



The tale of two cities

A mild breeze floated off Sydney Harbour last Friday night. Office-workers were spilling out of cafes and bars. Commuters were making their way home. Sydney was at its late-summer best. Over at the residence of the Governor-General, Admiralty House, the Finance Ministers and Central Bankers of the G-20 were gathering for a reception.

One of the World's most influential Central Bankers wandered up to me with a puzzled look on his face to ask: "Why is it so quiet? Where are the demonstrators?" It was a good question. The last time we had been together in Australia was at the G-20 meeting in Melbourne in 2006. There were no balmy outdoor receptions. The Ministers and Bankers were barricaded inside a perimeter around the Hyatt Hotel. Demonstrators were rioting in the streets outside. The city was in lockdown.

A tale of two meetings.

In 2006 the Victorian Police Commissioner was Christine Nixon. When the militants who called themselves 'Stop G-20' began damaging businesses and property, the police did not intervene. Apparently it was thought this would antagonise them. Some demonstrators began to vandalise police cars. No-one intervened to stop that. Demonstrators lined up to taunt and humiliate police who had to stand back and defend the perimeter around the meeting venue.

As I spoke to the police inside the perimeter it was clear that the rank and file did not think this was much of a way to handle the situation. They were as frustrated as I was at the mayhem on the streets- a frustration I shared with Commissioner Nixon when I called her to give her a very frank assessment of how things were going and what she should do about it. When eventually the Riot Squad was called out the streets were pacified very quickly.

After the Melbourne G-20 was over, Commissioner Nixon thought there were some lessons to be learned from the riots that happened under her watch. According to her, it demonstrated that it was not "appropriate" to hold Global meetings like the G-20 in major cities. Her advice was to move summits to out of the way places where it would be difficult for protestors to gather.

I am glad no-one in Sydney listened to that advice. Sydney showed how it can be done. Strong policing needs to be backed by a strong Government. In New South Wales, Premier Barry O'Farrell wanted to showcase his capital city and attract international attention for all the right reasons not for scenes of ugly criminal street behaviour.

Of course not all the demonstrators against the G-20, back in 2006, were violent. There were peaceful ones- like the Collins Street Baptist Church which held a vigil outside in the name of the poor. The Aid Lobby, led by organisations like World Vision and Oaktree, used the occasion to condemn the Australian Government over foreign aid funding and organised a concert replete with a celebrity appearance from Bono to air their demands.

Despite the fact that the G-20 gave a seat at the main table to developing countries like India, Indonesia and South Africa, various left-leaning interest groups and NGOs protested the fact that "high priests of finance" were gathering to discuss global economic policy and support free-markets and free trade.

Where were these demonstrators, where were their concerts and their vigils in Sydney?

One possible answer is that they are saving themselves for Brisbane. The G-20 now meets at a Leaders level as well as a Finance level so why waste your protests on the second eleven or, as the case may be, the second twenty? It will be interesting to see if they gear up the protests for the Leaders meeting in Brisbane in November.

Another possibility is that the Melbourne protestors were egged on by sympathetic coverage from the local "Age" newspaper which was far more interested in their demands than the Ministers policy-making. But papers can only whip up so much feeling.

Why was there so much anti-G-20 sentiment in Melbourne in 2006 and why has it disappeared?

In 2006 Australia had a Coalition Government as it has now. In 2006 foreign aid was running up as a proportion of the economy and now it is running back down. And back in those days no-one ever thought to claim that spending on unauthorised arrivals was "aid" as did the subsequent Labor Government!

Back in those days the G-20 was seen as a diplomatic achievement of the Liberal Government that had helped to create it and secured Australia's membership. When the nice Mr Rudd was elected as a Labor Prime Minister he did not pull Australia out of the organisation. He did not try to change the membership. He showed no interest in ridding it of capitalist tendencies or support for free markets. He embraced the G-20. At times he even claimed to be the founder of it! Labor's embrace brought the moderates in the NGOs on-side and off the streets.

Perhaps the protesters now realise that while the G-20 is not perfect there is no international institution that ever will be. The Forum never was a grand conspiracy. The G20 can be supported by all sides of mainstream politics. Australia can be a peaceful place to visit. What is more, it is an ideal venue for international summits.