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# Nuclear power in New Zealand: Attitudes and prospects

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## New Zealand Nuclear in New Zealand: Attitudes and Prospects

New Zealand is famously (or notoriously) antinuclear. For many it is a matter of national pride and the stance is seen to bestow a sense of moral virtue (superiority) and the satisfaction of 'standing up to the big guy'. Anti-nuclearism may be the closest thing we have to a state religion, with the 1987 Act our sacred text and David Lange as our first saint. This gives rise to a certain rigidity in our policy responses, which means that the things we say and the stands we take may not always be in our best interests. I want to argue that we should consider nuclear power for New Zealand: what I call 'A Modest Proposal'.

### The general problem

The reality is that our antinuclear policy is naive and frequently contrary to our other interests; our simplistic and ignorant comments on nuclear matters tend to make us look foolish in more sophisticated circles. This applies not just to activists groups and fringe political organisations but to our political leaders and public servants and those who represent us abroad. There are many examples of this. Early in her Prime Ministership, Jenny Shipley paid an official visit to Japan. Before she set off, it was announced that she would certainly be raising with the Japanese, New Zealand's concerns about its nuclear industry. Now, this is the nuclear industry that has no adverse effect on New Zealand and its people whatsoever but which is crucial to the energy security of what is a major trading partner. Japan's fifty-five power reactors also represent seventy million tons of oil it does not burn. In a similar way, our present Prime Minister has publicly fero-ciously protest ships aiming to intercept ships servicing the Japanese nuclear industry, which occasionally pass through the Tasman, despite the fact that there is absolutely no evidence of any danger from these shipments. In this she may have been following the advice of her sometime Minister of Science, Pete Hodgson, who pronounced on these matters whilst still a shadow spokesman. Of the 1992 shipment of plutonium oxide from Europe to Japan, he said, 'if the ship sank passing by New Zealand, New Zealand would have to be evacuated ... the alternative would be death'. In fact there would have been no perceptible effect. If he (or anyone else) had asked the then-director of our radiological laboratory (Andrew McEwen) he would have told him that it was highly improbable that there would be any leakage of material and if there was it would sink to the ocean floor because of its density.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Mr Hodgson did not publicly retract these comments and subsequently became Minister of Energy, speaks volumes for the level of public debate about these matters. It is also reflected in the fact that, despite a continuing issue with safety of the ships that occasionally pass through the Tasman, our permanent representatives repeatedly decline opportunities to look over the ships and see the safety and security provisions for themselves. They apparently respond that they have all the information they need.

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## Abstract

Traditional New Zealand attitudes with regard to all things nuclear are subjected to critical scrutiny. It is argued that these may frequently lead us to take policy positions that do not best serve our national interests. In the context of continuing anxiety about future energy supplies, an unreflective refusal to even consider civilian nuclear power is an outstanding example of this. The chapter author makes a 'modest proposal'.

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