

Demonstrations: A Matter of Self-Expression

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Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon.

Why do we feel the need to express ourselves by taking part in demonstrations? Only a week ago there was a peace march held here in Tampere. Approximately 4000 people attended and, in doing that, expressed their feelings about the war in Iraq. I was one of them.

Why did I do this, someone might ask? What did I think I would accomplish by walking a short distance with a crowd of other people, disrupting traffic and shouting out catch phrases? Well, to answer the first question, I can only say that I wanted to speak my mind. I wanted to show anyone and everyone that I am against the war, this is how I feel.

The second question, what was I trying to accomplish, is slightly more difficult to answer. Speaking in concrete terms, no, I do not think that what I did makes any real difference in the war. I seriously doubt that the powers-at-be could really care a whole lot less whether a few thousand people in a small city way out here in Finland oppose the war they are fighting.

However, there is a small chance that our newly-elected government will understand something from last week's demonstrations, which were relatively large in Finnish terms. We sent the message that there are many people in this country who feel strongly enough about the subject to take to the streets and make their opinion known. The government cannot completely ignore our feelings.

In addition, with so many demonstrations being held around the world, and so many people attending them, the powers-at-be are receiving a strong message that we feel that what they are doing is wrong. The demonstration in Helsinki a short while ago was attended by 20,000 people. Hundreds of thousands of people, even millions, have protested against this war in Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Holland, Austria, Switzerland, Ireland, Portugal, Greece, Egypt, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, South Korea and numerous other countries.

In general, demonstrating has always been a simple way for people to express themselves. Last week was the first time for me, because I have never really felt strongly enough about any other subject to take to the

streets. But now, as I marched with a few thousand other people, I actually felt like I had sent a very real message to people somewhere out there.

For the second time within a week, I actually felt like I was making some kind of a difference. The first time was two weeks ago on Sunday, when I voted for the first time and my candidate got elected. Attending the demonstration may not have been a very big thing in other people's eyes, but it was a big thing for me.

However, people are also speaking their minds on the opposite side. Varpu Sihvonen told in a recent article in *Aamulehti* that some Americans are boycotting French products and, in some cases, even French people. People in New York are half-seriously suggesting that the Statue of Liberty should be sent back to France, back to where it came from. French wines are being poured down the drain and French restaurants no longer have any customers.

A French-owned hotel in Manhattan no longer dares to fly the French flag side by side with the American flag and the flag of New York State in fear of it upsetting potential customers and passers-by.

According to Sihvonen, customers in some restaurants have announced that if there are French waiters or waitresses working in that restaurant, these customers do not want to have anything to do with them. There is no use in keeping French wines and dishes on the menus, because no one will order them. In Texas, the homes of French-born residents have been vandalised with short messages written in red paint and filled with anger.

Nevertheless, apart from the vandalising of other people's property, the anti-French demonstrators have every right to show their mind by not buying certain wines or not visiting certain restaurants. As much as I may not agree with their ideas or methods, it is their right, their way of demonstrating, their way of expressing themselves. According to Sihvonen, these people strongly feel that the boycott is justified, because France has traded with Iraq and France prevented the UN-vote to sanction the war against Iraq. Thus they feel that boycotting French products is the least they can do to show support for the American troops who are defending their country.

In other words, everyone has the right to an opinion and also the right to publicly show that opinion, as long as they harm no one else. I am sure that you have all heard about past demonstrations where things have gotten out of hand. People have been arrested, hurt or even trampled in situations where others have protested against something or other. Some

demonstrations, which were originally meant to be peaceful, have turned into what seem to be more like riots than expressions of opinion.

These are unfortunate events. One can only hope that these kinds of incidents decrease in number and eventually die out completely. One can also hope that they do not lead to making demonstrations forbidden or illegal.

Demonstrations and protests, as small or simple as they may be, are an important way of expressing ourselves and our opinions. Even though the effect of a demonstration, such as our little peace march here, may not be immediate or even concrete, it nevertheless makes a difference, at least in the minds of those who take part in them. Our march hopefully also gave those who saw us something to think about. We made a difference — at least in my mind.

Thank you.

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