

THE NUCLEAR-FREEING OF RANGIORA

The following account of one particular anti-nuclear campaign is given from my own perspective as a very involved activist in that campaign, but there were others who first inspired the actions, who gave valuable time and resources to make it a success and who deserve the credit for contributing to what was just one small episode in a much larger campaign but which in the end helped convince the New Zealand Government to enact the 1987 Nuclear-Free legislation. From 1957 when, with my wife and young family, I first moved to Rangiora we made many friends but during the nuclear-freeing period some of these friendships cooled considerably. I saw some so-called friends or acquaintances cross the road to avoid me, whether through embarrassment or disapproval is uncertain. However most of the friendships made through the Peace Movement have lasted and these I value.

Chris King
June 1997

Rangiora, 33 kms North of Christchurch, was always known as the "hub of North Canterbury" because of its market town facilities serving the North Canterbury area. Local administration was in the hands of a Borough Council whilst the surrounding farming area was administered by the Rangiora County Council. Total population in the late 70s was approx 6000 and the number has increased since then with more housing areas being developed. It is said that Rangiora, now controlled by one local authority, has become a satellite town to Christchurch.

All the well known car and farm machinery franchises available thirty years ago were represented by six garages and service centres, there were also at least four large Stock and Station agencies, the Forest Research Institute had a research centre in the area and the Rangiora High School was innovative in running an agricultural and practical farming course for the students. In those earlier days there was a good sense of community, many men had joined up and gone off to war together and later worked side by side in the shops, Banks and garages. Young Farmers' Clubs and the Countrywomen's Institute branches were well supported, also the Golf and Bowling Clubs, the RSA and the four licenced hotels. The "six o'clock swill" was nowhere better exemplified in the 50s and 60s than in Rangiora! For a period mine host at the Plough Hotel was Jack Hinton VC. Altogether we were a well ordered and friendly community where the Bank Manager and the Council employee keeping the roadways clean were on first name terms. On Friday afternoons most of the farming fraternity descended on Rangiora to stand on the High Street corners and discuss sheep and dairy prices or gather at Devlin's Market where everything from chickens and ducks to armchairs and carving knives were up for auction.

It was in May 1983 that a concerned resident, Olwyn King, arranged a meeting at the Borough School to hear Larry Ross, Secretary of the NZ Nuclear-Free Zone Committee, based in Christchurch, speak about the nuclear threat and as a result of that meeting the Rangiora District Peace & Nuclear Disarmament Group was formed. Several towns and cities had passed resolutions becoming nuclear weapon-free zones and our priority was to promote Rangiora in the same way. One member, Sam Hobson, suggested a map of New Zealand should be produced showing the zones and populations already involved. Our map was adopted by the NZ Nuclear-free Zone Committee and produced by the thousand for distribution throughout New Zealand, in both A-4 and poster size, updated from time to time as the zones increased. I was able to present to our group my research into an earlier nuclear free zone attempt, in 1982, by some Rangiora Council members, including Chris Hayward, which was unsuccessful. The information obtained from the Council's records made interesting reading.

In February 1982 the Town Planning and Bye-laws Committee (Chris Hayward - Chair) had recommended that Rangiora be declared a nuclear weapon-free zone. Mrs Harris, the Mayor wished her vote against the recommendation be recorded. A letter from

David Ayers (later to become a councillor) supported the concept as did the North Canterbury branch of National Council of Women. At a Council meeting in March 1982 it was moved and seconded that Rangiora NOT be declared a nuclear-free zone. The voting was five for and five against. Mayor Harris then used her casting vote and the resolution was passed.

Armed with this information the Peace Group decided we should try and change the Council's thinking with a petition and submissions to Council members. We arranged to canvas the entire Borough and on Hiroshima Day, Saturday 6th August 1983, an army of volunteers set out, under direction of Colin Ayers, who issued cards of every street in the Borough to the volunteers, to avoid any duplication of calls. Most people were receptive to our request for signature and we had prepared some notes for collectors including - "Be courteous no matter what" and "Don't argue and withdraw courteously if antagonism met." When we assembled at midday at the Borough School we had collected 1500 signatures within the Borough or 70% of the houses canvassed. Some Councillors were later critical that apparently some primary school students had signed. I responded that we did not know of any specific cases but that if there were a few "does it really matter, is it really important? I don't think any nuclear weapon will make the distinction." A meeting was arranged and we got a sympathetic hearing from the Council's Community Development Committee. We were also holding regular group meetings and stall days to plan strategies and promote letter writing.

On 23rd August we were able to present our petitions at the Council meeting and I was permitted ten minutes to address the Council. However the idea of a nuclear-free zone was again narrowly defeated and the next gathering of our group was disconsolate that our efforts had been in vain. Meanwhile other Peace groups were forming in the Canterbury area and I attended a meeting of the nearby Amberley Group to organise an approach to the Hurunui County Council. We also managed to obtain space for a stall at the local A & P Show. Most members were active in lobbying Council members, distributing leaflets and helping to run street stalls to raise funds for the campaign. Many local shopkeepers were also supportive.

In early September the TV programme "Close Up" approached me with the idea of doing a current affairs programme on the issue of nuclear weapon-free zones and I jumped at the idea of nationwide publicity for our cause. I remember coming back from helping put up 200 metres of fencing near the Orana Animal Park to be met by the TV team who interviewed me on Forestry land against a backdrop of the Canterbury ranges and the Southern Alps. It made a good spot to talk about New Zealand's clean green image and the dangers of nuclear pollution! The Mayor, Mrs Harris was also interviewed, at home, she had by then decided we were some of the "reds under the beds" people!

By coincidence that evening our group had arranged a public meeting in Rangiora to highlight the nuclear issue and had invited Dr Keith Hickling of IPPNW (the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, later to receive the Nobel Peace Prize) to speak about the health aspect and the horrors of nuclear war. We could never have envisaged the size of our audience. The Rangiora locals had seen the TV vans in the town and word soon spread that TV would be covering our meeting. As a result, when the meeting started at 8 pm the hall was bulging at the sides with many people crammed in the doorways. For the first time I faced a barrage of lights and cameras as I introduced the subject and dealt with the idea and symbolism of nuclear-free zones, internationally, nationally and locally. I noted that in New Zealand at the time of the meeting there were 36 nuclear free zones, 36% of the population, over one million people. We were hoping No. 37 was not too far away. I also stressed the ever changing nuclear arms situation - that the super powers had enough weapons to kill us all at least seven times over, that it needed people power to make governments aware that the world's peoples did not want anything to do with nuclear weapons. As I concluded and prepared to introduce Dr Hickling the TV lights were turned off, the cameras packed away and probably the most important part of the evening was not recorded. But the audience stayed and

on Wednesday 14th September the programme, complete with interviews and comments from some local residents, was shown on prime time television. It was a great publicity occasion for our group and the start of a learning curve for me !

The group members, now numbering about 40, were all getting anxious to have another go at the Council and I decided to approach the Town Clerk with a request for another hearing. Also on 26th September Larry Ross and I attended a meeting of the Hurunui County Council. We rigged up a TV set in the Council Chamber and ran excerpts from the very graphic Helen Caldicott video. Larry and I both then addressed Council members, mostly farmers, and I remember the County Chairman asking me, as a Navy veteran, whether I was relieved when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. I had to reply that I, like many others in the European areas, did not then realise the significance of what had happened in Japan and had no idea of the devastation and horror which accompanied the dropping of the bomb but that I had since become aware of nuclear dangers and was dedicated to preventing anything like Hiroshima or Nagasaki ever happening again. The County Council wrote later that they would defer any response until "newly appointed councillors can become familiar with the submissions made to the Council." Later the County Clerk wrote informing us that the Council had written to the Government stressing the dangers of the nuclear weapons build up by the super powers and calling for a "unilateral disarmament process" !.

The Rangiora High School in September asked me to speak to 5th form liberal studies groups and I was able to use some of the "Close Up" programme and the Helen Caldicott video to make some points. I remember I always concluded any talks with - Remember that it is the same sun which shines over Washington, London, Moscow or Wellington. We must never let it be hidden behind a nuclear cloud". There was a favourable response from most of the students to my talks and I did four separate days speaking, approx an hour at a time with the videos.

On 23rd September I wrote formally to the Rangiora Town Clerk, on behalf of our Peace Group asking for another hearing. I also suggested that it was more than ever important that we show a united concern by joining together in the nuclear weapon-free declaration and so help increase the ground swell of feeling that right-minded citizens subscribe to helping to prevent any possibility of the nuclear nightmare becoming a reality. I also quoted Bernard Lown MD - " We are but transient passengers on this Planet Earth. It does not belong to us, we are not free to doom generations yet unborn....." I asked for an opportunity to read the letter myself at the Council meeting. The Town Clerk replied on 3rd October that as my letter was received as a late item at the 27th September Council meeting it could not be dealt with. (Devon Cooke raised a notice of motion in respect of nuclear weapon-free zones and although the motion was lost, after some debate the Council did agree to hear my letter which the Town Clerk was asked to read, I think much to his annoyance).

In his 3rd October letter the Town Clerk also referred to Standing Orders C39 1 and set it out - "When a motion of which notice has been given has been duly proposed and put to the Council and has been rejected by the Council, no notice of any other motion which.....is substantially the same....shall be again entered on the order paper for the space of 6 calendar months."

The full stop in the Town Clerk's quotation is significant ! Because of the keenness of our group not to give up I went personally to the Town Clerk and asked if there was not something we could do but he again referred me to Standing Orders and said that the Council could not keep having the same notices of motion raised all the time and we should accept that our efforts had failed or wait 6 months if we wanted to try again. I asked for a photocopy of the particular Standing Order and he readily supplied me with a copy to take away. Imagine my surprise when I found that it actually read ".....space of 6 calendar months - comma - unless such notice shall be signed by not less than one third of the members of the Council." It also allowed for a further notice before the expiration of 6 months if requested by a majority of the Council members. I could hardly believe what I

was reading and really felt we had been accidentally or intentionally misled on the situation. I knew that neither the Mayor or the Town Clerk were well disposed towards our Group. The rest was comparatively easy. A new Council was elected on 12th October (including the original supporter David Ayers - and three good friends of mine). On 15th November I received a phone call from Devon Cooke saying everything would be OK (I had already informed Devon of the miswording) and on 22nd November 1983 Rangiora became a nuclear weapon-free zone by a 6-4 Council vote. A pre-Christmas barbecue at Olwyn King's house became a real celebration and in the early New Year a mini-Peace Festival was held in Rangiora's public park thanks to the efforts of so many group members and friends. A crowd of about 1000 people was not as great as hoped for but the point had been made and the real value of the day was in raising local awareness of peace and nuclear issues. Game to the end, when we asked for permission to use the Park, the Mayor (still Mrs Harris) suggested it might be best if we used the park opposite the railway line on the road to the Council Dump ! Fortunately, thanks again to Devon Cooke, this idea was outvoted.

Rangiora became - I think - nuclear weapon-free zone No. 43 and Larry Ross invited me to join the NZ NWFZ committee. I attended my first meeting on 1st December 1983 and again found some new friends. The 1984 first annual Nuclear Free Zone Conference was held in Wellington and Glenda Rich and I represented our Group. Speakers included Sir Guy Powles, Sir Jack Hunn, Marie Leadbetter, Col David Hackworth (America's most decorated Officer) Fran Wilde and Helen Clarke and of course Larry Ross. All Group representatives gave a report of their activities and I was surprised when we gave out a long list of all that Rangiora had done. I remember so well that Rod Alley, in summing up on the day's events said that the highlight for him was hearing the reports and ideas that came forward from many of the Peace Groups present "from Rangiora to Napier" !

The Rangiora experience was probably similar to the activities in other areas and showed I think that authorities did not like being pressured and perhaps losing control of their own comfortable decisions. Our Group continued with various activities and the newsletter was published monthly. A Marae visit was arranged and the Group was also welcomed to the ANZAC Day parade and service at the local Tuahiwi Marae, after being refused participation in Rangiora. But that's another story. A Peace Tree has been planted in front of the District Council Offices and more recently the Peace Group held a Street Day to raise awareness and collect signatures for the World Court Project, getting more signatures per head of population than any other area in New Zealand. When Wolf Rosenburg wrote to me in 1984 with thanks for helping with Heathcote's nuclear free zone campaign, he said "Cooperation is Strength". The anti-nuclear movement is still trying to prove it today - on an international scale.

There were those in our Group who saw the issue as solely one of Peace (hence the length of our original name !). Local Churchmen and Church members were mainly supportive of the issues we promoted and my very good friend Colin Ayers became a dedicated group member in 1983 and has continued his efforts, when needed right up to the present time. But there have been so many dedicated people over the years who faced all the challenges at great personal cost in some cases. If I try and mention them all I may miss others who by their own contributions have done so much. Those who took part know who they are. I humbly acknowledge their efforts and guidance and say God bless 'em all !

To all my Rangiora Group friends, I hope this account does justice to all your collective efforts. It was a "combined operation" and taught us all a lot about conflict resolution and peaceful mediation.

New Zealand's Nuclear Free legislation was not enacted until 8th June 1987 but I am sure that people power, generated by small groups like Rangiora helped to carry the day. I will always be proud to have been part of Rangiora's efforts and grateful for the friendship of those dedicated people.

Rangiora: nuclear free?

Cr 4.3.82

Rangiora might be declared a nuclear weapon free zone by the borough council, in a symbolic anti-nuclear gesture.

The move would follow the lead of Auckland's Devonport Borough Council and many similar authorities overseas.

The borough could be declared nuclear free or nuclear weapons free, said Cr C. G. Hayward when he raised the two options at this week's town planning and by-laws committee meeting.

"While it is unlikely to be nuclear here, as a moral stand on the issue we should declare this borough a nuclear free zone," he said.

Cr J. A. Sparkes said the issue was one of personal opinion and it would be "facetious" of the council to make a declaration.

"Nuclear weapons are here to stay and they are a good deterrent," he said.

Cr Sparkes said he would be against a nuclear power station in the area but saw no reason why personnel and

components from nuclear installations should not pass through.

Cr G. E. Koller remarked that the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research had a nuclear reactor at Lower Hutt and although unlikely it was "not beyond the bounds of possibility" that one could be set up locally.

"We have nothing in our town planning that protects our citizens from the setting up of a nuclear reactor."

The Mayor (Mrs D. M.

Harris) said the council should not make a rush decision on the issue and, with Crs Sparkes and S. A. Boyce, she voted against Cr Hayward's motion, for a nuclear weapons free zone.

However, the motion was carried 4-3 when the committee chairman (Cr D. J. Williams) added his vote to those of Crs Hayward, Koller and D. A. Franklin.

The committee's recommendation will go before the full council meeting at the end of the month.

Ayers Family, 15:14 9/03/02 +13, 20 Years Commemoration

Return-Path: <ayersmd@extra.co.nz>
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Reply-To: "Ayers Family" <ayersmd@extra.co.nz>
From: "Ayers Family" <ayersmd@extra.co.nz>
To: <Adrienne@disarmsecure.org>, <kate@chch.planet.org.nz>
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Date: Sat, 9 Mar 2002 15:14:37 +1300
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Hi Jasmin & Kate

Marilyn and I accept with pleasure the invitation to the commemoration on 15 March.

Thank you also for inviting me to speak. I do feel, however, that I need to correct something. Although a committee of the Rangiora Borough Council did recommend making the borough a nuclear weapons-free zone in 1982, it didn't happen when the recommendation got to the full council. It had to wait until after the 1983 local body elections - Rangiora became such a zone early in 1984 (with, I might add, absolutely no debate at the council table!). With subsequent amalgamations, both Rangiora District and Waimakariri District became nuclear weapons-free zones.

Do you still want a Johnny-come-lately from Rangiora to speak?

Regards
David Ayers