

EDITORIAL

After Armageddon

ONE OF THE less justifiable National jibes during the election campaign was directed at Mr Lange for his Government's release of two French terrorists of the *Rainbow Warrior* squad. His credibility suffered, he was told, because he had earlier promised not to release the pair until they had served their sentences.

What Mr Bolger apparently overlooked was that the Prime Minister gave in to overwhelmingly superior force. Not to change would have meant that France continued to block millions of dollars of our export trade. A prudent prime minister had no choice but to accept — on our behalf — that he was too weak to win against a strong nation prepared to act outside the law. Even so, he had the spirit to try saving face by allocating \$125,000 of the money the French paid as reparations toward a study of the probable effects upon us of a northern-hemisphere nuclear conflict.

The resulting study, *New Zealand After Nuclear War*, was written for the Planning Council by Wren Green, Tony Cairns and Judith Wright, and was published last week. What it says — or, more chillingly, omits to say — about such military poseurs as France in the event of a major nuclear war in the northern hemisphere reminds one of Nikita Krushchev's succinct remark that "The living will envy the dead". Certainly it would compel instant forgiveness of France for humiliating us over Mafart and Prieur. The measured prose of the report conveys some unthinkable notions, such as the World Health Organisation estimate that, depending on the number of missiles fired, between 250 and 1000 million people would die immediately and even greater numbers would be at risk of death from starvation.

But not New Zealanders. As previous reports on the nuclear winter have averred, our isolation might for once be an advantage. We are unlikely to be a direct target, and we might survive (though less well) the effects of attacks on the US bases in Australia, Pine Gap, Nurrungar, and North-West Cape, and even the less likely attacks on major cities in south-west Australia such as Sydney and Melbourne. Radiation would not be a major problem for us — although it induces the most fear. Nor would starvation. Our food production is still so enormously out of proportion to our population that we would grow enough to eat even in a climate of nuclear winter.

But the study seems sure that our overseas trade, both ways, would cease immediately. The northern-hemisphere countries with which we trade would be in no condition to import or export anything. So, quite soon, we would be short of medicines and instruments and x-ray film and contraceptives and chemicals for purifying our drinking water: "Society may have to return to the standards of health which were the norm fifty years ago." Unless, that is, we had a flood of refugees from worse-off parts bringing cholera and plague.

We could suffer disruption of our energy supplies (including electricity) and communications, both of which are seen as important for morale as well as their manifold usefulness. They might cut out immediately if one of the nuclear powers were to explode a high-altitude device anywhere near us — as they might well do over the US bases in Australia. That would generate an Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP), an intense electrical field which does not affect people but has the power to blow out insulation, control systems and micro-chips, the last with extraordinary ease. Computers, radios, TVs, videos and stereos would suddenly cease to function — and we are not well equipped to build new ones without imported parts.

Even so, *New Zealand After Nuclear War* is at least mildly reassuring. It reminds us that, later than most, we did manage to produce detailed procedures for managing the economy in the form of a *War Book* published one month before World War II broke out. (It does not add that we ran things rather well.) The authors consider that we should be doing the same sort of thing in advance of a nuclear war, which they are sure we will survive anyway but survive the better for a bit of sensible planning. They gently suggest a few obvious measures such as mineral and petroleum stockpiling, and preparing simpler and less vulnerable technology of the Third World kind for manufacturing such items as insulin and lubricants. They stop short of a list of urgent imperatives — remembering perhaps what happened to the Commission for the Future when it ventured onto that perilous political ground.

But how shall we ordinary people behave when faced with this nuclear obscurity? At the risk of seeming complacent it is worth quoting the study:

"Contrary to popular understanding, people respond to natural disasters, floods or cyclones with a remarkable degree of self-control and adaptive behaviour. Without waiting for outside authorities to arrive, they take the initiative and make critical decisions. Anti-social behaviour, hysteria, fleeing in panic and social chaos are not common responses . . . People generally give highest priority to helping their spouse, children, parents and other relatives, and to keeping family members together. Child-family relationships are particularly important, especially for children's psychological security. Families attempt to get together when disaster threatens or as soon as possible afterwards, preferably in their own homes where they decide collectively what to do next."

Sane enough behaviour, one might think, but we live in a world of *un*-natural disasters. It would be sensible to prepare for the worst — and that without too much dispute and delay.

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