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More nuclear propoganda

The Planning Council seems to have done an honest enough job in assessing the likely effects on New Zealand of nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere. But less creditable are the motives of the Government in spending a considerable sum of public money on what many would see as an exercise in futility. The study was funded from the French reparations for the Rainbow Warrior bombing, so the whole business has been part of Labour's jingoistic, sometimes pathetically pious crusade to change the world. There is little doubt that by continually directing public attention to the nuclear evil, it helps to stop people thinking about unemployment, high interest rates, business failures and all the other problems somewhat closer to home.

The Planning Council tells us that the effects from nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere would, obviously enough, be bad. While we might not suffer too much, if at all, from radiation, the destruction of the industrially advanced nations would knock out our export markets as well as choke off sources of essential imports. We would have all this food, mountains of meat and butter, not to mention enough wool to carpet the Canterbury Plains. But we would be short of medicines, technical equipment and fuels, and our Morris Minors would have to be patched up and kept going for another 20 years.

The Planning Council doesn't go quite so far as to advise us to start digging out bunkers under the house. But there are suggestions for stockpiling seeds and vaccines and for developing alternative farming practices and new crops. The council urges "a comprehensive bureaucratic and civil defence response" if New Zealand is to survive a nuclear war. Society would not survive without "rigorous, far-sighted contingency planning". Currently there is none.

Given the Government's enthusiasm to spend money maintaining anti-nuclear fervour, one would expect the council's suggestions to meet with a ready response. So it is surprising that the outgoing Environment Minister, Mr Goff, is less than gung-ho. He says suggestions for stockpiling of essential commodities are unlikely to be adopted extensively. Stockpiling is expensive and unsuitable for goods which deteriorate. He would not predict that we would make an immediate decision to start moving New Zealand toward self-sufficiency now "simply given the prospect of a nuclear war being possible".

This is all very revealing. Having spent hundreds of thousands of dollars programming researchers to tell us that the aftermath of nuclear war would be bad, the Government is disinclined to do anything much in the way of making the aftermath not so bad. And mainly because, implicit in Mr Goff's comments, there isn't much prospect of nuclear war actually happening. Money has been wasted probing a giant hypothesis. Good for the Government, good for the research business, but nothing more than a cynical propoganda ploy.