

Citizen Advocacy: The Achievements of New Zealand's Peace Activism

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Abstract

Aotearoa New Zealand provides an important example of successful citizen activism in the form of anti-nuclear peace advocacy. The collective efforts by peace actors over several decades resulted in the successful demand for a nuclear-free nation. This paper highlights the widespread participation and political support that facilitated the process and assesses its achievements.

Keywords: New Zealand, anti-nuclear, peace, advocacy, mobilization

Introduction

New Zealand, a small and isolated country, is a rare example of a nation achieving nuclear-free status. The peace-seeking nation unified around an anti-war narrative, and moved from activism based on public awareness and engagement to the passage of laws that eliminated nuclear weapons through a number of stages: from the first generation of movements against the atomic bomb after 1945 to the response to French nuclear testing in the late 60's to US and UK nuclear warship visits in the 70's and the early 80's. As part of this shift, the US-led military alliance with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS) was redefined by New Zealanders from a guarantee of security to a threat that posed a security dilemma. As this essay shows, social consciousness and activism was ultimately successful in bringing fundamental change. The Labor Party, in

particular, played a critical role in translating strong public participation on the part of a broad section of the population into a significant policy outcome: 'the creation of a peaceful and nuclear-free nation'.

This mobilization involved persistent and substantial public pressure over decades. Public pressure to change the nation's foreign policy also included opposition to involvement in the United States-led coalition in the Korean and Vietnam wars. As these wars came to an end, the matter of nuclear testing became a hot-button election issue forcing each political party to adopt a policy on nuclear weapons. The anti-nuclear argument was placed within a broader moral vision. New Zealand peace advocates problematized the threatening conditions and demanded a solution under the narratives of a 'democratic, egalitarian, decolonized, independent, non-violent, non-militarist nation which is intrinsically based on 'a peaceful nation'. A peaceful nation for them required a nuclear-free approach in its domestic and foreign policies. To achieve this, they organized actively, coordinated professionally, sustained effective campaigns, and engaged in the policy-formation and shaping process.

Since the end of the 60s, successful protest movements have established new modes of political participation in advanced democracies.¹ In some democratic societies including New Zealand, social movements have benefitted from tolerant political structures. Their success depends further on specific configurations of resources, trustworthy

institutional arrangements, and historical precedents for social mobilization that facilitate the development of protest movements.²

Strong democracies are conducive to positive engagements and interactions between citizen and the state. The strengthening of practices of participation, responsiveness to a majority, and the development of inclusive and cohesive societies are powerful components of the democratic decision-making process. Therefore, citizen participation in governance with a responsive, open, and tolerant state can produce positive effects based on popular consensus.

Peace Activism and Citizen Participation in New Zealand: Emergence, Development, and Outcomes

New Zealand civil society has been deeply concerned with peace issues in response to controversies over the country's involvement in major wars including the two world wars, the Korean War, Vietnam War, and various conflicts associated with the Cold War. The initial mobilization of anti-nuclear forces followed the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. This encouraged the formation of small local groups. By the 1950s, these were transforming into a broader vocal and well-organized anti-militarist struggle. This went beyond the moral obligation to protect human lives or emotional issues such as sympathy toward Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors and concern about radiation in the environment. The spread of nuclear weapons came to be understood by many as a nationwide threat. In the 1960s, anti-war slogans and messages spread over the major cities through rallies, marches, demonstrations, and sometimes riots. The Vietnam War gave rise to new levels of coordination of protests and demonstrations. Opposition to the war was rooted in criticism of New Zealand's participation between 1965 and 1972 as a

member of the ANZUS alliance binding Australia, New Zealand, and the US. This resonated as a political crisis with widespread condemnation of government war policies. Individual actors of civil society unified to protest the war and call for New Zealand soldiers to return home. Protesters criticized the government for succumbing to US pressure and participating in the war. The anger generated toward the US continued after the war with a government decision to allow US warships to port in New Zealand.

During the 60's, the conservative pro-American National Party held power in NZ. When the anti-Vietnam War movement together with anti-nuclear dissidents gained momentum across the country, the Labor Party called for the withdrawal of New Zealand troops from Vietnam.³ The Labor Party won the 1972 election and ended NZ's participation in the Vietnam War. Attention then shifted to French nuclear testing in the Pacific atolls. The anti-nuclear movement was fueled by the fact that New Zealand (as well as Australia) was affected by nuclear fall-out, sparking public concern about its effect on both personal health and the environment.⁴ The Pacific People's Anti-Nuclear Coalition was formed to confront nuclear testing. Greenpeace vessels were also sent to the test site causing delay in testing. And in 1973, the Labor government under anti-nuclear leader Norman Kirk challenged the legality of nuclear testing in the Pacific and filed suit in the International Court of Justice.⁵

Following the sudden death of Norman Kirk, the National Party won the 1975 election and invited port visits by US, French and UK nuclear warships. This prompted the formation of Peace Squadron, which sought to block all channels for the entry of the ships. Peace Squadron (sometimes employing civil disobedience) gained media attention and helped raise awareness through mass protests. Public opposition to nuclear testing was part of a broader peace narrative, which won support

of churches, community organizations, trade unions, and student and youth organizations `in a vigilant democratic society`.⁶



Peace Squadron, Auckland Harbour, `Te Ara, The Encyclopedia of New Zealand. A Peace Squadron action to prevent the entry of US nuclear warships in Auckland.

The 70`s also witnessed new forms of peace activism (sometimes in radical ways). New groups formed a national coalition including (but not limited to) the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament New Zealand (CNDNZ), Women`s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Peace Squadron, Greenpeace, The Peace Media, The Peacemaking Association, The Society of Friends (Quakers), United Nations Association of New Zealand (UNANZ), Progressive Youth Movement, The Christian Pacifist Society (CPS), The Foundation for Peace Studies, Friends of the Earth (FoE), Environmental Defense Society (EDS) and Ecology Action.⁷ In other words, New Zealand peace activism was integrated into world peace and anti-nuclear movements.

Furthermore, over the 70`s, the New Zealand Values Party (the first environmental political party in the world) and The Social Credit

League (the Democratic Party now) declared themselves anti-nuclear parties, a position that was later adopted by the New Zealand Party. The position of the Labor Party was already clear with its unconditional anti-nuclear stance and opposition to the ANZUS alliance.⁸ Movement actors collaborated closely with this growing group of leftist parties. The outcome was a united front of Labor, Values, and Social Credit parties with the aim of ending visits of nuclear-powered and armed ships. The political coalition prioritized nuclear issues in its agenda. In this way, the anti-nuclear peace movement gained recognition.

New Zealand responded to a number of crucial events in the mid-80s. These included continued French underground testing in the South Pacific (after ending atmospheric testing in 1975) as well as ongoing concern over a potential nuclear war as the Cold War intensified. Terrifying images of the nuclear arms race and war provided a strong stimulus for anti-nuclear forces. In this regard, disaster-related movies of the 80`s, including `The China Syndrome`, `The Day After` and `When the Wind Blows`⁹, directed popular attention to nuclear threats, raising fears of nuclear doom. Overwhelming public opinion made it possible for the Labor Party to work together with more radical opposition forces to call for a nuclear-free zone.



This photo highlighting the peace symbol appeared in *The New Zealand Herald* on the recommendation of peace activist Laurie Ross on the anniversary of Hiroshima bombing in 1983.

Many workplaces, schools, homes and later councils and cities declared themselves nuclear-free zones. By the 1984 election, over 66% of the population lived in locally declared nuclear free zones.¹⁰ With this growing public participation, small-scale grassroots challenges grew into a widespread anti-nuclear peace movement rooted in a social and political network including 300 local groups.¹¹

This rise in public activism rested on an increasingly sophisticated communication and organizational effort. Activists established personal contact with key people around the country in the early 80's, encouraging them to form neighborhood peace groups and lobby local politicians for a New Zealand Nuclear-

Free Zone Committee (NZ NFZ). The committee focused on campaign strategies, public education, numerous policy petitions to the parliament, lobbying, production and distribution of information on the nuclear threat from authoritative sources, popular merchandise for promotion, and advertising (such as financing badges, stickers and leaflets.) The movement provided extensive documentation on the dangers of nuclear weapons and alternatives to warfare, and progress reports on the campaigns. All of these were significant in raising awareness of the multifaceted growing New Zealand Peace Movement that included all parts of society.¹²

The actors in the movement focused on conscious-raising activities through organizing speaker events and inviting scientific experts (such as Dr. Helen Caldicott, a prominent internationally known anti-nuclear activist) and providing educational materials from The Peace Foundation, Greenpeace, etc., and Larry Ross, the founder of the New Zealand Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Committee, who organized the first New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone Campaign Tour 1982 where he presented plans to small town meetings throughout the country. Peace education mobilized students and teachers in schools under the network called 'Youth Peace' focusing on teaching disarmament and organizing cultural events. The Peace Education Van of Jim Chapple and later Alyn Ware visited schools throughout the country to educate students on the danger of nuclear armament.¹³

Art was also an effective tool for the promotion of peace. Photographers, street artists, theater players and filmmakers creatively provided visuals for opposing nuclear development and responded to the events that took place in the context of nuclear politics and war.



Photo from the archive of Laurie Ross. In the 80's, the poster parodying the classical movie of 1939, *Gone with the Wind*, was iconic and powerful in New Zealand with its depiction of mushroom clouds.

The other actors were from the scientific community. Expert knowledge provided by university professors and groups such as Scientists Against Nuclear Arms and Engineers for Social Responsibility cooperated and provided 'Fact Sheets' that were distributed in the 80's and helped increase the credibility of anti-nuclear campaigns. Additionally, faculty at the University of Auckland wrote and spoke extensively against nuclear weapons/defense ideologies and about the consequences of nuclear war calling for a New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone.

In this context the Labor Party pledged to pass nuclear-free legislation when elected. In the

snap election of 1984, the Labor Party led by David Lange was the victor, largely on the basis of anti-nuclear votes. The resulting government introduced the Nuclear-free New Zealand Bill outlawing both nuclear weapons and nuclear power, as a legal and legislative outcome of all peace-related activities.¹⁴ A year later in February 1985, a new era started when the nuclear-capable American vessel USS Buchanan was refused access to New Zealand ports.

A major new element was introduced with the bombing of the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* by French secret service agents that same year. Many felt it was time to take practical action toward France and the US. The Peace Movement called for withdrawal from the ANZUS treaty and its replacement with a new peacemaking autonomous foreign policy and separate identity for New Zealand.¹⁵ As a result, ANZUS security obligations were suspended during the Labor era from the mid 80's to 1990. In addition, after the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*, France was condemned and obliged to pay reparations. The compensation was allocated partly to establish the Peace and Disarmament Education Trust and was used to invite visiting experts as speakers on arms control.¹⁶

To sum up these observations, the seeds of cooperation and coordination for peace actions were sown; the result was an influential majoritarian political and legal struggle culminating in a significant policy achievement. The mobilization highlighted important issues of defense and security, progressed over time, and gave rise to a national consensus based on the prioritization of peace and anti-nuclear policies.¹⁷

Discussion

An important outcome of the social and political struggle described above is that the

meaning of ‘peace’ for New Zealanders came to transcend the conventional definition of absence of violence. It includes disarmament and anti-militarism, egalitarianism and inclusiveness, social justice for all, indigenous and human rights. Although other factors have contributed to this outcome such as national identity, environmental sensitiveness and consciousness, we have seen that anti-nuclear peace advocacy was central to this understanding.

The movement extended from the response to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 to the creation of a New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone and the Disarmament and Arms Control Act of 1987. The result was the transition from a grass roots political movement to wider social awareness by New Zealand citizens acknowledged by government officials to fundamental political change in nuclear and alliance policy. In the end, the interaction between civil society peace activists and politicians strengthened both, allowing them to become political allies that produced a peace-oriented policy achievement that gained legal status in 1987.

All spheres of society played a significant role in the process. This included pacifists, students, youth, artists, lawyers, teachers, scientists, women, Christians and non-religious people, indigenous people (The Maori), peace researchers, and opposition party politicians who mobilized through lobbying, petitions, media channels, education, reaching out to local councils, inviting overseas experts, and more. The sustained movement with numerous protests and demonstrations generated media interest and public attention and awareness. It was vital for New Zealand to create visual and deliberate actions and ‘an experience’ of ‘togetherness’ of the people in high energy that helped in the creation, development, and protection of a ‘Peace Culture’.

Thanks to this anti-nuclear victory, it can fairly

be said that, since 1987, New Zealand has created a national identity based on anti-nuclear, disarmament-focused, and peaceful principles. Such a tiny nation (with over 4 million people) demonstrated an abiding commitment to disarmament with an effective civil society. Over the next three decades, they extended peace education using French government reparations to fund applications for peace and disarmament education projects by Peace Groups.¹⁸ New Zealand has been active not only domestically but also globally. It immediately signed and ratified the Nuclear Ban Treaty in 2017. That same year New Zealand commemorated the 30th anniversary of one of the strongest anti-nuclear weapons domestic legislation programs in the world.¹⁹ It has led the way for other nations as well. New Zealand provided assistance to other States in their ratification process and called on others to participate in the 2018 UN High-Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament.²⁰

The case of New Zealand’s anti-nuclear peace advocacy shows that persistent advocacy can gain success in democracies through pacifist approaches, ethical consideration of foreign policy, and strong commitment by all parts of society through open political discussion, scientific evidence, protest art, educational tools, and other approaches. It can be sustainable over time when the narrative of ‘power-to-the-people’ is effectively applied. And it can offer a history lesson for other States that exclude the public from decision-making and are closed to nuclear debate.

Conclusion

What distinguishes the New Zealand outcomes from many others in the pro-peace and anti-nuclear camp is that a morally-driven opposition to militarism was transformed into a nationwide social struggle against nuclear weapons that unified the vast majority and

brought a new government to power. This led to strong feelings of national pride in the achievements of the movement that spanned decades, making the process widely accepted, credible, and respectable. Anti-nuclear activism became a mainstream sentiment.

The New Zealand peace movement was transformed from a small movement initially focused on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into a broader anti-nuclear movement that successfully combined opposition to French nuclear testing and US nuclear warship visits with security concerns to create a coherent peace narrative and New Zealand's withdrawal from the American war

agenda as defined by ANZUS.

Citizen activism with the inclusion of all spheres of society was effective when it combined active participation through multiple channels such as campaigning, lobbying, demonstrations, civil disobedience, conscious-raising, activist art, and speaker events. The transition from social to political action was made possible when these issues began receiving political support from the opposition parties especially from the Labor Party. This culminated in the election of 1984 when the Labor Party won and adopted the Nuclear-free law that made New Zealand a nuclear-free country.

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Notes

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