

Bruised and sore at G20

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Picture this. You're in the city. There's a fair bit of commotion because of the G20 summit but you're not interested in that. You're in town with a friend. You stop at a small supermarket on Swanston St to pick up a drink. As you walk to the counter, three to six big men approach. Suddenly and without warning they surround you and threaten, "We've been looking for you".

You say you haven't done anything but they grab you and drag you outside. You start calling for help. There is a white van outside. Your friend runs out and asks what's going on. The men tell him to "get the f... out of here". They throw you in the van and close the doors.

The men are not wearing uniforms and their van is unmarked. They force you to the floor of the van, hold your legs behind your back, handcuff you and sit on your head. You can hardly breathe. They cut your backpack off your back. They are swearing at you and abusing you. They refuse to answer your questions about who they are. The van drives for about ten minutes before it stops and someone tells you that they're police officers.

They take you to the St Kilda Rd station and only then do they say that they have arrested you for assaulting an officer in the G20 protest the day before. You tell them that the day before you were in Malmsbury, around 100km away, but they don't listen. Finally, after two hours, they realise you had nothing to do with the incident and let you go. You are bruised, sore and in shock.

If this happened to you, what would you do?

Mr Drasko Boljevic decided to complain. He alleges this is precisely what happened to him on the weekend of the G20 protests. It is this incident, and others, which has led to complaints about police behaviour during the G20 summit.

The Federation of Community Legal Centres co-ordinated a team of volunteer human rights observers to attend the G20 protests. The team was there to monitor the protest and the police response and to ensure that the right to peaceful protest was respected. It was not there to support any of the protest causes and its work was intended to assist all parties, including the police.

The Federation does not support or endorse violent protest. Violence, by protesters, or by police responding to a peaceful protest, is completely contrary to human rights protections. The violent protests that took place over the G20 weekend undermined and alienated those who peacefully supported causes such as the Make Poverty History Campaign and Falun Gong.

Shortly after the summit, the Federation released a report based on the team's observations over the weekend. The report noted that "there was a high level of aggression and deliberately provocative behaviour toward the police from some protest groups and individuals" including "verbal abuse, property damage, the throwing of missiles and assault."

The report noted "a high level overall of police discipline and restraint in the face of deliberately provocative actions by some protestors." Premier Bracks' is generally right to say the police "deserve our praise and support" for their role.

However, there were a number of concerning reports of police incidents against people who were not involved in any sort of violent protest.

One of these was the incident involving Mr Boljevic. Another involved the failure by police to issue warnings prior to a baton charge on a peaceful group of protesters. There were also numerous reports of overhead baton strikes against non-resisting protestors, targeted towards the head, face, back and neck. Baton blows like this carry a serious risk of injury and according to police documentation "should only be used when lethal force is justified."

Our police force in Victoria is generally highly disciplined and professional. It is constantly reviewing and improving its practices. Monitoring and complaint processes help to ensure police accountability and promote better policing practices and greater safety for officers and members of the community. These processes are vital in securing public trust and confidence in our police force. The investigations into the G20 incidents may find that the police acted appropriately, or they may recommend important changes to police procedures.

Community legal centres provide free legal services to over 60,000 Victorians every year. We respond to requests for legal assistance from a wide range of members of the public, many of whom have no where else to go for help. We also work closely with police and other government agencies on a range of policy issues including family violence, sexual assault and support for victims of crime.

A small but important aspect of the work we do is to make sure police use their powers properly, and to promote respect for the right to peaceful protest. The Federation's work at the G20 summit was directed towards this end.

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