The origins of New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance

"This is who we are, this is what we believe, and damn the consequences." - David Lange, former Prime Minister of New Zealand.

The issue of nuclear power has been a long standing one in New Zealand; with very differing opinions from the general public and leading political parties. When the British started atmospheric bomb testing over the Pacific, New Zealanders began to get very concerned over the future effects that this testing could cause- such as radiation poisoning. Naturally protest organisations arose, which specifically targeted these tests and the effects they would have on the surrounding environment, in an attempt to gain international publicity, by drawing attention to the small nation of New Zealand. New Zealanders were divided on whether they should support an anti-nuclear stance, or instead support the ANZUS Treaty in order to stay within America's favour, for guaranteed security against possible invasion by Communist states.

The eventual decision for New Zealand to become (officially) nuclear free in 1987 has had a huge impact on us as a nation, and placed the country on the world stage; what with its bravery to take an independent stance on a global issue whilst in the process breaking its ties with the superpower of the United States. This fierce anti-nuclear outlook is of great importance to New Zealander's because it helped to establish our identity, and shape the environmentally friendly country which we know and love today.

The time period for which this documentary is based stretches from the late 1950's - with the ensuing of the hydrogen bombs being tested over the Pacific, through to the late 1980's, as this was a period of great unrest among New Zealanders, (making it a very interesting topic to follow up on).

The question of whether or not New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance was a beneficial decision to make is still hotly debated today; and it is my endeavour to explain the background motives for why this is.

You might ask; what is New Zealand's stance on nuclear power and armament? Well, since the late 1950's keen New Zealanders have been actively protesting in the hopes of banning nuclear dependency completely; and while this has still yet to become successful, New Zealand as a country has taken a stand and become nuclear free with several other countries following suit.

The road to our clean green image has been a rocky one with several political debates between leading parties and general protest within the New Zealand government.

One protest group, named the 'Voice of Women' decided to collect signatures of women from all around New Zealand in order to better express their views on nuclear testing in the Pacific. As the leader of the Dunedin branch, Mrs Violet Ballantyne, wrote (in a letter sent to a Madame Pfrimmer in 1965): "We collected 13,165 signatures and sent them through the French Embassy to General De Gaulle. It took a very long time to collect this number of signatures as people are very apathetic..."

This letter suggests that early on in the protest movement there was not too large a following, as people did not originally feel threatened enough by the testing to take action against it. But there was however still a resistance present, as seen in an earlier letter sent to the very same before mentioned woman, (who is presumable the leader of the very same women's organisation, but of the French branch), in 1963, in which Mrs Ballantyne writes: "People in New Zealand are very concerned about the proposed French tests. We were so very pleased when the other nuclear powers signed the test ban agreement and we feel that France's refusal is a mistake morally, politically and economically."

... New Zealanders were afraid of the consequences that nuclear testing in the pacific could bring; such as radiation, and the attraction of our country as a future target from the growing Communist threat. In the words of Former Prime Minister (for the National Party) Keith Holyoake himself said: "On the question of the hazard to health the Government has repeatedly pointed out that the radioactive fallout which reaches New Zealand as a result of French tests is inherently harmful, and that there is no compensating benefit to justify New Zealand's exposure to this harm. In a contradicting report made by MP A.M. Finlay, "[the nuclear tests]... in themselves do not appear to be as dangerous as we feared, but none the less the
cumulative effect of this activity is to be deplored, not only for its threat to world peace, but for its undoubted effect on world food supplies." Although the information provided contradicts each other's findings, the same principal remains in both sources - which is that France's nuclear testing is harmful to the morale of the New Zealand people and should cease immediately.

Prime Minister Keith Holyoake's National Government by 1963 wanted an "end to nuclear tests, but a Pacific zone was out of the question because the whole region was under the threat of Soviet power and Chinese communism". In an address to the public the Prime Minister said that Government: "While sympathetically receiving numerous protests was careful to disapprove any form of direct action". The National Government were thus uncomfortable with upsetting the ANZUS alliance, especially at such a time when New Zealand was under a very real threat, (or so they believed). Travelling in a very different direction during this same year was the Auckland branch of the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) who submitted a petition named 'No Bombs South if the Line' to the NZ Parliament after having gained 80,238 signatures. The purpose of this petition was to raise awareness and call upon the Government to sponsor an international conference which would discuss the establishment of a nuclear-free Southern Hemisphere. This was one of the leading petitions ever signed in New Zealand, coming second only to the vote for women's rights; a fact which suggests that there was a lot of support for NZ to become more vocal in their anti-nuclear stand.

... France moved the site of its nuclear testing to Mururoa Atoll in 1966; by 1972 New Zealand and Australia had had enough so launched a case against France in the International Court of Justice - ordering them to cease atmospheric testing. The French chose to ignore the court’s ruling, which greatly angered the New Zealand Government. So much so, in fact, that the Prime Minister at the time - Norman Kirk - in a symbolic act of defiance sent two Navy frigates, the HMNZS Canterbury and Otago, to the test zone area accompanied by a considerably large flotilla of protest yachts, containing various local New Zealand peace organisations. Among these protest yachts was one named the Vega, which was part of Greenpeace - an independent campaigning organisation that uses non-violent, creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems. This protest yacht was boarded by French commandos who were operating on the test site, and proceeded to arrest the crew. Again it faced backlash when, in 1973, the Vega was rammed by a French military warship, with the co-founder of Greenpeace International, David McTaggart beaten by French police. This incident gained a significant amount of international publicity; further igniting public opinion against the French tests in the Pacific.

These protests profited, as, when the new French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing came to power in 1974 he ruled that the tests be moved underground. However, there was still continuing opposition, even to this arrangement, and as a result Greenpeace was officially founded to help organise further methods of active protesting and raising awareness.

In March 1976 there were over twenty anti-nuclear and environment groups set up around New Zealand which came together to form a loose coalition called the Campaign for Non-Nuclear Futures, (CNNF). Their aim was to promote renewable energy, and of course, oppose the introduction of nuclear power to New Zealand. The group embarked on a nationwide educational exercise which produced a startling 333,087 signatories for a petition against nuclear power by October 1976. This petition was the largest anti-nuclear one in New Zealand’s history...