

# 1970s – Decade of Protest Exhibition of Photographs

## Manawatu, May 2024

*Speech at exhibition opening by  
Dame Judy McGregor*

On Sunday, July 26 1981, the Sunday News, the paper I worked for at the time, broke with its text-only tradition and used a full length photo on its poster under the words NO MORE! The photograph was a powerful and emotional shot of two women, the younger one with blood streaming down her nose and chin, and an older woman comforting her.

The injured woman was Meriel Watts who had been hit above the eye by a flying full beer can while protesting against the Springbok Tour at the aborted Waikato match at Rugby Park in Hamilton. Her companion, Libby Burgess, was quoted as saying, “we were moved to take to the streets to express our dismay and disapproval.”



The photograph was taken by staff photographer Grahame Cox. The poster with its capped text plus a tabloid screamer of an exclamation mark, could have been interpreted to mean no more violence and injuries or it could have meant no more tour. Its ambiguity was probably not deliberate given the deadline pressures on a Saturday evening.

The Sunday News paid circulation that weekend was 240,000, one for every 20 people in Aotearoa, who paid 40 cents for the read. The Springbok Tour editions outsold all previous circulation highs. The poster, in those days a competitive media branding device, was on display outside the majority of dairies from Northland to Southland.

So why was that photo chosen from the dozens of pictures taken that day? For example, why was it chosen over helmet-clad protestors cutting through the wire perimeter fence with bolt cutters and storming the pitch? Why was it picked ahead of a shot of anti-tour leader Father Dibble negotiating with Police Commissioner Bob Walton in the middle of Rugby Park's chaos with its endless noise and swirl?

Late American feminist Susan Sontag, who wrote persuasively about photography, would say it was chosen to mobilise and goad conscience. As well, of course, to sell newspapers.

Sunday News was one of only several INL-owned newspapers, the Manawatu Evening Standard being another, that was avowedly anti-tour. It editorialized against the Muldoon government's decision to allow rugby to generate near civil war in Aotearoa New Zealand. The poster photograph was chosen for its drama, its inherent tension, to dent public opinion, and to generate information and knowledge. One of

the Springbok Tour's protestor chants was "the eyes of the world are watching", an explicit acknowledgement of the power and ubiquity of media generated visuals.

Nearly 150,000 people, some who had never taken to the streets before, protested in opposition to the visiting Springbok rugby team which provoked a near collapse of civil law.

A less reported fact was the considerable newsroom bitterness amongst the majority of the sports-reporting staff of the tabloid newspaper, jock-journos whose mantra was that politics had no place in sport. Many photographers, too, were no doubt conflicted. Renowned rugby photographers like the late Peter Bush and Ross Setford were part of the staff. But newspaper photographers are a uniquely eccentric breed (apologies to those present!) and ultra-competitive. Whether they were pro or anti the tour, they realized that the drama of match protests, let alone events such as plane-dropped flour bombs landing on All Blacks at Eden Park, provided unrivalled, professional opportunities.

Photographs, both still and moving, were a potent, poignant, often intrusive and shocking revelation to the public during 1981. The film *Patu!*, Merata Mita's powerful documentary of the inner workings of the protest movement at that time, also revealed tensions at meetings between Maori activists and other anti tour protestors. Protestors exhibited different levels of commitment but there was disagreement over degrees of civil disobedience and non violence. Many Maori led by Ripeka Evans spoke of the contrast between the mobilization for South African apartheid compared to they saw as veritable silence about the poverty, land appropriation, Treaty breaches and police racism of Maori at home. Diplomatically the late Reverend Hone Kaa suggested in the documentary that took film conservators five years to restore, that 1981 could serve as an awakening about domestic, everyday racism.

Not all memorable protest photography is of action and violence, though. In 1975 as the Maori Land March left Te Hapua to walk its way to Parliament, NZ Herald photographer, Michael Tubberty, shot a black and white photograph of 79 year old Dame Whina Cooper holding hands with her three year old granddaughter, Irene Cooper. Whina and her mokopuna, shot from behind, hand in hand, with a winding gravel road ahead of them, became an iconic visual metaphor for the historic hikoi. Whina, in head scarf and full length black skirt is walking with a stick and her tiny moko has one hand in her jeans pocket. On the one hand the photo showed the literal reality of the start of the march in rural Northland. On the other hand it was a visual metaphor for intergenerational justice, for Maori land appropriation, and for tino rangatiratanga. No matter what copy print media journalists filed from the hikoi, and I was one of them, nothing we wrote was as evocative as this single image.

The role of other women in seventies and eighties protests in New Zealand was also widely photographed. Safe legal abortion in Aotearoa NZ was difficult to obtain in the 1970s. The Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act 1977 enacted more restrictive provisions for abortion than even the conservative Royal Commission had recommended. The largely Wellington-based group WONAAC (Women's National Abortion Action Committee) mobilised public opinion with the traditional demonstrations, pickets and rallies. But it also adopted a protest choreography that was flamboyant, theatrical and controversial. WONAAC was early to embrace more media and photography sensitive forms of protests in a bid to build public pressure to amend the law. Who can forget photographs of the group's release of helium-filled condoms in Parliament and the leafletting of the Capital City by women dressed as pregnant schoolgirls, for example.

The Clowns during the Springbok tour armed with French baguettes instead of batons at the Eden Park game were others who realized that protest demanded theatrical responses to be noticed by the media. I

loved the clown who dressed as in a white bunny rabbit outfit with pink ears. For those of you who don't remember or have mercifully forgotten, Ron Don, was the stridently unapologetic rugby boss who promoted the tour at every turn and was the voice of rugby defiance. The white bunny rabbit protestor wore a placard that read "Ron Don roots rabbits", which was as widely snapped by protestors as a souvenir as it was by the media. Very sadly, of course, the Clowns were among those severely battered, injured and hospitalized during the Eden Park anti tour protest.

Both the trade union movement and progressive church interests have long been active in social justice protest movements for and against the State, and for and against government policies. The battle for equal pay especially for low paid female workers in health, disability, community and aged care settings, continues today as it has for the last fifty years. The disability community have been in the streets most recently and a Minister has fallen because of the row over benefit cuts and carer's pay. Would she have been rolled without photos of disabled people in wheelchairs and their carers with their placards that ignited public indignation that could not be ignored?

As a media watcher and an activist, I have some disquiet about the changing nature of protest and whether its authenticity as community mobilisation will be eroded by authoritarian, populist movements. A new hatred seemingly not accompanied by idealism or a worthy cause is abroad. Of course those on the right are entitled to protest and to freedom of expression just as everyone here is, regardless of political, social or religious opinion.

But protests which have been both *against* apartheid and at the same time *for* racial equality, *against* land appropriation and *for* Maori sovereignty, *against* restrictive legislation and *for* women's control of their reproductive rights, have more salient moral purpose, I would argue, than protest based on a coalition of disaffection and pure, unalloyed hatred. Those who protest in public spaces to attract the eye of the camera and to inform a wider audience about social justice must be vigilant. Protest, as a form of mobilization of social conscience, should not be de-railed by illegitimacy.

I would like to thank the organisers, the photographers who shot the images and the members of the public depicted in the photographs in this exhibition. They are powerful images, images that remind us of the historical and social context in which they were taken. They are privileged moments in our knowledge.

Susan Sontag writes that "in teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe. They are a grammar and even more importantly, an ethics of seeing."

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I am grateful to former Sunday News librarian Carol Edmonds for research help. Nau mai haere mai.



**Dame Judy McGregor, journalist, lawyer, public servant and human rights activist, speaks at the opening event of the 1970s Decade of Protest photograph exhibition on 1 May 2024 at Square Edge Gallery Palmerston North, New Zealand.**