The big question: Is it o.k for people to stage extreme protests at parliament house?

On the 29th and 30th of November, 2016, members of a group known as the Whistleblowers Activists and Citizens Alliance group, staged a disruptive protest for the rights of refugees detained offshore from Australia. Their protest brought parliament to a halt.

The November 29th protest involved a number of protestors shouting out ‘close the camps’ and ‘bring them here’ during parliamentary question time. The protestors shouted from the public gallery - a type of balcony - which overlooks the chamber where parliamentarians debate the running of the country. Members of the group superglued themselves to the furniture making it difficult for them to be removed. Parliament house security eventually forcibly removed all the protestors from the gallery. Question time had to be stopped as the protestors were removed.

The following day, two members of the group abseiled from the top of parliament house, unfurling a large sign which read ‘Close the bloody camps now’. The pair of abseilers were later arrested by police.

The protestors’ actions have generated a range of responses. Some people spoke out supporting the protestors, describing their actions as an important and effective means to draw attention to the treatment of refugees. Others claimed the protestors were a selfish group who should have raised their concerns with their local politician rather than stopping parliament.

Quick facts:
- The Whistleblowers Activists and Citizens Alliance group were protesting against the federal government’s policy of detaining illegal refugees offshore on islands such as Nauru and Manus.
- There are nearly 1400 people being held in offshore detention centres.
- The protest suspended question time on the 29th of November. Question time is a period when members of the opposition question members of the government about their actions.
Arguments that... the actions of the protesters were reasonable

- There are a huge range of ways people can have their voice heard without resorting to dramatic stunts. People can speak to their local member, write letters, create petitions, create social media campaigns.
- Rather than aiding democracy, the protest prevented democracy from occurring. Question time - the period where the opposition gets to challenge the government and keep them accountable, came to halt because of the protest.

Snap perspectives

Protestors selfish

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce labelled the protesters "outrageous" and "selfish", adding that Australians "would have been really upset by it".
"It's their Parliament, and they have a right to see the people they elect do their job during Question Time," he told Lateline.
"People would be saying, 'you've got no right to come into my Parliament and shut my Parliament down'.
"If you've got a problem, sure, say it. Say it outside, go into your local member, have the appointment, but don't go into your nation's Parliament ... and shut down our Parliament, that's just outrageous."

As reported by the ABC

Protestors courageous

Greens Senator Rhiannon said she had no issue with protesters scaling the front of Parliament House, and called their intervention yesterday "courageous".
"Thank you for what you've done," she told the protesters. "It's just so amazing, the whole visuals of it. There's a lot of people who are not sure what to do and how to make it (offshore detention and boat turnbacks) stop, and I'm sure it'll go around the world, the message to close the camps."
Senator Rhiannon denied that it had been inappropriate for the protesters to disrupt Question Time.
"What’s not appropriate is the way the Turnbull government is treating refugees," she said.
"We’re breaking our international obligations, so that’s where the problem lies.
"That’s where the laws are being broken. These people are courageous. These people are showing what this government, this parliament should do."
Senator Rhiannon said she had no problem with protesters scaling the front of Parliament House.
"It’s a non-violent protest," she said.
"Those people are not impacting, they’re not endangering anybody, they’re taking a message to the world, that we need to bring justice to the refugees."
Senator Rhiannon said she did not believe police and security time was being wasted.
"What’s wasting the money is the billions of dollars this government puts into these offshore processing," she said.
"This protest needed to be held today. It’s incredibly important. I can’t congratulate the protesters more. They are speaking for so many Australians. This is absolutely critical action."

As reported by The Australian