

WHY NEW ZEALAND'S NUCLEAR-POWERED SHIP BAN MUST STAY

Robert Green points to disadvantages likely to accrue from any change in New Zealand's approach to the admission of nuclear-powered ships.

In August 1992 New Zealand anti-nuclear groups invited me, as a former British Navy Commander concerned about the safety of nuclear power, to conduct a national speaking tour, and meet politicians and members of the Special Committee on Nuclear Propulsion. I brought a video of a UK TV documentary called "Polaris in Deep Water" which had not been shown in this country. It investigated reports of cracks in reactor coolant pipes in both the Royal Navy's Polaris nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarine force and other nuclear-powered attack submarines.

In it, the Chair of the UK Nuclear Powered Warships Safety Committee admitted that British nuclear submarines were currently banned from foreign port visits because of these cracks. A copy of the transcript of the interview had arrived in the mail with eight pages, which covered the admission, ripped out. The documentary maker suspected harassment by British government agents monitoring my upcoming visit.

The Special Committee's report "The Safety of Nuclear Powered Ships", published in December 1992, was irresponsibly unscientific and simply wrong when it claimed: "The presence in New Zealand ports of nuclear-powered vessels of the navies of the United States and United Kingdom would be safe." It was so aggressively pro-nuclear that the National government did not risk using it for its obvious purpose - to justify removing the nuclear propulsion ban in the 1987 Nuclear Free Zone Act - and instead quietly buried it.

Within months, *The Scotsman* newspaper revealed in August 1993 that the Royal Navy had contingency plans for a worst-case accident in a nuclear-powered submarine based in

Faslane, near Glasgow, which included evacuation of an area out to 10 km depending on wind strength and direction because of the potential radioactive contamination.

A decade later, the New Zealand government must stand firm against pressure from the Bush administration to link a possible preferential trade deal with withdrawal of the ban.

Some reasons follow:

- New Zealand's nuclear-free legislation is not anti-American. It is pro-human and environmental security for New Zealand.
- Banning nuclear-powered warships is a rare example of application of the *precautionary principle*. Adopted at the Earth Summit in 1992, this recognises the vulnerability of the environment, acknowledges the limitations of science and engineering, reverses the burden of proof, and assesses alternatives.
- The US and UK governments have to accept absolute liability for the consequences of a nuclear accident in one of their warships. However, *no commercial insurance company has ever insured* either nuclear-powered merchant ships (which were all economic failures) or electricity generation plants, because a worst-case accident, like the 1986 Chernobyl reactor explosion, cannot be ruled out.
- The US and UK Navy show a high level of concern about safety and preparedness for an accident in a nuclear-powered warship in a foreign port, with detailed instructions on how to deal with media and local authorities. This reflects their

sensible assessment of the unacceptable consequences for their operations if an accident causes damage to life and property ashore.

- Following the successful terrorist attack on the destroyer *USS Cole* in Aden in 2000, the US Navy recognized that nuclear-powered warships in port (like shore-based power plants) are prime terrorist targets, because the consequences of a successful attack would be potentially catastrophic. Because of this, even before 11 September 2001, the US Navy did not allow its nuclear-powered ships to visit New York and several other major US ports. US pressure to allow visits to foreign ports by its nuclear-powered warships, therefore, means that it is willing to place other countries at risk of terrorist attack.
- Despite Australia being a close US ally, the Australian Nuclear Safety Bureau does not allow any nuclear-powered warship to visit Sydney.
- Safety problems in UK nuclear submarines persist. In 2000, different, more serious pipe cracks in *HMS Tireless* were repaired in the British colony of Gibraltar after a major emergency in the Mediterranean, causing deep concern over many months among both Gibraltarians and the southern Spanish people. In 1996 another submarine of the same class, *HMS Torbay*, had a steering gear failure while entering Devonport in the UK, prompting a nuclear safety alert to emergency services until tugs regained control.

- The grounding of the UK nuclear attack submarine *HMS Trafalgar* off the Isle of Skye in Scotland on 6 November 2002 was immediately followed by a reassuring Royal Navy statement that there was no nuclear risk to the public. Contrast this with the near-sinking of the British destroyer *HMS Nottingham* after striking rocks off Lord Howe Island in the Tasman in July 2002, which would have risked a major environmental catastrophe had she been nuclear-powered. Ironically, she was rumoured to have been there to intercept the British Nuclear Fuels ship *Pacific Pintail* – carrying spent fuel rods back to the UK after rejection by Japan because BNFL had falsified records about them – in order to escort it through the Tasman where a protest flotilla of yachts had gathered.
- Opposition to nuclear-powered warship visits is also based on wider rejection of the activities and processes used to gain and maintain nuclear technology for military purposes. Mining uranium, its processing for use as fuel in warship reactors or in weapons, and the poisonous radioactive waste cause long-lasting pollution and damage to the health of affected workers and public, including genetic effects. Also, no environmentally safe way has yet been found to dispose of the highly radioactive decommissioned warship reactors.
- New Zealand's unequivocal nuclear-free status gives it a unique freedom and authority to criticise the safety of nuclear propulsion and electricity generation, and their incestuous link to creating fissile materials for nuclear weapons. Nuclear-armed states which have followed this path include the UK, Israel, North Korea, India and Pakistan. Many other countries, especially those allied to

the US or with an indigenous nuclear industry, are inevitably muzzled.

- The economic benefits of New Zealand's "clean, green" image will always outweigh any marginal US trade concessions.

US pressure could also be linked to its concern that the "Kiwi disease" will spread to Japan, where the last conventionally powered aircraft-carrier *USS Kitty Hawk* based there must soon be replaced by a nuclear-powered one. Apart from the scandal about BNFL falsifying records referred to earlier, there is associated sensitivity in Japan about the growing crisis of confidence in the Japanese nuclear energy industry following several accidents and revelations that safety inspections had concealed cracks and leaks in reactors since 1986.

Caving in on the nuclear propulsion ban would be seen by the world as the beginning of the end of New Zealand's courageous, hard-won global role as a relatively independent honest broker and leader in promoting alternative security policies which are not locked into US nuclear war-fighting strategies, uphold international law and are environmentally responsible.

**Commander Green served in the Royal Navy from 1962 to 1982, navigating Buccaneer nuclear strike aircraft and anti-submarine helicopters and serving in Fleet intelligence. With wife Dr Kate Dewes, he is now co-ordinator of the Peace Foundation's Disarmament and Security Centre in Christchurch.*