹¹.

The key to the success of non violent actions is the agreement of persons involved to base their opposition upon generally supported moral beliefs¹². Here, the belief is that fuel is too expensive. While aiding this success is the emergence of

<http://www.dailytelegraph.news.com.au/story/0,20281,16548102,00.html>

⁶ Wesley Warren, Interview (1-10-2005) No Petrol Day website co-ordinator

⁷ Author Unknown, “Katrina stokes petrol price fears”, *BBC News*, FIND DATE, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4203414>

⁸ Author Unknown, “Enough is enough say angry drivers”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 September, p.p 4-5

⁹ No Petrol Day website, <http://www.nopetrol.com/>

The date was the 22nd of September this year.

¹⁰ Martin, B, “Communication Technology for nonviolent struggle”, *Technology for Nonviolent Struggle*, chapter 5

¹¹ Conflict Research Consortium, “Non-Violent Struggle”, *University of Colorado USA*, <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/nonviolc.htm>

There are three forms of non-violent action outlined by Gene Sharp. They are: non-violent protest and persuasion (the mildest), noncooperation, and non-violent intervention (the strongest). No Petrol Day fits into the non violent protest and persuasion category which includes such actions as symbolic parades, picketing or protests with the intent of persuading others to join in the non-violent struggle.

¹² Conflict Research Consortium, “Non-Violent Struggle”, *University of Colorado USA*, <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/nonviolc.htm>

technology that can reach a large number of people in a short amount of time¹³. This includes mobile phones, the internet and engaging the media.

‘No Petrol Day’ organisers used communication technology to publicise the immoral behaviour of its opponent. After all, people can’t be expected to frown upon things that they know nothing about¹⁴.

To get the word out about ‘No Petrol Day’, organisers encouraged the use of communication. ‘Forward this message to everyone you know’ is the catchphrase of the protest, and was used to encourage motorists to get others involved.

Again, this is in line with non violent action theories which state that communication technologies that encourage and permit dialogue are more practical for the purposes of non-violent action than those that hinder dialogue¹⁵.

Clearly, this email encourages dialogue, even today, and the communication technology allows this¹⁶. Without communication technology nobody would have known about the petrol boycott¹⁷.

The internet, being mass emails, was used to get the message across about the non-violent struggle. It is a powerful and effective means of communication. Forwarded to a vast number of people, the email has even featured on news programs, and in newspaper articles¹⁸.

And while September 22nd - ‘No Petrol Day’ - may have been and gone, organisers say its message remains strong. In their eyes, the day was a success with their web-site claiming oil companies worldwide were “running scared”, and have since kept prices low¹⁹. A point that is quite true.

¹³ For example, the recent case of an Iraq War victim’s mum, Cindy Sheehan, who camped outside the U.S president’s Texas ranch demanding he talk to her. She wants the U.S military out of Iraq.

¹⁴ Conflict Research Consortium, “Non-Violent Struggle”, *University of Colorado USA*, <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/nonviolc.htm>

¹⁵ Martin, B, “Communication Technology for nonviolent struggle”, *Technology for Nonviolent Struggle*, chapter 5

¹⁶ No Petrol Day website, <http://www.nopetrolday.com/>

‘No Petrol Day’ organisers ask visitors to the website to continue to circulate the previously mentioned email, and to let others know about the follow up protests to ‘No Petrol Day’. For example on the website it says ‘Forward this message to everyone you know’.

¹⁷ op.cit Martin

¹⁸ For example, seven reports under the title “Enough is enough say angry drivers”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 September, p.p 4-5; Chenevier, C, “Motorists protest petrol price rise”, *Milton Ulladulla/Sussex Inlet Times*, 14 September 2005, and Sunrise, <http://seven.com.au/sunrise/>, late August - On the program, presenter Melissa Doyle commented that ‘everyone is talking about it’, in regards to the email

¹⁹ No Petrol Day website, <http://www.nopetrolday.com/>

On the other hand, NRMA Petrol expert Jack Haley says refiners have extra storage and so would not have be affected by such a boycott regardless of the number of people who participate²⁰.

Major success or not, communication technology was effectively used by the group, and the protest itself fits within differing non violent action frameworks. A core element of such theories is that participation in non-violent action must be voluntary – we can't force others to join us in our missions²¹. This was clearly the case in regards to the email which *asked* motorists not to buy fuel on that particular day.

Furthermore, the boycott did not intend to involve, nor did it call on motorists to use violence, which is also a key aspect of non violent theories. Instead, the emphasis was put on the “action” of not purchasing petrol on a particular day, something that is central to the success of non violent struggles²².

And while the future of petrol prices remains to be seen, which Kim Beazley has claimed could skyrocket to five dollars a litre within ten years²³, there is one thing I do know. I will risk life and limb to get in the driveway of the service station that has petrol for a dollar seventeen a litre. One year ago I would have stared at disbelief and run up the behind of the car in front of me. What is going on here?

(983 words)

²⁰ Author Unknown, “Enough is enough say angry drivers”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 September, p.p 4-5

²¹ Martin, B, “Communication Technology for nonviolent struggle”, *Technology for Nonviolent Struggle*, chapter 5

²² *ibid.*

²³ Author Unknown, “Beazley foreshadows \$5 a litre fuel”, *ABC News Online*, 19 October 2005, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200510/s1485339.htm>

Part 2

Letters to the Editor

So, the Prime Minister feels our pain and can understand motorists' anger at the ridiculous cost of fuel²⁴? I doubt that.

Mr Howard, do you pay for your own fuel? No. Mr Howard, are you considering getting a second job so that you don't have to sell your car? No. Oh, and Mr Howard, aren't I as a taxpayer paying for the petrol to run your classy government car as well as my humble 1992 model Commodore? Yes. And so I ask Mr Howard, what can you and your government do to help *me* out? It's "out of our control" he says. Not happy, John. Maybe we should put you "out of control" come election time.

Stuart Angry-Fuelista

I agree with Gigi Madigan (Opinion Page – 'Forward this message to everyone you know') that violent protests wouldn't work in regards to rising fuel costs.

You can't take people seriously about a cause if they're breaking down fences and running riot. Take note Forbes protestors²⁵. Even if only one of you gets violent, it makes ALL of you look bad.

So, enough with the hooliganism, send in the non violent protestors. 'No Petrol Day' organisers, you have my support.

Linda Petroliuma

²⁴ Prime Minister John Howard "Powerless to resist price rises at the pump", *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 2005,

<http://www.dailytelegraph.news.com.au/story/0,20281,16548102,00.html>

²⁵ Carter, P "Police Arrest eight protestors", *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 August 2005,

<http://dailytelegraph.news.com.au/story/0,20281,16435191-1702,00.html>

The Forbes Protests – Police arrested eight people at a protest targeting the Forbes CEO Global conference in Sydney. Protestors were angry for a number of reasons including The Iraq War, Globalisation and proposed Industrial Relation changes

I too believe current petrol prices are a joke, and will lend my support to any non-violent protest group that tries to find the answer.

But I don't think that 'No Petrol Day' carry much weight. These 'protestors' make a mockery of the word. Get out there and actually DO something if you're serious about the cause.

Look at Cindy Sheehan. Now there's a lady who knows how to protest. Use the media! Now she's even gone and got herself arrested²⁶. You go girl. That's the way to get a message across. An email sent to a select number of people doesn't cut it in my view.

Hilda Outprotesting

(301 words)

²⁶ Author Unknown, "Peace Mom Cindy Sheehan arrested at DC protest", *New York Daily News*, 26 September 2005, http://www.nydailynews.com/front/breaking_news/story/349972p-298588c.html
Cindy Sheehan was arrested after she and several other dozen protesters sat down on a pathway after marching along the sidewalk on Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington DC. Sheehan was the first person arrested after she refused to get up off the pathway following three police warnings. Protesters want the Iraq War to end.

Part 3

Dialogue

Between myself and John, a motorist angry at the heightened cost of fuel

John – I’m so angry about the price of petrol at the moment. Why is it so expensive?

Gigi – I could point out numerous factors here. For instance, ‘No Petrol Day’ organisers believe the high prices are due to the pricing policies of oil companies²⁷. While Dr Adnan Shihab-Eldin²⁸ says that high oil prices are simply an excuse for wealthy nations to make more money from the poor; U.S President George W. Bush points at factors such as hurricane Katrina²⁹; while our PM says the high prices are a result of soaring international oil prices³⁰.

John – Looks like no one really knows for sure what’s causing them.

Gigi – It could certainly appear that way.

John – About hurricane Katrina. We all hear on the news how hurricanes developing off the U.S coast are sure to impact the price of petrol in other countries including Australia³¹. How does that work?

²⁷ Wesley Warren, Interview (1-10-2005) No Petrol Day website co-ordinator
That is, crude oil prices are artificially factored into the Australian retail fuel prices, rather than companies determining prices independently. Warren also believes that the current prices are producing rich profits for the oil companies, and high tax revenues because of tax revenues.

²⁸ Author Unknown, “Katrina stokes petrol price fears”, *BBC News*, FIND DATE,
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4203414>

Dr Adnan Shihab-Eldin is the director of research at the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Companies (OPEC). The purpose of the organisation is to ensure the co-ordination and unification of the petroleum policies of its member countries (eg. Libya, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia) and to protect their interests.

²⁹ Author Unknown, “Katrina stokes petrol price fears”, *BBC News*, FIND DATE,
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4203414>

³⁰ Prime Minister John Howard “Powerless to resist price rises at the pump”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 2005,
<http://www.dailytelegraph.news.com.au/story/0,20281,16548102,00.html>

³¹ For example, the newly formed hurricane Wilma has ignited fears of more price rises at the pump. Author Unknown, “Oil: New storm menaces Gulf Coast”, *The New Zealand Herald*, 18 October 2005,
http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/story.cfm?c_id=3&ObjectID=10350837

Gigi – The Gulf Coast in the U.S is where hurricanes, such as Katrina, often hit, and is a prime supplier of oil throughout the world. In regards to hurricane Katrina, eight oil refineries on the Gulf Coast were shut down immediately following the hurricane due to damage caused. This meant that oil had to be sourced elsewhere, including the Middle East, effectively pushing prices up at that time³².

John – You said previously that violent action wouldn't force oil companies to lower their prices. I'm not saying that I agree with violence, but wouldn't it force them to stand up and pay attention?

Gigi – It may make people pay attention, but for the wrong reasons. The problem with violent actions is that they swiftly escalate to the point where the protesters are only worried about winning the battle³³. To outsiders, the violence overtakes the moral arguments of the protesters and the cause becomes irrelevant³⁴.

John – So why did you decide to look at petrol price protests from the non violent angle? I've heard of violent protests around the world such as in Lebanon³⁵. Wouldn't that be more interesting?

Gigi – I thought the 'No Petrol Day' protest would be more relevant for Australian readers as many motorists either engaged in it, or have at least heard of it³⁶.

³² op.cit Author Unknown, "Katrina stokes petrol price fears"...

³³ Conflict Research Consortium, "Non-Violent Struggle", *University of Colorado USA*,
<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/nonviolc.htm>

For example: Many of the people who involved in the Forbes protests in Sydney appeared to only be worried about winning a 'fight' against the CEO members present at the function. One person was quoted as saying; "It would appear the corporate pirates eating a \$5000-a-head meal tonight have fled. They're scared of us." While the crowd cheered at their 'victory'.

Author Unknown, "Unruly protest becomes a moving feast", *The Australian*, 31 August 2005,
http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5744,16443947%255E2702,00.html

³⁴ op.cit, Conflict Research Consortium, "Non-Violent Struggle"...

³⁵ Thompson, H "At least 6 killed in Lebanese fuel protests", *World Socialist Website*, June 2004,
<http://www.wsw.org/articles/2004/jun2004/leba-j05.shtml>

On May the 27th 2004, six people are shot dead in Beirut as soldiers tried to disperse protests against rising fuel costs. Protesters threw stones, glass and pieces of wood at soldiers and also tried to seize an army truck. Widespread anger at rising petrol prices prompted the protest. At the time, petrol prices were hovering around 80 cents a litre.

³⁶ As indicated through attention received from media organisations such as The Daily Telegraph and Sunrise (as previously cited)

John – Yeah, I heard about it through a friend of mine. Nobody I know bought petrol that day, but afterwards we heard that our actions wouldn't have had any effect on oil companies. Is that true?

Gigi – It depends on who you are talking to. The organisers of No Petrol Day say the success of this specific protest can be claimed because it had widespread support and generated a high level of community interest³⁷.

John – What about oil company profits. Did they suffer?

Gigi – That is hard to know for certain, and oil companies haven't responded to my request for an interview. However, what is known is that Thursday the 22nd of September – No Petrol Day – did not cycle to the high levels that were persistent in the week leading up to the protest³⁸. That is, they dropped their prices which may have resulted in a loss of profits.

John – In regards to its protest value, how many people took part?

Gigi – That is difficult to determine due to the sheer number of petrol stations, and the fact that participation wasn't documented. However, what is known is that since September 19, 2005 when traffic records were first recorded for nopetrolday.com there have been almost 1500 page loads and 800 unique visitors to the site. And there have also been over fifteen thousand petrol price related Google searches within that timeframe³⁹.

John – No offence but that doesn't sound like many people

Alana – I agree. Those figures on their own aren't many people however did you ever visit the website?

Gigi – No I was forwarded an email.

³⁷ Wesley Warren, Interview (1-10-2005) No Petrol Day website co-ordinator

³⁸ ibid.

³⁹ ibid.

Gigi – So was I, and the email I received had already been forwarded to over 20 people, plus the five people I sent it to, and the people they sent it to... the list goes on. Most people I talked to hadn't visited the website.

John – So, a lot of people may have participated then?

Gigi – Exactly. Even if only a small number of people, who either visited the website or was forwarded the email, participated in the boycott, the number could still be significant.

John – You said you visited the nopetrolday.com website. Is that where you got your information from?

Gigi – Some of it, yes. But I had to clarify the information of course so I arranged an interview with Wesley Warren who runs the website to find out further and more in depth information than was contained on the site such as where to go from here.

John – And where else did you find your information?

Gigi – Various places. I collected news items, read Brian Martins theory of communication technology for a non violent struggle, as well as visiting various websites and finding other theories relating to non violent struggles including information from the Conflict Research Consortium at the University of Colorado.

John – Do you think you presented a one-sided view of the reason behind the high petrol prices because you only talked to people on one side of the fence?

Gigi – No. As I stated in the article, nobody is telling us for certain why prices are so high, and I didn't present my personal views on this. Also, my request for an interview was declined by Shell so I couldn't get the company's pricing policy. However the official line on the website is that prices are mostly made up of taxes. I could have tried Mobil but I didn't think of that at the time.

John – Back to the protest itself. What would ‘No Petrol Day’ be classified as? For instance could it be called a rally?

Gigi – A rally is more defined as coming together for a common action⁴⁰, which implies motorists came together and protested all at once, which they didn’t. I would more likely say it would be classed as a boycott which means to abstain from buying or using something in particular⁴¹, in this case petrol.

John – Hold on. Motorists did protest all at once because there was a set date for the action.

Gigi – Yes but they weren’t all at the same place all at the same time, so again I’d class it as a boycott.

John – Do you know of any other non violent struggles that have been in the media lately that people might have heard of if they don’t know about this one?

Gigi – Well there’s the case of Cindy Sheehan who staged a non violent protest outside George W. Bush’s Texan ranch, refusing to move until he agreed to speak to her personally⁴².

John – What was she protesting about?

Gigi – Her son Casey was killed in Iraq recently while on military duty, and she wants the U.S military to get out of Iraq⁴³.

John – That sounds interesting. How come you didn’t focus on that subject?

Gigi – Because I think the price of fuel will be more of an issue in Australia for a longer period of time.

⁴⁰ Macquarie Dictionary and Thesaurus, p. 329

⁴¹ Macquarie Dictionary and Thesaurus, p. 54

⁴² Author Unknown, ‘Mr President, there’s someone waiting, and waiting, to see you’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 2005, p.7

⁴³ *ibid.*

John – So, is the ‘No Petrol Day’ protest and Cindy Sheehan’s protest similar?

Gigi – Both relate to Martin’s theory in regards to using communication technology for a non violent struggle⁴⁴. Mrs Sheehan made use of her mobile phone to communicate with a large number of people, and used the media to get her message out to the public. While ‘No Petrol Day’ was also picked up by the media, and organisers used the internet as a form of communication technology.

John – What’s one way that they differ?

Gigi – Martin’s theory says that making use of images can be a very powerful tool in a non violent struggle⁴⁵. This was very true in the case of Sheehan. The sight of Mrs Sheehan beside the road in Texas was very effective in communicating a message that may not have been as powerful if people had only heard about her protest and not seen it with their own eyes. Comparatively, the ‘No Petrol Day’ protest was void of imagery and instead used words to get a message across which Martin also identifies as a powerful tool.

John – I heard the ‘No Petrol Day’ protest group now want to specifically target Mobil and Shell service stations. Why is that?

Gigi – Their reasoning behind this is that Mobil source most of their crude oil from cheap Australian wells meaning that their high petrol prices are unjustified. While Shell is the pricing leader for the Australian market, meaning that if they have high prices, everyone does⁴⁶.

John – Why didn’t you put that in your article?

Gigi – I ran out of room, and there isn’t much to say about it yet.

⁴⁴ op.cit, Martin, B, “Communication Technology for nonviolent struggle”...

⁴⁵ ibid.

⁴⁶ Wesley Warren, Interview (1-10-2005) No Petrol Day website co-ordinator

John – Back to communication technology. How do Computer Networks differ to telephone networks?

Gigi – Martin states that there are three foremost differences between the two technologies. Firstly, correspondence through computer networks is mainly by text, not spoken words. Secondly, it is by far much simpler to save, duplicate and distribute text through computer networks, rather than by phone. Thirdly, the ability and amount of time needed to become a capable user of computer networks is a great deal bigger than to become a competent telephone user⁴⁷.

John – And in regards to being used for non-violent struggles, which one is better?

Gigi – Here, Martin points to the first two differing factors I just mentioned. He believes these two factors usually make computer networks a more influential form of communication technology for a non violent struggle than the telephone. And while it is pointed out that the third factor reduces the value of computer networks, it is an issue that can be rectified.

John – In your opinion, which one is better?

Gigi – I think it makes more sense to use computer networks for non violent struggles rather than the telephone. For example, it costs less to distribute material to a large number of people via the internet than the telephone. Also, it is more time convenient – you won't wake somebody up at 3am if you send them an email, but it is likely that you will if you call them on a telephone.

John – I agree, and I also think that the internet helps to make us feel that we have some sort of power in the world because you can say and do almost anything in cyberspace without the fear of getting in trouble. I think that's also why I am so interested and took part in 'No Petrol Day'. It feels good to think I have some control over the price of fuel, especially after being told that I don't.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Gigi – You're not alone there.

(1797 words)