

Nuclear weapons - a New Zealand perspective

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Mihi.

Greeting to country.

It is my pleasure to be here today in my capacity as Chairperson of NZPNND – New Zealand Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. This is a cross-party group of MPs who are committed to promoting the international peace agenda, most particularly the anti-nuclear weapons agenda. It is customarily chaired by a member of the Opposition and the Vice-Chairperson is a member of the leading Government party.

We are affiliated to PNND which is the global version, registered as a charity in the United States as a programme of the Global Security Institute, a non-profit educational organisation with registered charitable status. PNND was originally established as a programme of the Middle Powers Initiative which until recently was also registered in the US as a programme of the Global Security Institute. The Middle Powers Initiative has recently moved to registration as a programme of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation which is also a registered charity in the US. We have primarily been funded through the Disarmament Education United Nations Implementation Fund (DEUNIF).

Our purpose is to promote through the NZ Parliament and through parliaments internationally, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament initiatives, in an effort to expand nuclear-free zones, progressively halt nuclear proliferation and systematically reduce the numbers of available nuclear weapons to zero over time.

We in New Zealand have a particular perspective on this agenda and I want to describe that briefly, before returning to the overall usefulness of a cross-party Parliamentary group.

In 1957, the NZ Labour Party leader, Walter Nash, said the following:

“The Party’s policy is to support the prohibition by international agreement of the use of the hydrogen bomb and all other weapons of mass slaughter and destruction.”

The second Labour government was in place from 1957-1960. Clearly Nash was voicing what had become the public horror at the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a few short years before. As the potential for and actual destruction of the H-bomb became well known, people and their governments began to recoil at the wholesale slaughter of innocent people in that final conflagration of World War 2. In the Pacific, as you will be well aware, the situation was magnified by the announced intention of the French to test nuclear weapons in the South Pacific. That intention was subsequently realised.

In 1961, recently out of office, the Labour Party at its annual conference of that year, fiercely resisted the notion of nuclear weapons bases being established in New Zealand. In 1963, Labour members supported and sought “most favourable consideration” for a petition to keep the Southern Hemisphere nuclear free. The National Party government at that time, led by Keith Holyoake, said that such measures would be “detrimental to our

own safety” and would “seriously compromise the cooperation and understanding we have sought over so many years to establish with our allies”.

In 1964, the Labour Party, again at its annual conference, specifically called for a day of national demonstration against planned French nuclear testing in the South Pacific.

In 1972, the third Labour government was elected, having campaigned on the policy of a regional nuclear-free zone as a continuation of the developing policy on this issue since the 1960s. Under Norman Kirk, the government vocally opposed test by France in the Tuamotu archipelago of French Polynesia. Legal action against France was pursued in the International Court of Justice and the government campaigned amongst the Commonwealth Heads of Government for the banning of all nuclear testing. In August 1972, Kirk publicly raised the notion of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the South Pacific, in full recognition of the national and regional security issues that it would raise with allies. He actually voiced concern at the real extent to which the US would come to New Zealand’s aid with its nuclear umbrella in circumstances where its own interests were not directly affected. He even went on to echo this concern in his address to the UN General Assembly in 1973.

In 1974, the issue was raised directly at an ANZUS meeting. The US received the proposals but expressed its concern at the impact on both US policy interests and on the alliance between the two states.

The next Labour leader, Bill Rowling, continued the party’s anti-nuclear position and the promotion of a South Pacific nuclear-free zone, modelling it on the 1967 agreement amongst Latin American countries for the world’s first nuclear-free region, achievement which stands to this day.

He said:

“The Latin Americans have achieved something worthwhile. Perhaps the time has come to take a hard look at the possibility of doing the same in our own immediate area”.

The official proposal was lodged by the government at the South Pacific Forum meeting in June 1975. The US outlined its position in an Aide-Memoire to the Australian government:

“[The move] could be interpreted as an effort to force US naval and military withdrawal from an area in which the US has long been involved.”

This was primarily because the ultimate aim of the measures was to prevent the passage of nuclear materials across the high seas, which would significantly affect all US naval vessels given its policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons on board.

Most South Pacific governments by this time supported the idea and the first step was suggested as the “endorsement of the concept in principle” by the United Nations. At this point in time, the NZ National Party did not receive the Labour government’s initiative with particular approval, although the Young Nats expressed their support.

The policy was also hesitantly received by the Whitlam government. A letter by PM Gough Whitlam expressed support for the intentions behind it but concern as to its effects. Whitlam was especially troubled by the potential effects on ANZUS.

“I appreciate that the New Zealand proposal regards a nuclear-free zone regime on the high seas as a long-term objective requiring the agreement of the nuclear powers, and that it envisages, in the first instance, that a South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone should be limited to the territories, territorial seas and air space of South Pacific countries which might accede to it. From the Australian point of view, however, we do not see how any useful arms control purpose could be served by this more limited proposal. Furthermore, even the limited initial proposal could stir up controversy with the United States and raise questions about the ANZUS relationship.”

In a written response to Whitlam, Rowling suggested that the fragility of the ANZUS relationship was perhaps being overstated:

“I know that your people have been concerned that the zone proposal may cut across our ANZUS commitments or in some other way affect our relations with the United States. Frankly, I believe that this view is mistaken. I respect your concern not to disturb the ANZUS relationship and I fully share the great importance you place on the Treaty. For us too it is a cornerstone of our external relations. However, I am also sure that our relationship with the United States can accommodate without any undue strain our nuclear weapon-free zone proposal.”

Rowling’s views would eventually lead to the position that the ANZUS relationship should not dominate New Zealand’s foreign policy considerations, and that independence was critical. Thus, the anti-nuclear policy not only developed much earlier than the Fourth Labour government, but it perhaps also contributed to the formation of New Zealand’s increasingly autonomous foreign policy perspective. In a speech to the 1983 Labour Party Conference, he suggested:

“The foundation on which our foreign policy must rest is clearly stated in our determination to maintain our absolute independence and political integrity. Our task is therefore to produce foreign policy which underlines that situation – a policy which tells the world that our decisions will be made in Wellington – not in Washington nor London, nor Canberra. The kind of independence which we will maintain under a Labour Government will not be negotiable. Neither will our non-nuclear stance which will be an important element of that policy.”

It was the fourth Labour government which finally gave legislative teeth to the protest movement cum policy development which had been brewing since the 1950s. The New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control legislation was passed, our relationship with the United States went into cool storage and ANZUS became a two-legged stool for a while.

But a funny thing happened out of all that – it became an incredibly popular policy! People saw the US reacting angrily and behaving badly and it really triggered that “stick up for yourself” mentality of New Zealanders. We relished our plucky little battler status and the policy, within ten years, became part of our national psyche and identity.

It was in the 1990s that Jim Bolger as Prime Minister brought the National Party on board with the policy and so developed a tenuous but palpable bipartisan approach to our nuclear-free status. That was challenged in the mid 2000s when the then National Party leader in opposition famously told US officials that our nuclear-free policy would be “gone by lunchtime” if they were to be elected. The electoral backlash has meant that that effort is unlikely to be repeated. Our relationship with the US has improved by leaps and by

bounds over the last 15 years and the policy which was once a huge roadblock has simply become an acknowledged difference which has not slowed modern engagement.

This year we celebrated the 25th birthday of our nuclear-free legislation. We marked it with a large Parliamentary reception chaired by myself and including past MPs, local body dignitaries, NGOs and school students who are clearly taking up this torch. We had messages from the United Nations, including one from former Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark, and former National Prime Minister, Jim Bolger. We also supported a motion without debate in the Parliament, supported by all parties and objected to by none. That motion celebrated the 25th anniversary of our anti-nuclear legislation, reaffirmed our commitment to the achievement of a nuclear weapons-free world, welcomed the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty and commended Norway for its initiative in holding a conference in 2013 on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, calling on the government to provide its highest support for this conference.

The purpose of traversing this history is twofold:

1. to demonstrate that every country's journey along the nuclear disarmament and nuclear weapons-free path is different. New Zealand's experience does not need to be replicated by others, but cooperation over how to reach the same goals is possible and highly desirable;
2. New Zealand's establishment of a joint Parliamentary group has been a useful tool. There is no doubt now of the bipartisan consensus around this issue and the shared charring of the NZPNND group exemplifies that. That bipartisan arrangement is useful. Speaking with one voice is powerful. That may be worth exporting even if our policy was not, as David Lange once said!

I offer these reflections as a contribution to advancing the global nuclear disarmament agenda. Younger generations are coming on, wanting to live in peace without the threat of nuclear deterrence or nuclear deployment. Why should they live with anything less? President Obama has encouraged a new dimension of global anti-nuclear activity. We have new opportunities as well as new threats. Developing whole of Parliament approaches may be one useful stratagem.

In my view, we should seize those opportunities, stare down those threats and renew our efforts to rid the world over time of nuclear arsenals. We have the knowledge; we have the systems; we need the political will.

Thank you.