

New Zealand and Nuclear

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Controversies over nuclear issues are no strangers to New Zealand. To some this is a surprise. Often regarded in the northern hemisphere as a country both remote and insular (one of 'eternal Sundays' as playwright Alan Bennett has written), it is a locality that at times jolts with a seismic unpredictability. This is

what happened in 1984 when an incoming Labour government, headed by the ebullient and unusual David Lange, introduced a ban on nuclear ship visiting. Yet in doing so it also sought to remain within a joint defence arrangement which included Australia and the United States (ANZUS). Here the Americans insisted that, to maintain a doctrine of extended nuclear deterrence, its 'neither confirm nor deny' policy about which of its visiting ship carried nuclear weapons had to remain non-negotiable. In the event, New Zealand's ban on nuclear ship visiting, its desire to remain in ANZUS, and the American neither confirm nor deny policy became points on a circle that was never squared; indeed quicker than most, Lange soon appreciated that reality.

Attempts to buy time and possibly manage this contradiction were made through attempts to arrange a visit by a vessel, the USS *Buchanan* which, to all intents and purposes, was neither nuclear armed nor propelled although possibly with a capacity to deploy nuclear tipped depth charges. With Lange not saying no, a mutual accommodation seemed in the offing, only to be uprooted in early 1985 when Lange's Labour Party erupted in uproar over a ship visit deemed certain to buckle an anti-nuclear policy just taken to the electorate. Somewhat naively, this policy was grounded on an assumption that ANZUS membership could coexist undisturbed with a nuclear ban. Full appreciation of just how deeply the United States remained wedded to a neither confirm nor deny policy, intrinsic to a nuclear deterrence posture permitting no compromise became readily apparent. When the *Buchanan* visit was cancelled, recriminations flew thick and fast: the Americans and their ever patient American Secretary of State George Shultz feeling publically humiliated by Lange's retraction of the ship visit invitation; Australian Prime Minister Hawke openly disparaging of Lange's sincerity; and other governments, including Japan, now worried that the virus of anti-nuclearism could disturb security ties to the United States. Yet within the opposition to what the misguided New Zealanders were up to some nuances did exist. For the British, including Prime Minister Thatcher, the rift was more a matter of sorrow than of anger. Perhaps a period of quiet reflection was called for, wondered Foreign Secretary Howe out loud, permitting the immediate crisis to blow over and allow these wayward antipodeans to come to their senses.

While not as committed to nuclear disarmament as rising backbencher Helen Clark (later the Labour leader and Prime Minister), Lange now rode a wave of popular anti-nuclear sentiment. This was invigorated by local resentment at American retaliation that included cutting defence, intelligence, and high level political consultation which, eventually, led to a formal suspension of obligations to New Zealand under ANZUS. Lange's finest hour was the March 1985 Oxford Union debate where, with oratorical panache, he won on a motion asserting the moral indefensibility of nuclear weapons. Only gradually were relations between the United States and New Zealand restored, Washington's deepest mistrust persisting until 1989 when Lange left the premiership. Yet into the post-Cold War era the anti-nuclear policy prospered to enjoy broad cross party support, while in retirement George Shultz became a committed nuclear weapons abolitionist.

As head of the Prime Minister's Department, and a diplomat of considerable standing, Gerald Hensley was an eye in the storm of these tumultuous events. All the events just described he deciphered with consummate skill. In another life he would have made an excellent historian. Like a number of his senior colleagues holding positions of foreign relations responsibility, including Frank Corner, Bryce Harland and Denis McLean (the latter two now deceased), Hensley was incensed by the breach with the United States. For he and his sympathetic colleagues, this was simply something that should never have happened. To these prominent figures - controversially in the case of McLean as a serving official voicing public opposition - years of patient relationship building with Washington had been recklessly squandered by David Lange's dissimulation and disorganised handling of the entire episode.

Not surprisingly critics disagreed: what had the much vaunted access to the highest tables in Washington actually produced of tangible benefit to New Zealand? Was it New Zealand's reluctant participation in the futile Vietnam War? Was it an absent American signature to this country's long sought Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty? Considering the damage the United States sustained with its nuclear weapons testing in Micronesia, how fully had the United States cooperated with a New Zealand's key goal of orderly Pacific decolonisation? The mixed answers to all such questions did nothing to allay the professional hurts sustained by Wellington's most pro-American diplomats. The good old days of first name familiarity with

Washington's movers and shakers, it seemed, were now gone forever.

Attracting most local publicity since its publication has been the author's valid claim that Lange lied by claiming he had no prior knowledge of the planned ship visit pending the eve of its cancellation. Here he failed to circulate relevant papers to senior colleagues, did not discuss the issue in Cabinet and, to make matters worse for his luckless Deputy Geoffrey Palmer, departed on an official visit to the remote Pacific islands of Tokelau where communications were problematic in the extreme. This sojourn occurred just as the crisis was erupting. Well described is the book's confirmation that, to even his most loyal supporters, Lange remained an enigma – highly intelligent, devastatingly articulate, disarmingly humorous, gun shy of confrontation, yet sufficiently disorganised to allow unseen events a chance to create new opportunities. And oddly enough that is what happened: in 1985 the French bombed the Greenpeace vessel *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland harbour, a year later a serious nuclear accident occurred at Chernobyl, while Gorbachev fully emerged to set in train the events that helped bring down the Berlin Wall and conclude the Cold War. Within five years, the New Zealand stance had become more plausible, less isolated and, with Lange's departure, less idiosyncratic.

Yet for Hensley, American and Australian mistrust of New Zealand's management of security issues persisted. Here his detailed, assiduous recounting of key diplomatic and political exchanges is built upon access to a range of files, and an extensive range of interviews conducted with key individuals. Interestingly, however, Helen Clark refused to provide an interview as did Lange's widow, Margaret Pope. Both women were highly significant, the former in mobilising the Labour caucus to insist on the ship ban, the latter directly assisting Lange by shaping some of his most important speeches on the issue.

The book has been written with an eye to history: something to stand as the true record of what actually happened. Indeed it is, but perhaps in more ways than the author intended. Future historians well removed from the fire and brimstone of these events, will find this an excellent source for deciphering the internecine domestic public and bureaucratic politics that helped shape these events. It provides an excellent case study of what can go wrong when a Prime Minister's senior officials find themselves operating as if watching a foreign film without subtitles. Future analysts will puzzle over why Hensley, as Head of the Prime Minister's Department, did not make it his business to see that details of the planned Buchanan visit were circulated in advance to relevant Ministers and their senior advisers. Or was it that he and those most anxious to avoid an outright rift with the Americans, believed that should they do so leaks would soon suppurate to threaten the planned visit? Lange was not alone it would seem in keeping these plans under wraps until the visit was sufficiently in train as an irreversible *fait accompli*.

While an essential narrative, this account is not the full story. Nowhere does the book adequately describe the growing frustration that developed within New Zealand over failure to end nuclear weapons testing. A 1963 petition calling for a Southern Hemisphere nuclear-free zone had previously gathered over 80,000 signatures, one of the largest in current memory. That momentum did not dissipate. To growing anger, France detonated 41 atmospheric tests in the Pacific between 1966 and 1974, with a further 148 conducted underground until their cessation in 1996. Opposition voiced by the government abroad built from local community catchments of protest. Resentment over the testing of nuclear weapons extended to their proliferation across and, as importantly, within states through euphemistically termed processes of 'modernisation'. An unbridled nuclear arms race, Lange told an early 1985 Wellington audience, was 'thoroughly alarming'.

Unsung and unmentioned in this study were countless voluntary activities, organised by a wide variety of local and professional bodies, and designed to end nuclear testing and foster actual nuclear disarmament through whatever local means were available. With some inevitability that pointed to a ban on nuclear ship visiting. This accumulation of public pressure had to go somewhere. The protest activity concerned did not constitute what this book describes as 'hard left' anti-Americanism', so much such as a condemnation of nuclear weaponry regardless of ownership. Certainly the author is correct in discerning some anti-Americanism driving the anti-nuclear protest, but this was less emotive froth than a sour reflection upon the Vietnam War's painful lessons and hardening disbelief in Washington's claims of 'trust us, we know what

we are doing’.

This was the key contagion concern, worries in evident capitals from Tokyo to Madrid that broad segments of public opposition might disavow nuclear deterrence as a realistic or legitimate option for their essential defence. New Zealand’s sovereign act of nuclear delegitimation came with the 1987 Nuclear Free Zone Disarmament and Arms Control Act. Of greatest irritation to the United States was its clause 9 stating that the Prime Minister ‘may only grant approval’ for the entry of foreign warship into internal New Zealand waters if satisfied such ships were not carrying any nuclear explosive device. This was obviously a flat repudiation of the neither confirm nor deny policy.

It is difficult to avoid the tone of embitterment that the author maintains towards New Zealand’s rupture with the United States. Yet if not sooner, then probably later it was a collision waiting to happen, indeed George Shultz indicated that at some stage New Zealand would have to expect visiting ships would carry nuclear weapons. But for Hensley and indeed many others that price was worth paying to stay on board as a solid, Western-aligned team player. Hence revealing is a concluding passage (p.299), namely: ‘However enticing the dreams of being free and leading the world in anti-nuclearism, the independent foreign policy meant in practice opposition to American influence. Playing on fears of being a nuclear target alarmed a significant number of people and gave a small but dedicated anti-American group the chance to detach New Zealand from its alliance and for a time unsettle its customary pro-Western orientation’.

Considering the foregoing, it is remarkable that the New Zealand Labour Party was once more pro-nuclear than its main National Party rival. Newly elected in 1957, a Labour government announced that it would investigate the possibility of establishing nuclear power stations in New Zealand. This initiative would be more intense than that of the outgoing National government, a finding in Rebecca Priestley’s lively and informative study about the evolution of civil nuclear policy in New Zealand. With accuracy, fairness and skill she traces how the enthusiasm for radioactive materials and nuclear energy, possibly beckoning a brave new world, soured towards denial, even condemnation of these technologies. But why did that occur?

At the outset, and into the 1920s, radium was promoted as health product marketed to New Zealanders promising beauty and an invigoration of vitality. Initially public donations helping hospitals purchase radium for cancer treatment had, by 1929, availed a greater supply per head than that existing in the United Kingdom. Gradually, however, such overselling of radium use for medical and health purposes moderated, although it took another 20 years before adequate standards of protection for local radiation use were enacted.

Internationally some New Zealand scientists played an active role in the initial development of British and American nuclear weapons. Later, the British were prepared to support uranium mining in the South Island and the development of heavy water facilities in the North, both initiatives faltering towards eventual rejection. Remarkably the country was seriously approached by Anthony Eden as British Prime Minister for use of the Kermadec Islands to the north of the country as a possible nuclear weapons testing site. Before eventual rejection, this 1955 proposal was taken seriously by Empire-loving Prime Minister, Sidney Holland. Here the study notes that official opposition to nuclear testing during this period emerged no more than gradually, a key turning point coming in 1962 when a huge upper atmospheric test conducted by the Americans in the north Pacific proved of such strength as to light up the night skies over distant Auckland.

When it came to local civil nuclear research and development, parsimony and caution by central authorities prevailed. They were unwilling to outlay the resources required to fund either the science or infrastructure required. Without tangible reward to the national economic interest, it was argued, such commitments were not justified. This was despite vigorous, often internationally well connected lobbying by local scientific figures of standing such as the late Sir Ernest Marsden who emerges as a key figure in this story. That did not deny the establishment of some state-funded scientific research and institutions, such as the Institute of Nuclear Sciences under the Department of Scientific Research which produced internationally reputable outcomes, including advances in radioactive carbon dating. But for local physicists, keen to exploit the Rutherford name of original New Zealand nuclear research, this was never enough. Even an American offer

to stump up half the cost of establishing a local nuclear reactor went begging until its eventual withdrawal.

The unwelcome arrival of nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific, firstly by the Americans, then the British, and finally and most controversially by the French impeded but did not halt pressures for New Zealand to develop a nuclear-generated electricity industry capacity. In 1978, a Royal Commission of Inquiry into nuclear power generation in New Zealand concluded that this was not justified until the turn of the century and perhaps even later. This investigation with its wide array of submissions convey through these pages a compelling picture of the contrasting interests and agendas - then prevailing - in New Zealand with controversies that still persist over future energy development. The final chapters traverse familiar ground, dealing with heightened protest over nuclear weapons testing, the rift with the United States over nuclear ship visiting, and the way in which New Zealand's nuclear repudiation has become embedded within a fabric of national identity and external independence. However the book's final sentence offers a salutary warning that New Zealand's current nuclear free status cannot be taken for granted.

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