New Zealand After Nuclear War

THE BACKGROUND PAPERS

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prices, assessment of national vulnerabilities and the implementation of a "stock-take" of strategic resources and equipment.

Given the present lack of preparedness these decisions would be difficult to resolve, let alone implement, and probably impossible if there was widespread overloading or prolonged collapse of communications.

Model 1: panic and breakdown

Perceiving widespread social breakdown as imminent the government resorts to giving extensive powers to the military and police under special legislation. This action and the method of its implementation is perceived as coercive and against people's self-interest. It thus accelerates the process of social breakdown it was intended to prevent.

There is widespread public unwillingness to accept the repressive measures on rationing, directed employment and restrictions on movement. This leads to further social disruption and unrest, undermining the remaining authority of government.

With government credibility gone and widespread social breakdown, a coup is attempted. Regions splinter into small selfish factions dominated by local interests and self-preservation. The engineering and maintenance staff required to keep communications, electricity and gas supplies operating lose their effectiveness as management and co-ordination breaks down. Without these inputs large cities become ungovernable.

Model 2: a centralised repressive response

In this model it is assumed that there is no major social breakdown in the short-term after nuclear war. There is no EMP effect and energy systems are not affected in the initial period. In the drive to sustain an economy which is forced to be largely self-contained, government moves swiftly to take control of the financial sector, suspends normal legal process, sets up a command economy, and conscripts large numbers of people into para-military roles to oversee and implement rationing and directed employment. Control is exercised from the centre with no allowance for regional autonomy. Social unrest is met with further repressive measures which are felt necessary.

The steady decline in health and increasing failure of machinery and essential services over the first 2 years increases the authoritarian response. Rigidity and central control, coupled with the steady erosion of democratic systems, are the dominant features of New Zealand society a few years after nuclear war.

Model 3: a flexible regional response

As in Model 2 there are no major disruptions in the initial post-war phase. However the uncertainty, fear and disruptions felt in city and country are not met by repressive authoritarianism. Despite the importance of "maintaining the familiar", people and government recognise that a period of profound change and adaptation lies ahead. New systems must be responsive to local needs and should avoid premature stagnation.

As a response to shortages of transport fuels, problems of distribution and allocation, plus energy and employment imbalances between the North and South Islands caused by decline in exports, government decides to devolve many responsibilities and decision-making powers to a number of regional bodies. Thus central government recognises its inability to respond effectively to the divergent demands of the whole country. Nevertheless it retains responsibility for some essential co-ordinating functions, those of communication, the national electricity grid and some financial management.

Regions are forced by circumstance to respond to local needs for education, social welfare, resource allocation, employment and health. Existing organisations and agencies adapt or new ones develop with new leadership. Conservation of scarce resources through recycling and greater efficiency is a high priority. There are serious disputes between regions over resource rights, equitable distribution of imports and exports and the previous boundaries of various state and local authority jurisdictions. Some experimental approaches fail. Nonetheless, the responses to the massive changes forced upon the country are flexible, responsive to local needs, emphasising self-reliance and resilience. Central government is preoccupied with co-ordination and re-establishing overseas links in a vastly changed world.

A MECHANISM FOR POLICY AND PLANNING

The working party concluded that the situation after nuclear war would make unprecedented demands on government for which existing decision-making procedures may prove to be inadequate. Government's ability to act in the best interests of the country at a time of national crisis would thus be seriously impaired unless plans had been prepared for putting in place a flexible regional response.

In opting for a systematic planning approach to address this shortcoming it was clear that the issues would involve a wide number of government departments, agencies, and private sector organisations. The planning responsibility does not lie clearly with one particular department. Therefore the working party recommends the establishment of a separate entity called the Nuclear Impacts Planning Unit. The functions would include the development of policy advice and contingency planning, monitoring and updating information on the potential effects of nuclear war on New Zealand, and keeping the public fully informed on the work and findings of the unit. The planning process developed by the unit would intimately involve the public at all levels since public involvement and co-operation would be essential to its success. The development of policies for crisis management should include strategies for decision-making at regional and local government levels in the event of a collapse of central government or serious loss of communications.

The unit, with a small permanent staff, should be established within an existing government department. Public accountability could be encouraged by making it responsible to a Cabinet Committee or, more desirably, on a bi-partisan basis to a Select Committee of Parliament.

Possible functions and tasks are summarised below.

Functions of the unit and special purpose groups:

1.   To provide advice for policy formulation and contingency planning.