

Just Peace Co-Convenors report to 2004 AGM

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(inc. amendments from AGM discussions)

The past year has been a time of great change both in Australia's involvement in the so-called "war on terror", as well as the political and social conditions within Australia.

12 months ago the triumphal phase of the US invasion of Iraq had just been completed, with talk of a swift and relatively painless removal of the Baath regime there, and widespread media hype about the valuable role of the Australian military in that conflict. Rapid discovery of the weapons of mass destruction was assured. At the same time, the war in Afghanistan had faded from public consciousness. The massive sentiment of opposition mobilized in Australia (as in other western countries) during the leadup to the invasion had abated, and a sense of impotence had taken its place.

Today the situation is vastly different. In Iraq, the conflict has become one of a growing resistance by broad sections of the Iraqi people to the continued presence of foreign troops. The interim government seems to be losing the support of growing sections of Iraqi people. The predicted divisions between Sunni and Shia have not materialized. In Afghanistan there is a government installed by the US which has little control outside of the main city, with the former Taliban regime returning to power in many parts of the country.

In Australia there has been little evidence of a real mass movement in opposition to the Australian involvement in the "war on terror". Yet there have been signs of real political change. For example, consider public sentiment on refugees - the Australian government 12 months ago was still declaring pugnaciously that "we will decide who comes into Australia" Today they produce information kits entitled "Australia says Yes to refugees".... Whilst their underlying policy may not have changed, the turnaround in government rhetoric suggests that they know there is a real change in public mood - towards more sympathy towards refugees.

We are currently in the lead-up to a federal election, and there is a sense amongst many that it may be a time for a real change in direction in Australian policies.

This is the political scene in which Just Peace has worked over the past year. We have worked in a number of different ways over this time -

- Organizing large public events
- Working in with other groups on public events and rallies
- Running bi-monthly information forums on a range of topics
- Establishing a peace education project which has enabled xx? Teachers to develop teaching strategies for integrating peace education into the education Depart curriculum.
- Writing and producing publications, ranging from a bi-monthly newsletter to leaflets for distribution at events and meetings
- Sub-committees have concentrated on Finance, Qld Peace Network, The Crossroads Public meeting, Peace Education project, Publications, our newsletter and Just Peace membership. We would particularly like to thank Norm Bullen, who is stepping back from the position of treasurer at this AGM, after ably steering our finances (as well as making important contributions to our overall planning), since the establishment of JustPeace in 2001.

During this time our membership has stabilized at about 140 people. What we have not successfully done this past year is take the discussion and debate about our central concerns of war and peace out into the community as much as possible. This is one task which could play a more important role in our activities over the next 12 months.

Some other important tasks we should consider over the coming year are

- Developing a recruiting strategy to further build our membership and support in the broader community
- Looking at specific fund-raising strategies
- Aiming at developing the level of discussion and debate not only in the broader community, but also amongst our membership.

At an organizational level, we have gone through the process of becoming an incorporated organisation, with the consequent protections for individuals involved in our activities.

Our Just Peace activities have received generous support from a number of politicians and their staff, in particular Senator Clair Moore, Senator Andrew Bartlett, the Hon Jim Fouras, and Councillor Catherine Birmingham. We would also like to thank the Union of Australian Women, the Qld Council of Unions, the Qld Nurses Union and various other unions, for their support and assistance.

Reflecting on our activities for the past year explains why the year went so quickly!

A run down.....

- Sept 2003 the culmination of many meetings, and working with a diverse range of organizations was the International day of Peace events at the Piazza South Bank. A massive flag procession of most nations of the world led to an afternoon

of multi cultural performances and affirmations of support for peace from the multi faith representatives. Just Peace played a significant role in this event.

- Public meetings held every 2 months saw us reflect on
- media diversity and the growth of an effective peace movement with Prof John Harrison from UQ and Stephanie Campion.
- Dr Winnifred Louis a JustPeace member presented the findings of a study into the maintaining momentum amongst peace activists.
- Saif Abukeshek a young Palestinian gave a heart wrenching account of the situation in Palestine and the role of the International Solidarity Movement, JP member Bill Briner also spoke on his return from Palestine where he had worked for the ISM.
- Greg Poulgrain addressed a meeting on West Papua after screening the documentary The Land of the Morning Star, and most recently we heard from
- Terry Templeton and Dr Tracey Schrader talked on the likely impacts of an agreement on the Free Trade Agreement.
- Just Peace continues to play a leading role in the QLD Peace Network which has been active maintaining a core role of communicating between the 32 organisations which have re affiliated at the AGM early this year and also organizing key events such as the March 20 rally to mark the beginning of the attack on Iraq to which we invited Carmen Lawrence, Ali Kazak representing the Palestinian Authority in Canberra, and Towfiq Al Qady to speak. Currently plans are underway to hold a Time for Change rally one week prior to the federal election
- The peace education project has resulted in a working group of experienced and talented people from UQ, the Sokka Gakki, teachers from various schools and Education institutions working with JustPeace members to develop and implement projects in schools. It is hoped this pilot first year project will develop and grow into a yearly event.
- On the 2nd anniversary of East Timor independence we organized a picket outside the DFAT offices with a symbolic birthday cake indicating the unfair claim made Australian government to oil reserves in the Timor Straight, we invited Sen John Cherry and Greens senate candidate Drew Hutton to speak with good media reports on the action.
- July saw the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the US and Australian governments to build the so called Joint Training Facility ie US military base at Shoalwater Bay in QLD. This agreement was publicly supported by the QLD premier who we presented a letter with a list of questions re the facility. The premier has not responded to the letter. The inclusion of Darth Vader at the event created good media coverage with a photo in the Courier Mail and radio interviews. WE also made some public comment, including a press release, on Australian involvement in the US Missile Defence program – the “Son of Star Wars”.

Our major event for the year has been the successful public meeting AUSTRALIA AT THE CROSSROADS: TIME FOR CHANGE. This event was the culmination of a coalition of groups and individuals initiated by JP. The main auditorium was full, close to 1000 people in attendance with very positive feedback and ongoing activity currently being planned in the lead up to the federal election. This will include mass letter box drops of material addressing the issues covered at the Crossroads meeting, and possibly local public meetings depending on when the election is called.

In our report at last year’s AGM a projection was made of important issues and areas for JP to be active around these included

- An Australian strategy to reduce the risk of terrorist actions
- Dealing with the issues of social, political, economic injustice in our region, which we have started to address through activities and meetings on E Timor and West Papua, and an information pamphlet on Indonesian – Australian relations.
- How we can excel in conflict resolution v war making in our region- Can we develop a closer relationship with the Peace and Conflict Studies unit at UQ?
- An identity for Australians of which the community was part of developing and of which we can be proud of.

It seems that the efforts of organizations like JustPeace have led to enquiries and public interest to the point where now the public is asking the question Is the world a safer place as a result of the war on terror? Did our leaders tell us the truth? Can we justify our involvement in such gross human rights abuses such as occurred at Abu Grahیب and Guantanamo Bay. The presentations at the Crossroads meeting-particularly those of Julian Burnside, Mary Graham and Michael Raper have sparked thinking about what sort of country do we the people, want?

We would like us to consider the possibility of organizing a conference called IMAGINE for sometime next year, with some high profile speakers, some high school students and a significant emphasis on including youth ideas.

Our challenge like all other organizations is to maintain and build our membership through activity that has meaning and is effective in addressing our aims and objectives. In particular we should put more emphasis on young people. We would also like to encourage our current members to renew their membership status, and to bring new people into Just Peace, in the interests of the future direction of Australia and internationally.