

# Plans for the nuclear aftermath

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By EUGENE DOYLE

IT'S the start of another day. You lean out of bed and turn the radio on. The newsreader seems a little ruffled as he says: "There has been a nuclear war."

Most New Zealanders are worried that this image could one day become reality.

According to a recent survey by the Defence Review Committee, 44 per cent of the country believe a nuclear war is likely within the next 15 years. A slim 3 per cent believe there will be no such war.

George Preddey, leader of New Zealand 1982 Commission for the Future study on nuclear disaster and author of Nuclear Disaster: a new way of thinking down under, is one of the few people who have examined the subject in any detail.

Most of us, he says, have got our thinking wrong on what would happen if a nuclear disaster did occur.

Today, nuclear winter is almost synonymous with nuclear war. The experts inform us that, following a nuclear exchange, millions of tons of soot, debris and fumes would be thrown skyward, blocking out sunlight and plunging much of the earth into a severe, prolonged winter.

Some 500 million Soviets and Americans would die within hours. Many who survived the war would die of starvation because lack of sunlight, combined with cold, would kill plants and animals. Two billion people in the Third World would die.

These images of death and devastation, according to Preddey, are certainly valid for the northern hemisphere but they are entirely inappropriate for us . . . provided we are not nuclear targets.

"Everyone in New Zealand would survive the initial impact," says Preddey. "We wouldn't know it had happened unless we heard it on the radio."

Though Europe and North America would face temperature drops of up to 40 degrees celsius, the cooling in New Zealand, according to current research, would be in the range of one to three degrees.

With 70 million sheep, a butter mountain and the prospect of a nuclear autumn rather than a winter, we are unlikely to go hungry.

"The environmental impacts, radiation and so on are very much second order effects," says Preddey. "The real threat is of social disintegration through ignorance, fear and panic — the breakdown of New Zealand society from within."

New Zealand could face chaos, Preddey feels, because the Government has no plans in place and there is general misinformation about the likely effects the country would face. With little faith in the Government to ensure services, he fears there would be a scramble for resources and endemic violence as small groups pursued their own self interest.

"One could see in 10 or 20 years time," says Preddey, "disease-ridden peasants scratching the soil for their bare existence."

**G**OVERNMENT has acknowledged this growing concern by putting \$125,000 of the money paid by France for sinking the Rainbow Warrior into a six-month, New Zealand Planning Council study of the effects on the country of a nuclear war.

The study has only just begun but Planning Council director Peter Rankin sees the loss of our trading partners as one of the major threats nuclear war poses to this country.

"How long would it be," asks Rankin, "before our agricultural system ground to a halt because of the lack of some key chemical or element of maintenance or transport?"

The same question mark hangs over Marsden Point, Motunui, the national grid, our health service and every other part of our economic system.

"Most of our jobs," says Preddey, "can be traced back to the import-export cycle. The trading component is a very large part of the New

Zealand economy. If you removed it, the economy wouldn't make sense, it would collapse."

One by-product of this, according to Preddey, would be a rural drift.

"Auckland would not make sense. We would have to move most Aucklanders out into the country to give them a chance of survival," says Preddey.

Though few New Zealanders may die through blast or radiation, the health problems the country could face would be many and varied. Diabetics, for example, would no longer have access to imported insulin and needles.

"We might be able to produce insulin," says Rankin. "We certainly have the sheep pancreas's to do that. But would we have all the bits and pieces needed for the production process, the distribution process and the maintenance of adequate hygiene?"

The same uncertainty clouds every aspect of life, he says, because whilst the impact on an individual part of the system can be catalogued, the overall effect is much more difficult to foretell.

New Zealand has always had a selective immigration policy. In the aftermath of a nuclear war we could be faced with some rather unpalatable dilemmas. If, for example, there was a mass migration to this country, would we welcome them or shoot them on the beaches?

Perhaps the most likely — and the least welcome — refugees would be the crews of warships and submarines which had escaped the holocaust. If they were carrying unlaunched weapons, what would happen?

At the moment the decision-makers have no answers, only questions.

The Defence Review Committee survey shows that 82 per cent of New Zealanders are strongly of the opinion that preparations should be made to cope with the aftermath of a nuclear war.

Minister for the Environment Phil Goff agrees and sees the com-

missioning of the Planning Council study as a vital first step.

"I think the obligation on us," says Goff, "is to ensure that we know what the likely effects would be so that contingency plans could be drawn up. If a nuclear war happens tomorrow, we're in a great deal of strife because those plans aren't in place."

Both Goff and Rankin argue that there has been insufficient research done to justify taking action now. The study is, in fact, seen as phase one of a major study.

A further \$500,000 of the reparation money has been ear-marked by the cabinet policy committee to fund research of issues raised by the current study.

The Government has been applauded by a variety of peace and scientific bodies for mounting the study.

There are others, however, who argue that the study is a classic piece of political side-stepping, allowing the Government a luxury of time we might not have.

**P**REDDY says there is an abundance of information available to government. He cites the 1982 Commission for the Future study, last year's Royal Society report, his book and a variety of local and international studies.

"The Government has indulged in the classic New Zealand response to a problem," says Preddey. "They have set up a committee to look at it, thereby absolving themselves of any responsibility until the committee reports back. Any competent government would have some strategy in place. The fact we don't is an abdication of responsibility of the gravest order."

Scientist Ron Locker is another who has been urging the Government to prepare for the aftermath. He supports the current study but argues that Government must change its defence priorities if we are to survive.

"It strikes me as utterly remarkable," says Locker, "that we are prepared to spend a billion dollars a year on defence, basically at keeping the Reds at bay or defending New Zealand from a highly improbable invasion. The risk of a nuclear war occurring is probably a hundred times as great and on this we have spent nothing whatever."

Survival planning, says Locker and Preddey, is inexpensive compared to Skyhawks and frigates. The two essential elements are organisation and planning.

Provided we are not targets, there would be little need for the elaborate underground shelters that Sweden, Switzerland and China have provided for their populations.

Shrugging off the label of doomsday merchants, Preddey, Locker and others say there are measures that, preferably sooner than later, should be taken.

- These include:
- Plans of how every government department would operate in a post-nuclear society.
  - Better public information about the likely impacts.
  - Plans to move part of the urban population into the country.
  - Promote a public perception that the Government could ensure security and services.
  - Plans to quarantine and absorb refugees.
  - Stockpiling specialist medical supplies, such as iodine tablets to protect thyroids from radiation.
  - Stockpiling essential raw materials and plan for local production or substitution.
  - Obtain more equipment to monitor radiation levels.
  - Law and order plans to control looters or panic.
  - Psychological preparedness by individuals.

The Government is committed to the Planning Council study, therefore action is unlikely before it reports back. If history permits us the time, we can only wait and see if the Government translates the study group's proposals into action.

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