chapter seven

THE ROXBYS BLOCKADES, 1983 AND 1984

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter commences with a brief history of the Australian anti-uranium movement, before discussing the motivations behind the opposition to the Roxby Downs uranium mine. (This discussion is also relevant for Chapter Ten, the Jabiluka protest.) My experiences at the 1983 and 1984 Roxby blockades are then discussed, using my own writings published at the time (Branagan 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b), and aided by the available literature, primarily articles in student journals by 1984 blockaders from Sydney University, and Cohen (1997). Also discussed is a rally at the 1984 ALP National Conference, which involved many of the same activists. This chapter shows a move away from the orthodox nonviolence of the Franklin, towards more militant and varied actions, accompanied initially with more violence and consequent poor media. Artistic activism – particularly street-theatre - continued to flower, becoming a key component in alternative Australian politics.

7.2 THE AUSTRALIAN ANTI-URANIUM MOVEMENT

The history of opposition to uranium mining is complex, dating back to the mid-1970s (Burgmann 1993:195). It is well detailed by Hutton & Connors (1999:137-144; see also McCauslan 2003), who describe environmentalists working with unions, and then with Aboriginal people after 1975 when opposition to Ranger uranium mine by local Yolngu people emerged. A nationwide strike by the Australian Railways Union was sparked by the protest actions of one man, shunter Jim Assenbruk in May 1976. Conferences were held, with 400 being arrested in a 1977 march in Brisbane. Anti-uranium bike rides to Canberra, organised by Friends of the Earth (FoE), occurred in 1975, 1976 and 1977.
Mass rallies involving up to 50,000 people occurred in 1976 and 1977, direct actions tried to stop yellowcake from Lucas Heights reactor being loaded onto ships, and the Waterside Workers Union went on 24-hour strike and refused to work with the *Columbus Australia*, a ship carrying yellowcake (Doyle 2000:133-134). The peace movement, which had marched for nuclear disarmament in the 1950s and 1960s, and worked to end the Vietnam War in the 1970s, became a prominent part of the anti-nuclear movement from about 1977. Initially, it opposed uranium mining because of its contribution to nuclear weapons, and later for environmental, political and social reasons, especially the impact mining would have on Aboriginal communities (Denborough 1983; Saunders & Summy 1986:45). Other players in the movement were political groups, including some members of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), socialists and anarchists, human rights activists and church groups. Civil libertarians too were concerned with the centralisation of political and economic power in the hands of financial and bureaucratic elites, and with the clandestine nature of this power (see Coxsedge et al 1982; Camilleri 1984).

The ALP initially supported uranium mining (Green 1998:14), but between 1975 and 1982 they actively campaigned against it, and the movement concentrated resources into electoral strategies to elect the ALP. When these failed, the movement faltered. From 1982 the ALP watered down and then abandoned its anti-uranium stance, and the movement returned to mass mobilisation tactics, with Palm Sunday rallies peaking in 1984 and 1985, with some 250,000 people attending in cities (Doyle 2000:136). In May 1982, the first nationally coordinated occupation of an Australian uranium mine occurred at the Honeymoon mine to the north-west of Broken Hill, closing briefly its pilot plant (Cohen 1997:107). Although it achieved limited publicity, it was a precedent for the major action at Roxby Downs a year later.

7.3 **OPPOSITION TO ROXYBY DOWNS**

From 1983 the campaign against uranium mining focused on the Roxby Downs project, owned by the ‘Joint Venturers’ – British Petroleum (BP) and Western Mining Corporation (WMC). The Joint Venturers claimed that the uranium was just incidental to the project, which also involved gold, silver, copper and rare earths (Wabeke 1983:11). In fact, it was
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the largest uranium deposit on earth (Doyle 2000:x). The project had been allowed by the ALP, who just a year earlier had been promoting their anti-uranium credentials with stickers saying “Uranium - Play It Safe: Vote ALP”. I was appalled at this hypocrisy.

Many of us lived in dire fear of nuclear war during the 1980s, and this was the focus of much activism. A prime concern of Roxby activists was that uranium fuels the global nuclear weapons cycle, either directly or by adding to stockpiles - which could also be accessed by terrorists (Mullin & Vincent 1984:17; see also Coalition for a Nuclear Free Australia 1983:1). Evidence of this concern can be seen in the banner “From Roxby to Greenham¹, Uranium Kills” (Figure 51)

![Protest march at 1984 Roxby blockade.](image)

Another consequence of mining would be four hundred hectares of tailings dumps left in mounds up to 30 metres high; these would be dangerously radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years, contaminating the soil, water, plants, animals and people in the surrounding area (Branagan 1983b:2; Wabeke 1983:10). Strontium, a radioactive by-product of the extraction of yellowcake from uranium ore, was already being stored in large

¹ Between 1981 and 1993 at Greenham Common, UK, a women’s camp protested against nuclear weapons (see Thompson 1997:219-220).
open tailings ponds, from which birds were drinking and bathing; there was nothing to prevent dispersal of radioactive materials by willy-willies and other desert winds (Meikle 1984:25). The carcinogenic radon gas released from these tailings (and during extraction) would be emitted for at least a million years. It is heavier than air and thus does not disperse easily, yet it was not measured by WMC, whose ventilation systems were inadequate to protect workers and their families, according to Wabeke (1983:10). Although the Federal government’s ‘Ranger inquiry’ into uranium mining recommended that supplies of uranium by Australia be restricted or terminated if a safe long-term method of nuclear waste disposal was not soon found (Fox 1976:178), such a method has still not been found some three decades later, and mining proceeds apace.

Another concern with Roxby was that 33 million litres of water per day would be taken from the Great Artesian Basin, an ancient and largely irreplaceable resource that had supplied oases around mound springs, used by Aboriginal people for millenia, and more recently farmers from four states (Mullin & Vincent 1984:17). Roxby’s extraction is one fifth of the total consumption of bore water in Australia (Meikle 1984:25), and “the most extensive right to underground water ever seen in this country” (Cohen 1997:114). The basin would also be threatened by groundwater seepage of radioactive effluent sprayed onto the road to settle dust (Cohen 1987: 114), and leaks of radioactive water from the tailings dams, which had only plastic liners to prevent seepage (Meikle 1984:25). Many of these predictions have eventuated, with one spring drying up (Buzzacott et al. 2005) and an estimated 110,000 litres of radioactive water being spilt during an accident at the mine’s hydro-metallurgical plant in October 2003, which released an estimated 32 kilograms of uranium (Australian Conservation Foundation 2003). According to the ACF, this followed other major leaks and unpredicted serious safety failures including extensive fires.

The opposition of the Kokatha people was also important. Although dispersed and poverty-stricken, with fewer than 800 Kokatha descendents living in the Ceduna district (Western Kokatha Weenamooga Aboriginal Corporation 2000:2) and only 24 people speaking Kokatha at home (Community Relations Commission 2005:2), their Elders had clearly and repeatedly expressed their opposition to the mine. An independent anthropological report
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verified the Kokatha’s claim to sacred sites at Roxby but was ignored by the Joint Venturers (Meikle 1984:25-26). The main (Whenan) shaft had already destroyed one site of significance, - others were threatened. Dismayed at the injustice of governments protecting the interests of industry against the concerns of citizens, the mine’s opponents felt a responsibility to act (Oldroyd 1984:7).

Economically, the South Australian government was providing $50 million worth of roads and other infrastructure, yet had little guarantee of recouping any of this outlay, with loopholes allowing the owners to avoid repayments if there were any halts in production (Wabeke 1983:10). Most mining equipment would be imported rather than made in Australia (Mullin & Vincent 1984:17), and the capital intensive and highly mechanised nature of the project meant that the much-mooted job creation was at the cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars per job. Many more jobs could be created for the same money, jobs that were both ethical and environmentally-friendly (Coalition for a Nuclear Free Australia 1983a:4). We also argued that as a society it would be better to take energy efficiency measures, reduce consumption and develop alternative energy sources such as solar, wind, biomass, geothermal, tidal and - where appropriate - hydro, rather than utilise dangerous ‘high-tech’ methods such as nuclear power (Branagan 1983:2; CNFA 1983a:4; see also Bierbaum 1991).

7.4 THE FIRST ROXBY DOWNS BLOCKADE, 1983

In 1983 the Coalition for a Nuclear Free Australia (CNFA) and particularly the South Australia-based Campaign Against Nuclear Energy (CANE) organised a blockade of Roxby Downs for one week, starting in late August. More than 200 people were arrested, and solidarity protests were held in London and Germany (Hutton & Connors 1999:200). Over two months, a further 100 people were arrested. Apart from Cohen (1997), I have found few accounts of this blockade.

I had returned to my Arts studies at Sydney University in 1983. The blockade was to be held during university holidays, so although trepidatious, I decided I should participate. I had stayed in contact with Lee, my comrade from the Franklin, and together we hitchhiked
from Sydney to Port Augusta. There we stayed at a caravan park with some ‘hard-core’ activists: working-class, substance-abusing, rough in appearance and speech, much-arrested full-time protestors. They were a little daunting but turned out to be extremely friendly and humorous. I was both excited and apprehensive, for talk at the Franklin and here of previous uranium blockades indicated that there had been much violence. Having experienced little police brutality to date, I presumed that the violence must have come from the protestors. The Blockade Handbook specified that all participants must have Blockade Training – of which a discussion of nonviolence, but no practical training, was merely one of seven components (CNFAa 1983:27). However, I encountered no training in Sydney or Port Augusta. Nor was there any mechanism by which organisers could enforce this requirement.

7.4.1 First action
The next day Lee and I secured lifts in the convoy of vehicles which had assembled, and we made our way north into the desert. Prominent in the group were veterans of the Franklin, the Nomadic Action Group, and self-identified feminists, hippies and anarchists. We arrived at Roxby Downs on August 27th, to find gates preventing us from driving close to the mine, although pedestrians were being allowed in closer. Much debate ensued – should we leave our vehicles, enter on foot and set up camp, or camp with our vehicles? Many (including myself) were in favour of the former, arguing that this heated debate was only occurring because people were dependent on their vehicles, and this was another major and linked environmental issue. Others felt that they could blockade better next to their cars (one or two of which had ‘walkie-talkie’ radios, other radios and equipment) or using them as physical blockades (a tactic which would not eventuate until the forest blockades). Some people started to walk in. Benny Zable set up his ‘theatre of survival’ show on top of Cohen’s truck and began to perform, wearing his trademark gasmask and black costume, painted with ecological and peace messages. He moved in a tai-chi-like dance, flying a rainbow flag.

The first vehicle through the gates was a bicycle, which was ridden unhindered past a four wheel drive vehicle parked across the road (Sydney Morning Herald 30 August 1983:3).
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Then someone pushed past the guard, swung the gate open, and the cavalcade, led by Cohen's truck, charged through the gate. Protestors physically held back guards, and pushed aside the four-wheel drive and a semi-trailer. They rocked and tried to push aside a police vehicle. A policeman was hit on the leg by a protest vehicle. Cars were driven around police blockades, and pushed across sand-hills. Some mine workers used protest tactics and sat down in front of protest vehicles, including one carrying food. There were many arrests, and Benny Zable was lucky to escape injury as Cohen drove at speed, having forgotten the artist on his roof (see Figure 52). Each time the convoy was halted, musicians, dancers and jugglers began to perform. When the police became confused, the protestors again rushed forwards. This shows that, despite the violence by some activists, the arts fulfilled an important tactical role through distracting and disorienting opponents:- this aid to civil disobedience is elaborated on in section 13.3.3.1.

Figure 52: Zable clings to protest vehicle roof as Cohen drives through gate at Roxby Downs, 1983.
7.4.2 Violence and bad publicity

Cohen (1997:111) felt that the day achieved a “convincing victory” and that they would not have got through the front gates and gained media attention without the small group who was “hell-bent on smashing the barriers”. He admits, however, that although the coverage was saturation, nearly all of it was unsympathetic, with media accusations of a violent, hysterical mob like “an invading army smashing down a fort ... frightening ... goading police and frequently tangling with them” (Cohen 1997:110; see also Murray 1986:211-213). This is evidenced by headlines such as “Police and protesters head for Roxby showdown” (Sydney Morning Herald 27 August 1983:5), “Four held in Roxby clashes” (SMH 30 August 1983:3), “Roxby workers break blockade” (SMH 31 August 1983:5) and “Police win the day in the battle of Roxby Downs” (SMH 1 September 1983:2), with accompanying photos of scuffles (see Figure 55). The coverage barely mentioned our concerns about uranium mining, or ridiculed them when it did: “[t]he weird looking people ... want us to take them very seriously. They want to stop a project that has plans for a town of 30,000 people, jobs for 2,400 and a revenue of $500 million a year” (SMH 29 August 1983:3).

At the time I was overwhelmed and confused by the situation, but my position now is that this action was far from a victory, but a media disaster that raised only the spectre of ‘law and order’ problems. In unavoidably militaristic terms, a minor battle for some physical ground had been won, while the war (for favourable public opinion and long-term success in closing down the mine) had been lost. No action at all would probably have been better than such a violent one. Cohen’s argument resides in a school of thought that disruption is an important tactic in social change, regardless of poor media and other consequences (see Scalmer 2002:63). David Cortright (2002:para 2), however, while noting the effectiveness of disruption and citing sociologist William Gamson’s phrase “the success of the unruly”, argues for the disruption to be nonviolent to avoid the bad publicity and distraction from the core issues that violence brings. As Chapter Thirteen will argue, this is an advantage of the arts – creating clever methods of disruption that advance the movement’s long-term agenda.
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Although Cohen claims that the atmosphere was more one of exhilaration than anger, this is very much from the protestors’ viewpoint. Although he may be right that the violence was tame compared to the treatment of protestors and Aboriginal custodians by the authorities in the following months, it is just as likely that the fear and anger that police felt that day was a reason why they were so violent later. A cycle had begun that would be difficult to break, and this was exacerbated by the determination of the South Australian authorities that there would be no weakening of their commitment, with one policeman writing: “Nobody wanted to duplicate the ... experience at the Franklin ... where police actually fought amongst themselves” (Ball cited in Runciman 1986:162).

7.4.3 Music inspires civil disobedience

We set up camp near the mine site, and saw the small township of Olympic Dam, which CANE organisers advised us to avoid to prevent confrontations with the miners. Actions occurred each day at the front gates to the mine - many of them artistic or performance-like (see section 7.4.4). At night, affinity groups cut through the fence and made dashes over the sandhills into the mine area, often chased by helicopters with searchlights.

An arrestable action was planned for one evening. We would amass at the gates and try to prevent a busload of miners from entering. Those wanting to be arrested had agreed to sit down in front of the gates. There was some discussion on whether or not to link arms. Although comforting, and increasing our solidarity and sense of resistance, this might be construed as resistance to arrest (leading to stiffer penalties and worse publicity), or lead to scuffles. I had no plans to get arrested, and do not recall what decision on this was made.

That evening, as we assembled, someone drove a car up to the gates, playing a cassette of Midnight Oil’s album ‘10-1’. The stereo was a powerful one, and this inspiring protest music filled the clear desert air, singing of the corruption and lies of governments and corporations, loudly proclaiming what many of us believed. We began to dance under the eerie floodlights, with several hundreds of police and private security doing nothing to stop us. It was an empowering moment.
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Despite rumours of imminent violence from miners, we continued to mill around the gate until we were informed by police that we would be arrested if we did not move. Some people sat, others moved off. Stirred up and emboldened by the music and dancing, I felt angry to be told to move, and passionate that the mine should not go ahead. On the spur of the moment I sat down. Almost immediately, two policemen approached me. One grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back, so fiercely and suddenly I thought it would break. They dragged me to a van and threw me inside.

I recorded this action in ‘The Roxby Stomp’, a poem (long-forgotten until I recently rediscovered it) published in a student magazine. Despite its doggerel quality, it shows how art-forms perform an historical function by recording stories and information. An excerpt reads:

They pulled my hair and grabbed my feet
And tried to break my arm
They seemed so angry, vicious
Yet I hadn’t done them harm (Branagan 1983a:21).

We were next confined in the local squash courts, then driven to Andamooka at great speed over rough dirt roads. With no seatbelts, we were tossed about in the back, a frightening experience. At the police station they cut my bracelets off (so I could not hang myself), photographed and fingerprinted me and put me in a crowded cell:

They took my rank and number
They took my name and age
They cut my beads and bracelet off
And locked me in a cage (Branagan 1983a:21).

By this time it was dawn. The hours dragged on, with the temperature soaring. As more and more arrestees arrived (mainly women), they put the men into the back of a vehicle:

The cell was getting crowded
So they stuffed us in a van
Leaving 60 women in a single cell
Like a sardine can
17 men in the Black Maria
It was dark and hot in there
We meditated quietly
To try to save our air (Branagan 1983a:21).
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The van was parked in the desert sun for several hours, from about 2 pm. It was swelteringly close, and we struggled to breathe. We held particular concerns for a man in his sixties with a heart condition, and we made loud but seemingly ineffectual complaints about our treatment. Some well-educated and articulate men in our group threatened to complain of human rights violations to the ombudsman². Finally, we were released into the station yard. We exulted in the fresh air and open skies, danced around and hugged. We then assembled into a circle, perhaps at the behest of Benny Zable. We held hands and I felt a peculiar power, as of men who had undergone a ritual initiation together. I underwent a strong spatial/physical sensation, as if I could feel the earth turning. We later talked to the police and sang protest songs, during our interminable wait to go before court. Finally we were processed en masse, and I do not recall any lawyers being present or anyone defending themselves. Like most, I was found guilty of ‘Failure to Cease to Loiter’, and fined. Our twenty-nine-hour ordeal was almost over. Our support vehicles, however, had been vandalised:

At 3 am they set us free
But our tyres had no air
Funny how the constable
Just didn’t seem to care (Branagan 1983a:21).

7.4.4 The arts and ‘Roxby 1983’.

The arts featured throughout the blockade. Benny Zable’s performances were chilling warnings of the seriousness of our mission, and a photo of him was chosen by the journal editors to accompany my ‘Roxby Stomp’. The music, juggling and dance of the first day, as well as having tactical benefits in distracting opponents, created a carnival atmosphere which diffused a great deal of the potential for violence. A later example of this was when a line of tense police was confronted by a line of angry protestors. In a situation spiralling

² I am unsure if these complaints were made. A number of positive recommendations resulted from complaints made after the 1983 Pine Gap women’s peace protest (see Human Rights Commission 1986), benefiting later generations of activists. However, such procedures are time-consuming and often take place so long after the action, and with such little publicity, that few activists feel satisfaction from them. For example, Pine Gap protester Barbara Finch was unaware of the complaints or their success (2002, pers. comm., 8 January).
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towards violence, a Maori activist strolled down the space between the lines, playing his
guitar and singing. The lines moved apart, confused by this incongruous action. Then an
acrobat flung himself down the space in a series of somersaults, further disrupting the
confrontation. The bravery and breath-taking skill of those actions successfully defused the
tension and no violence ensued that day. This is an extremely important function of the arts,
discussed further in 13.3.1.2.

The arts also clothed disruptive acts in less-threatening guises:
a stylized theatre developed between police, protesters and workers. Painted
demonstrators gathered at the gates at shift change and made human pyramids in the
hope of jumping the fence, but they were dispersed by police. The Sleepy Lizard
affinity group ... bound themselves together as one lizard unit and flopped at the
most inauspicious times under the wheels of the shift bus or police vehicles ... fifty
[arrestees] were women who bound themselves together with strips of material in a
passive protest, symbolic of the interconnectedness of life (Cohen 1997:112).

Another women’s action involved the Roxby Action Theatre adapting the ‘Three Witches’
segment from ‘Macbeth’, bringing an impressive ‘High Art’ element to the protest. Finally,
the Midnight Oil dance protest created in us exhilarating feelings of empowerment,
indignation, and confidence that we were right to act against uranium mining. The eloquent
and passionate music of Midnight Oil inspired me to civil disobedience and my first
deliberate arrest. Clearly, the arts were an integral part of nonviolent direct action, inspiring
civil disobedience, imparting humour and colour to it, and reducing or preventing violence.

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Most people left the blockade around the 3rd of September, exhausted physically and
mentally, but having some satisfaction that the profile of the issue had been raised through
our presence and media coverage (eg SMH 1983a:5). A small number remained there
permanently as a vigil camp. In October, a further anti-uranium protest occurred at
Parliament House, Canberra. More than two hundred protestors established a tent city on
the lawns, and held a rally on the 11th (Mockridge 1983:2). About thirty remained until the
3rd of November, when they held a sit-in inside Parliament House (SMH 1983g:3).
7.5 THE LAKESIDE PROTEST
The following year, in July 1984, a National ALP Conference was held at the Lakeside Hotel in Canberra, with the prospect of expanding uranium mining likely. Despite freezing conditions, over a thousand people gathered in the nearby park to voice our opposition, returning to the Australian National University in the early hours of each morning to grab a few hours sleep. Many of us had been at Roxby Downs, and were preparing to return in August if the ALP did not stop the mine. We were also disturbed by the ALP’s lack of action on land rights and on the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. Inside the conference were a number of TWS activists, lobbying on issues such as the Daintree rainforests, western Tasmanian forests and woodchipping.

I entered the conference as a journalist, having borrowed a media card. This was quite nerve-wracking; it was an important meeting and I expected, being both young and unkempt, to be asked to leave. I witnessed the small ALP elite on the platform, consisting of prime minister Bob Hawke and premiers such as Neville Wran, making all the decisions, while debate from the floor was generally stifled. Several ALP members walked out of the conference. Some resigned from the party, with one burning his membership card inside the meeting, having made an anti-nuclear announcement (see also see Thomas 1984:10). Another made an impromptu speech about Roxby. I was so disillusioned with the decision to allow Roxby Downs to go ahead under a policy that allowed three uranium mines, that I too spoke aloud about a sellout, and walked out.

Simultaneously, an alternative conference in the hotel foyer (see Figure 57) saw a variety of options canvassed. Jim Cairns, treasurer in the Whitlam government, advocated that activists join the ALP and effect change from within, but many felt that the ALP was beyond repair. A Green Alliance was suggested, as was an anti-nuclear party. Shortly afterwards, Dr Michael Denborough founded the Nuclear Disarmament Party (see Doyle 2000:136-137), while Bob Brown, who had been elected to Tasmanian Parliament in 1982, would be joined by four more ‘Green’ independents in 1989 (Hutton & Connors 1999:223-228). A national party, the Australian Greens, would form in 1992 (Evans 2005:21), and by
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May 2001, there would be one Green Senator, nine State MPs and over 40 councillors around the country (de Blas 2001:para 6).

7.5.1 Artistic explosion
Art-forms such as music and theatre permeated the protest. The highlight for me was a ‘snake’ of singing, dancing activists, of which I suddenly found myself the leader. I took it into the hotel and around the foyer while ALP politicians were having morning tea. We performed passionate, chant-like songs, such as ‘Singing for our Lives’ (Near 1984:6) and ‘Old and Strong’ (see Appendix 4). I was astonished not to be thrown out by the police or security; indeed, our continued access to the foyer of the hotel was remarkable. At the time I attributed it to the tolerance of the ALP, compared to the intense security I had earlier witnessed surrounding former Liberal PM Malcolm Fraser at student protests. However, Cohen (1997:115) writes that the Lakeside’s manager refused to allow police to remove protestors, fearing damage to the building. As a result, we had unprecedented access to the government, which could not ignore our presence.

Another action I joined was a ‘Die-In’, where a large group entered the foyer and pretended to die, as a statement on the dangers of the nuclear industry. The ‘Die-In’ was intended to be silent, but one man maintained an undertone of comment, which I felt did not detract from the action. When not at the hotel we maintained a vigil in the park (see Figure 53). This was in a central part of town, visible from a main intersection, keeping the protest in the public eye 24 hours a day, and providing an important meeting place for activists. We huddled around fires blazing in barrels, and sang songs to guitar accompaniment. One night wheelchair-bound Jules Davison led the group in protest songs; when we exhausted those we sang Beatles songs and anything we could think of to keep the vigil going, only stopping at dawn, when a new shift arrived. I felt enormous warmth for my fellow activists that night, to which music contributed greatly. The congenial atmosphere also attracted a number of locals, including street people, with whom we were able to share our concerns and provisions. Music thus created a sense of community in the middle of the city, conducive to conversion.

3 The hotel is now called ‘Rydges’.
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Figure 53: The stage at the vigil near the Lakeside Hotel, 1984.

Another night we congregated at the university bar and danced for hours. This infuriated one man, who shouted “Stop it! You can’t change anything by dancing!” Yet the dancing re-invigorated and warmed us after a difficult day. We were able to release the physical tensions developed during interactions with police and politicians, and the fact that we enjoyed it as a group increased our feelings of solidarity. The Lakeside protest was also a highly visual event. At the park, activists gathered by a stage donated by the Canberra Arts Council, and decorated by banners painted by some of the disparate groups involved. One banner exhorted motorists to sound their horn if they supported us, and many did. One day there was a women’s action at the hotel, on another

babies were let loose in the foyer ... with anti-nuclear slogans on their nappies. Artists, meanwhile, performed street theatre outside the building with Hawke effigies [see Figure 56]. Arriving delegates had to run the gauntlet of banners, post-nuclear mutants and the Social Action Theatre, which stormed the entrance of the Lakeside Hotel on stilts. The scene was a riot of colour and absurdist theatre (Cohen 1997:114-115).

Although previously the anti-nuclear movement had worked closely with the ALP (see Doyle 2000:135-136), the decisions made at the Lakeside largely ended that alliance, as the movement withdrew its support and explored political alternatives. Although this led to some despondency that much energy had been wasted in supporting the ALP, it also led to the rise of anti-nuclear and environmental parties outside the two party system, an
important development in Australian politics. This split from the ALP occurred in a spectacular fashion at the Lakeside, because of the artistic flamboyance of the protest, which showed dissent in a nonviolent and creative manner that politicians and the media could not ignore. The variety of actions was exceptional, impacting on aural, visual, intellectual and emotional levels. And rather than just opposing the ALP using its own methods – where art and politics are dualistically separate - an alternative, colourful culture was showcased, a culture that is strongly related to the more holistic eco-pax or ‘Green’ politics that emerged from the protest. This is further discussed in section 13.3.

7.6 THE SECOND ROXBYS BLOCKADE, 1984
The second blockade occurred in August 1984, although for eleven months there had been a continuous presence of protestors at Roxby, collecting and transmitting information on mining practices, Aboriginal issues and the environment. On the 4th of August the vigil camp, which included a mother and her week-old baby, and Kokotha elder Maxie Thomas, was, according to Cohen (1997:116), brutally evicted by SA riot police, the ‘Star Force’. However, they managed to stay in the area despite continued harassment, and were of great assistance as protestors began to arrive for the second blockade.

This time comprehensive nonviolence workshops were held prior to the blockade. I attended one with others from Sydney University, primarily members of its Environment Collective. The workshop occurred over a weekend in a Glebe terrace house, and involved discussions of theory, role-plays, and practice in consensus decision-making (but little mention of the arts.) The workshop obviously had some influence on our group, evidenced by Smekal’s (1984) article on consensus, arguing it was overall a positive process (see below), and Oldroyd’s (1984) article on civil disobedience, which argues convincingly that breaking unjust laws is not just morally defensible,- it is actually preferable to acquiescing in the ecocide threatened by activities such as uranium mining. Similar workshops were

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4 These parties followed and to some extent replaced earlier alternative parties - such as the Australian Communist Party and the Australian Democrats - which had peace, anti-nuclear and other environmental policies (see Burgmann 1993:262-271).
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held at the International School at North Ryde; they included a great deal of time expounding feelings, using support groups to ‘let off steam’, lots of group ‘cuddles’, and positive affirmations to balance the negativity that is placed on people throughout their lives (Theobold 1984:40). It was felt that nonviolent practices needed to be instituted and affinity groups formed early, to deal with the frustrating and uncomfortable environment predicted for ‘Roxby II’. Unlike at the Franklin, where approval needed to be given by large group meetings, and where TWS could veto actions, the Roxby II groups would have complete autonomy to decide their own actions, though they were encouraged to announce their intentions at a ‘spokes’ meeting, both to prevent them interfering with each other, and to gain assistance in achieving their aims (Meikle 1984:24).

I return to this important point in section 7.6.7. After considerable struggle against the conservative Liberal Club, which controlled the Students’ Representative Council⁶ (see Worsoe 1984:16), the SU Environment Collective obtained $750 to hire a bus. Several women had meanwhile obtained the appropriate driving licences. With the addition of members of the SU Disarmament Group, twenty-two students assembled outside the Wentworth Building on City Road. While waiting for the bus, I used some handy paint to graffiti the grey wall facing a desolate vacant lot with “Exporting yellowcake is like nailing radioactive jelly to the ceiling”, a slogan which reached from one side of the building to the other. As it was the middle of the day, I was surprised not to be apprehended, and fortunately the bus arrived as I finished, and we departed. I felt both relieved and empowered. The graffiti remained there for some months, a constant reminder of a bizarre moment.

We travelled via Broken Hill with a memorable stop in a pub there, conversing with local miners about our intentions. As we travelled, we sang, drew, wrote and swapped massages, appreciating the break from the city and our studies. We arrived at Roxby on Sunday 19th August, a bonded and euphoric group (see Figure 54).

⁵ Section 13.2.1.1 describes how art’s holism aids conversion.
⁶ I had recently used satire to be elected – as ‘Sum-One Else’ - to the SRC on an ‘anarchosilly’ platform (see Sydney Morning Herald 2 May 1984:1).
This CNFA action was to be a six-week rolling blockade, with contingents from different states taking turns. This time, more mainstream environmentalists, students, socialists, a wide array of professionals, pacifists, and radical Christians joined the hippie, feminist, anarchist and Nomadic Action Group activists of the previous blockade. Many Australian universities were represented, with Macquarie having a strong contingent. People travelled from as far away as Tasmania and Queensland. The blockade was established as close as possible to the mine, which was guarded by security guards employed by Roxby Management Services, and by 300 police including a dog squad and the infamous ‘Star Force’. Jeff Meikle was in the Police Liaison Group; he was lectured by a Star Force official on the value of a family-based society and told “we should all go home, do what our parents tell us, and go to church more often” (1984:24). Coming from a supposedly “totally impartial” public servant (Murray 1986:213), and directed at a group aged between 24 and 35, this was laughable. The policeman was unmoved by the argument that the

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7 Fellow blockaders told me that many of these were veterans of the Vietnam (or ‘American’) War.
Roxby Downs Blockades

Kokatha people, whose society is based on strong family ties and religious obligations, should be allowed to visit their sacred sites.

The mine lease was patrolled by police with dogs, on horses, in Range Rovers, and in 3 helicopters, equipped with infra-red detectors (Meikle 1984:24). The authorities had obviously expected a major onslaught on the front gates, and had fortified these considerably, with barbed-wire-topped cyclone fencing and a steel bar grid backed by 44 gallon drums filled with concrete. The gates would “resist anything less than an ocean going oil tanker [and] the entire area was floodlit in a fashion reminiscent of the Sydney Cricket Ground” (Meikle 1984:25). However, twenty metres on either side was mere sheep fencing, and small groups were wont to climb over this at night and make incursions into the lease area. Protected from infra-red detectors by aluminium ‘space blankets’, several groups were able to reach the mine despite all that security.

Although there was less violence at Roxby II, there was much tension between police and protestors. For example, I observed NAG’s Doug Ferguson being bashed by five police after he angrily denounced Star Force’s pre-blockade actions to the media (see also Cohen 1997:117). Similarly, Hutton and Connors cite a report of a young woman having her arm broken when she and others were evicted after staying longer than the official blockade (1999:200). Another incident

where a few people had hissed and spat at police turned into ‘the whole country has seen them kicking at police, spitting and taunting them’ (Berrier and Worsoe 1984:16).

This quote shows, as well as the exaggerations of the media, how violent actions by a minority of activists can tar the entire blockade with the same brush. It demonstrates both the need for training and for mechanisms to prevent such actions.8 There were also tensions between city-based CNFA organisers and some activists who felt that CNFA was opposed to the blockade continuing beyond its official end, and that CNFA had even announced on the radio that it had been called off before that date (Hutton & Connors 1999:200).

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8 This is discussed in sections 12.3.5 and 12.4.1.
Roxby Downs Blockades

7.6.1 New tactics

Importantly, in a significant development of nonviolence strategy and philosophy, actions which would have been discouraged by trainers at the Franklin became common. The 1983 CNFA Handbook had encouraged graffiti and stated that “the use of metal chains, cars etc for blockading is acceptable” (1983a:9), and these tactics flourished in 1984, with one group bolting their necks to the gate of the mine shaft with locks that resisted bolt cutters.

Loads of successful actions occurred [including] a raid on the mine area to collect soil samples for analysis, penetration of the mine, during which the mine shaft was graffitied and the doors araldited, a large ‘NO URANIUM MINING’ sign was painted on the runway of the airfield (Ingram 1984:5).

Despite being less orthodox, some CNFA guidelines, such as “No endangering life” and “No deliberate, irreversible damage to property ... Blockaders should go under or over obstacles” (1983a:9) were regularly ignored. Large sections of the fencing (up to one hundred metres a night) were removed and buried. ‘Superglue’ was used to make locks unlockable, and to glue demonstrators to objects. In one such action, where two people had ‘superglued’ their hands to a gate, preventing access to the mine, the police had to ‘oxy-cut’ sections of the piping - to which they were connected - from the gate, with the couple appearing in court the next day with galvanised piping and a large security lock still firmly attached to their persons (Meikle 1984:24). A water truck was prevented from entering the site by a group chained under a cattle grid on the borefields road, with comrades waving signs a kilometre up the road to warn the driver. Fortunately he stopped. In a similar, extraordinary incident of bravery and determination (or perhaps foolhardiness) I witnessed, a musician played guitar in the road to the mine as an enormous water tanker thundered towards him. It seemed that the driver was not going to slow, nor was the activist about to move. At the last possible moment, the driver applied the brakes and the truck shuddered to a halt metres from the man.

Radical artistic actions occurred, such as women plugging a mine shaft with a three-metre tampon emblazoned with messages such as “Womyn know about hidden blood - plug the shaft - stop the cycle” (Hutton & Connors 1999:200). Again, such actions would probably have been prohibited by TWS, as I discuss in section 13.2.3. Actions were also more varied