

New Zealand After Nuclear War

THE BACKGROUND PAPERS

New Zealand Planning Council
PO Box 5066, Wellington

September 1987

BACKGROUND PAPER
1 (A) LIKELIHOOD OF NUCLEAR WAR,
1 (B) STUDY ASSUMPTIONS

460

CONTENTS

- 1a. The Likelihood of Nuclear War; 1b Study Assumptions, by the Study Team
2. Impacts on New Zealand's climate and growing season, by A.B. Mullan and M.J. Salinger
3. Impacts on New Zealand's natural environment, by Bob Brockie
4. Meeting New Zealand's food needs, by Diane Hunt
5. Effects of electromagnetic pulse on power and communications, by Gerald Coates
6. Impacts on energy systems in New Zealand, by Jeanette Fitzsimons
7. Impacts on communications systems in New Zealand, by Judith Wright with contributions from John Tiffin and Harry Whale
8. Disruptions to transport systems in New Zealand, by Judith Wright
9. Radiation effects on the environment and people of New Zealand, by Peter Roberts
10. Impacts on health and the health care systems in New Zealand, by Phillipa Kitchin
11. Human responses to disaster - a review, by Neil Britton
12. The impact on New Zealand society, by Cathy Wylie
13. Impacts on New Zealand's urban systems, by David Haigh
14. Government agencies for control and recovery in New Zealand, by John Mitchell
15. Policy options and planning approaches for the New Zealand government, by a working party
16. Initial impacts on New Zealand's financial sector, by Peter Rankin with contributions from Paul Tompkinson
17. Initial disruptions to trade and employment in New Zealand, by Kevin Makin and Campbell Gillman
18. International migration to New Zealand, by Judith Wright
19. Implications for links with South Pacific countries, by Kevin Clark and David Small

BACKGROUND PAPER 12

THE IMPACT ON NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY

By Cathy Wylie

*This is one of a set of background papers prepared, in consultation with the Nuclear Impacts Study Team, from material provided by a wide range of contributors for a study of the impacts on New Zealand of a major nuclear war. Along with other sources, the papers comprised the basis of the book **New Zealand After Nuclear War**, by Wren Green, Tony Cairns and Judith Wright, published by the New Zealand Planning Council, 1987. The assumptions that the study was based on are explained in Background Paper 1, note particularly the assumption that New Zealand is not a target, and the variable assumption involving an electromagnetic pulse (EMP - for an explanation, see Background Paper 5).*

How would New Zealanders react to the radical changes to their way of life which a nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere would create? What kind of society could we have?

The assessment of likely impacts on New Zealand society contained in this paper is based on the views and analyses of a range of people who took part in seminars, interviews, or responded to mailed requests for comments on the study's assumptions. They include Government officials, "streetkids", community workers, local government representatives and officials, trade union officials, Maori community representatives, Polynesian Community representatives, employers' representatives, rural commentators, doctors, lawyers, economists, sociologists, geographers, educationalists, psychologists, historians, political scientists, philosophers, planners, clergy, and women's group representatives. Together they provide a fair cross-section of views as to what might happen, and why, both initially and in the medium to long term (which most did not distinguish as separate phases). However, there is a bias toward white-collar sectors of experience which further research, particularly amongst tradespeople, the self-employed, and more farmers and rural workers, should check.

CONCERN FOR PERSONAL AND FAMILY SECURITY

People generally feel that if a nuclear war appears likely, they will focus most on trying to protect themselves and those they are most closely related to. This accords with the literature on disasters covered in Background Paper 11. Some with official responsibilities said they would feel torn between carrying out their official duties and looking after their own family. Self-protection activities would include stocking up on canned and cartoned food and drink, fuel, candles and torches, storing water, withdrawing savings, buying garden supplies and other items which individuals believe would be useful or hard to procure. For some, this would include weapons.

Evacuation from the larger cities and areas adjacent to military/communications facilities which could be nuclear targets was also thought likely, particularly if people had relatives or friends in rural areas. Such movement would mean considerable disruption to the cities' transport systems and create some pressure on those areas chosen for evacuation. Some also felt that a large number of people, New Zealanders and others, would be trying to come into the country.

Confusion, fear and panic were considered likely outcomes.

Those feelings would come to the fore after an actual nuclear war. They would then become linked to concerns about possible radiation; nuclear winter effects, particularly on food supplies and fuel needs; possible invasion; and extreme uncertainty as to the future. Throughout all the comments there was expressed a compelling need for information on what exactly the effects of the nuclear war would have been elsewhere as well as on New Zealand, and on what could be done next.

Because of the mobile and migrant nature of New Zealand society, it was felt that many people would have relatives and friends in the Northern Hemisphere for whom they would feel immense grief, shock, and possible guilt.

Within New Zealand, separated families and friends would be likely to overload phones and transport systems in their desire to seek reassurance that each was alive, and not in immediate need of provisions, and to make plans to unite where they felt they had the best chance of survival. For those with relatives and/or roots in the Pacific and Australia, questions would also arise as to whether they would be better off there. Anxiety is likely to spread if people fail to make contact (a distinct possibility if the telephone system was overloaded or there was extensive damage by an EMP) and to be particularly destructive for children separated from their families.

Looting, vandalism, and violence were expected in the initial phase especially; and there were fears that minority groups would be particular targets. While this view is at variance with research on disaster, it does accord with the leap in break-ins in Auckland and Whangarei during the electricity black-outs of February 6, 1987; and with the common feeling amongst these commentators that the survivors of a nuclear war may well feel that they have little left to live for. With the loss of jobs and normal daily routines, without access to savings, and with the redundancy of skills for the many currently working for financial and service institutions, such as shops and banks, export industries and in spheres such as advertising, marketing and sales, it was expected that anxiety would grow and erode values such as equality, concern for others' well-being, as well as diminish personal initiative and optimism. This may be more pronounced for the poor with few material resources, lack of access to land or decision-makers, and possibly lack of confidence. Many felt that most New Zealanders would be struggling to find meaning and personal identity with the abrupt disappearance of what could be the majority of the world and cultural heritages as well as their own day-to-day activities and relationships.

Rural areas and Maori communities with access to productive land were thought to have a better chance of remaining resilient and maintaining what some termed "altruistic" values. First, because they did have immediate access to food sources. Second, because land was seen as the basis of power in post-nuclear war New Zealand society. Third, because there was some collective and recent experience of disasters, and examples of community response. (These include drought, floods, earthquakes.) Fourth, because the more communal values and organizational structures which were linked with survival possibilities were seen as stronger in these parts of New Zealand society than in others.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The preparedness and response of central government was seen as crucial to the long-term prospects of a New Zealand society worth living in. One common theme was the immediate need to maintain law and order, to prevent looting, violence and group panic actions or at least curtail any spread. If this was not done, people thought that the credibility of central government and New Zealanders' ability and willingness to make a unified and co-operative response would be severely undermined. However, the concern for law and order was coupled with a concern that those whose function it was (the police, armed forces and civil defence were mentioned, with suggestions that some form of civilian peace-keeping force be developed) remain accountable to the government and the populace at large. Fears were expressed that power would arise from the possession of arms, whether those belonged to the armed forces, police, or individual/grouped civilians; and some saw themselves caught in armed conflict between these different groups.

Though there were doubts that central government could ensure the availability and equitable distribution of food and other essential supplies it was nevertheless seen as the crucial element. Otherwise it was thought that there would be major problems with supply and distribution - and hence the temptation to looting, theft and likely violence in the process - particularly in the cities. People's picture of the role and ability of government in this area is based largely on their knowledge or image of what happened in the Second World War. It includes rationing and nationalization of all essential supplies, including fuel. It also covers relocation of people into areas and work thought to be essential - which most thought would mean an enormous emptying of the cities for rural areas and horticultural/agricultural work. Coordination with local authorities would be vital to the success of such radical alterations to people's everyday lives, skills, and expectations.

Major difficulties were seen in an abrupt plummeting of living standards with further deterioration likely, and in ambivalent or resistant responses to a "command" economy and lack of much individual choice. Although people referred to the positive and communal reactions of people to such far-reaching stress as the Blitz, natural disasters, and acceptance of a controlled economy in the Second World War, they also pointed out that these events were seen as temporary; that there was an "outside" from which relief could come, and mainly did; and that compliance with rationing, conscription and personnel planning was by no means as universal as it was portrayed by a censored press. There were indeed fears that government would model its response on the Second World War, for what would be a very different situation and long-term outlook. Censorship was seen as a particular danger since the thirst for information and the need for that information to have credibility would be so strong.

Communications were consistently stressed as the key factor in New Zealand's survival as a society. For some, this means ensuring that the physical means of communication remains intact, through the guarding of nationwide links against an EMP or planning to ensure an alternative network through riders and town criers. For most, it means more than this. It means that there are reliable channels for information, feedback and decision-making between the national and local levels of government. They believe the local level will be far more important than it is presently, with or without an EMP. Without national co-ordination, there are scenarios ranging from brutal feudalism to a patchwork of diverse communities, with friction always a likelihood. The models people are using here to imagine what could happen to New Zealand are drawn from their perceptions of pre-

industrial society, and of medieval society in its response to the Black Death, as the nearest parallel to the impact of nuclear war.

People also saw severe problems if central government managed to maintain itself, but only through authoritarian measures, or takeover by foreign powers. They believed the reaction to such measures would include vandalism, guerilla warfare and sabotage, and a despair about the point of survival which could result in suicides.

OBSTACLES TO SURVIVAL

Despair emerged also in concerns that long-term survival would be either not physically possible, or possible only for a limited few. A good proportion believed that nuclear winter and radiation effects, coupled with a return to pre-industrial farming methods, would make it impossible to provide for New Zealand's population. This is based on the premise that because of our increasing dependence on imported technology it would be extremely difficult to develop a more sophisticated economic base (unless Australia were also physically unaffected by a nuclear war). Unpalatable decisions were foreseen with regard to the acceptance of refugees (most support their arrival - if they are unarmed and not numerous); treatment of disease and injury; and the distribution of what is produced. Some believe the population would be decimated by radiation (despite the lack of scientific verification) and an increasing inability, due to lack of medicines, to treat sickness and control some chronic conditions that are currently contained. A growing death toll was associated by some with increasing anxiety and sense of helplessness or loss of control for the survivors.

Another obstacle to the survival of New Zealand society in an acceptable form was seen to be the current trend towards more individualistic values, skills identity and relations, and the increasing compartmentalization of people's lives. This would make the necessary "control" government (at either central or local level) unacceptable, and assist its breakdown. Also, if those with little sense of social responsibility survived through use of force, the future would appear bleak for others.

A sociologist from the University of Canterbury (Christchurch) comments.

"The healthy, the resourceful, the greedy will survive. ...A key vulnerability is that moving in the direction of a more atomised, market, competitive society before this catastrophe occurs, (as we are at the present time) we will have to relearn and reacquire more altruistic and caring skills.

"We will need to develop a more decentralised, locally resilient, local resource based economy. We will have to accept much more discipline than we are accustomed to and much more restraint over individual freedom etc. We will have to move from being a relatively free society to being an unfree society."

Similar views were expressed by a sociologist from the University of Auckland.

"The likeliest outcome of a nuclear war would be feudalism: a highly decentralised production system based on local political control and sustained by physical force rather than consent. Feudalism will be the

characteristic social arrangement in both town and country; but the historical European relationship between town and country will be reversed. It will be the country, not the town, that is the progressive sector. Urban feudal bands will control access to the detritus of our current society, but this will be a dwindling asset. Much more stable will be control of land resources. In less well-endowed districts this could well provide for a recrudescence of tribal Maori society: the Ureweras is an obvious example. But on better land we will have a feudalism that owes little to earlier Maori attempts to live under circumstances not radically different from those following a nuclear exchange. A holocaust will not provide an opportunity to rebuild Maori society in a general sense. Life will be nasty, brutish and short; but it will be authentically Pakeha."

The present divisions and differences in New Zealand society also appear to some as major obstacles to maintaining the national unity they see as essential to survival. Most certainly saw some reversals in access to power and goods. The financial and managerial skills currently favoured were expected to lose ground. Farmers were seen as well positioned to make social decisions, providing they retained control over land. Those with physical skills and practical knowledge would also assume more status and have more say.

There is some optimism amongst Maori respondents that in a post-nuclear war New Zealand, their skills and systems would give most a fair chance. They cite:

1. Experience of supporting each other physically and spiritually in times of stress and distress. During the 1951 lockout, for example, many marae welcomed and supported displaced families, and marae are often used as community centres during natural disasters (for example, Edgecumbe 1987).
2. Systems and networks which can move very quickly to handle a crisis. At Sir Apirana Ngata's tangi 7,000 people were fed and housed for weeks. The hui system can get people of common interest together in a very short time. However these systems cannot function properly when there are large numbers of people who do not understand, or chose to ignore, the values and customs attached to them.
3. Food-gathering knowledge (edible flora and fauna not commonly known to Pakeha), medicinal knowledge, traditional cooking methods which do not require modern technology, and ancient methods of preserving foods.
4. Leaders who can take responsibility in a crises, and the elaborate knowledge of kinship links is useful in the regrouping of whanau and hapu.

However, they also point out that Maori society is not homogeneous. Of the 80% of Maori people who live north of Taupo, for example, 3 categories have been distinguished by the Maori Studies Department at Waikato University.

- 1) Tribal Homeland Maori (ca. 20%, 60,000 people).
- 2) Urban-related Maori (ca. 40%, 120,000-150,000).
- 3) Urban non-related Maori (ca. 40%, 120,000-150,000).

Relations between categories 1 and 2 are good but relations between 1 and 3 and 2 may be problematic. Many of the urban Maoris who know their connections and have

relatives on the tribal homelands will probably go there, if transport is available. Some of the urban Maori who do not know their roots may attempt to establish their identity and move towards their homelands, while others decide to stay in the city.

PRE-WAR PLANNING OPTIONS

Not surprisingly given their largely negative assessment of New Zealand society's ability to survive, the majority of commentators supported the development of plans designed to minimize the problems they identified before a nuclear war. Their suggestions cover:

- continuing as a nation to oppose nuclear arms so that a nuclear war cannot happen;
- starting to decentralize government functions, improve local authority decision-making, co-ordinate different levels of responsibility, and improve communications between levels of government;
- developing a better communal aspect to people's lives and values;
- ensuring an equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to minimize social conflict and alienation against government;
- educating the public about the likely impact of nuclear war on New Zealand, and teaching survival skills;
- developing specific systems for rationing, relocation, and work to cope with the event if it occurred.

This desire for pre-planning is supported by the findings of the Defence Committee of Enquiry public opinion poll.

CONCLUSIONS

The views summarized here are based on people's knowledge and experience of how our present society functions, and on the everyday activities, reactions and images we depend on for our personal identity. The disaster research indicates they may be unduly pessimistic about the degree of looting and violence, and that they greatly overestimate the amount and effects of radiation. Only a nuclear war could verify their analyses. But with unprecedented changes to our institutions and economy, the radical reversals they outline and their concern for contingency plans make sense.