

Conflict between Wagga protesters, MP reaches boiling point at peace ceremony



By Taylor Dodge

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1 Comment



Federal Member for Wagga Michael McCormack addresses the Peace for Gaza protestors at the Combined Rotary Clubs of Wagga Peace Day Ceremony on Sunday after months of butting heads. Picture by Tim Verhoef

Conflict between a group of Wagga protesters and the Federal Member for Riverina has spilled over in public at a Peace Day ceremony.

Every Sunday for the last four months, a group of residents have participated in what [they say is peaceful protest](#) outside the Federal Member for Riverina Michael McCormack's office.

The Sundays for Peace group has been calling for peace in Gaza, holding rallies on the grass following the October 7 attack, asking for Mr McCormack to call for a ceasefire.

Tensions between the group and the MP spilled over on Sunday [at the Combined Rotary Clubs of Wagga Peace Awards ceremony](#), when Mr McCormack delivered a speech to a crowd of about 100 in which he said the protest group - which was present at the Victory Memorial Gardens - hijacked a service for veterans the previous week.

"Our ageing veterans - heroes all - who fought so we could live free, get very few days in the year on which to commemorate their service and sacrifice and those are days

no group should hijack with political protests or by flying any flag other than our national red, white and blue ensign," he said.

"We all want peace in the Middle East. No more bloodshed.

"Palestinian babies are as innocent as Israeli babies and tragically too many from both sides have been unfairly caught up in this.

"But before peace can occur there, Hamas must realise this and release the more than 150 Israeli hostages it holds, dismantle its terrorist organisation and its leaders must be brought to justice for the atrocities committed."

After the speech a commotion occurred between a member of the group and a staff member of Mr McCormack who was filming the group - while legally in his right as it was a public event.

The member of the group approached officers who were at the event asking why he was allowed to film underage children.

The member has since accused Mr McCormack of wasting resources by calling the police on the group during their Sunday rallies despite their protests being peaceful in nature.

Mr McCormack said he had called the police on the group after they screamed profanities at him while he leaving a commemoration service the previous Sunday after being a key note speaker at the event.

"We had an animal remembrance day service at which [a] 101-year-old from Mangoplah and [a] 98-year-old turned up with a number of other veterans to commemorate animals and the service that had been given in wars past, particularly World War II where [the 101-year-old] had an incredible story to tell," Mr McCormack said.

"We had a number of veterans who were quite rattled and quite taken aback by these pro-Palestinian protesters who turned up and stood just behind - about 50 metres away from where the speeches were occurring and held a large Palestinian flag and poster.

"They didn't say anything during the service, but they still turned up and it was quite confronting for the veterans and as I left the service they screamed at me that I'm 'a genocide supporter', and a 'baby killer'."

Mr McCormack said he chose to address the group at the Peace Day Ceremony because a "strong message needed to be said".

Mr McCormack said members of the group had also been covering his office with pictures of deceased babies and posters and sending pictures of deceased babies to his staff members meant for him.

He also said while he agrees the group has "some" valid messages and he too wants peace in the Middle East, he simply doesn't have the capacity to stop the overseas conflict from Wagga.

Group members Jayne Christian and Zahraa Najem have both said they are unaware of any member yelling at Mr McCormack, sending disturbing imagery to him or his team or covering his office in imagery.

Ms Christian said Mr McCormack met with the group organiser and another member last Saturday to discuss his reasoning as to why "he won't advocate for ceasefire". "Having control of the microphone wasn't enough. He wants to control the narrative that comes about because of it," she said.

"Whatever other views people might hold, one thing I know for sure is that the core reason people keep gathering in support of Palestine is to essentially support the calls for a ceasefire by Palestinian people. Michael has been incapable of having dialogue with his constituents based on facts without derailing the conversations being brought to him."

Ms Christian said she believed it is concerning Mr McCormack is still in a position of leadership. "I hope the people of Wagga really reflect on his inability to adequately engage with facts and his constituents who are not conservative white Australians, and who do demonstrate a capacity for empathy and critical thought," she said. "Michael using community events to perpetuate narrow of flawed narratives and use local police resources to respond to his own imaginings of danger is ridiculous, especially in response to those showing up and using their presence alone to support the most pressing issue of this moment, being ceasefire in Palestine - otherwise recognised as peace."

Ms Najem said while there has been general chants such as "stop the killing of babies, stop the genocide", there has been no vandalism. "There was a separate incident where a gentleman stuck a small pro-Palestine sticker on a beam outside of the office and a police officer spoke to the gentleman about it," she said.

"The gentleman did not realise it was an offence and it has never occurred again."

"Finally his wording is intentionally structured in a way to spread misinformation. I wrote a letter to Mr McCormack outlining the atrocities happening in Gaza, the civilian deaths, statistics of children being killed and the importance of asking for a ceasefire."

"I highlighted that it's important to differentiate the statistics and acknowledge that these are actual human being's lives being lost. I attached media pictures of what is happening in Gaza with the letter and acknowledged these images within the contents of the letter."

Mr McCormack said he wants peace for all innocent civilians affected by the conflict and is doing all he can do in his position.

Ms Najem said Mr McCormack's stance against protesters is "problematic" and goes against freedom of speech.

"He has said in the past; 'Any form of protest, whether it's a protest over racial riots or indeed what we've seen on Capitol Hill in recent days, is condemned and is abhorred'."