

City swamped by a bow-wave of change

As an issue to foment the forces of revolution, the push for a nuclear-free city was tailor-made. It also heralded the end for an iconic mayor and a stubborn prime minister. **Peter Kitchin** reports.

'STUPENDOUS nonsense." After the Wellington City Council meeting of Wednesday, April 14, 1982, the mayor, Sir Michael Fowler, was seething. The go-get-'em mayor had been gazumped. The council over which he presided had just voted to make Wellington city a nuclear weapon-free zone.

Fowler thought the idea was outrageous, but it was he who had to declare carried the nuke-free motion of minority Labour team leader Helene Ritchie, seconded by her Labour colleague Hazel Bibby. Ten councillors voted in favour and, to rub it in, two of them, Betty Campbell and David Bull, were in the mayor's Citizens team.

There was no need for Fowler to call for opposing votes and, in any case, the minute he uttered the word "carried" there was thunderous affirmation from the packed public gallery as the council chamber was showered with applause and cheers.

As symbolic gestures go, it was a stunning victory 25 years ago by people the mayor feared were types who would "use the council as a political forum because of their frustrated parliamentary ambitions and political egos". Fowler was so angry the following day he announced that Ritchie's success with the nuclear-free declaration helped confirm a decision he'd been mulling in recent months. He said he would not stand for re-election in the 1983 local body election.

The declaration was "stupendous nonsense", he told *The Dominion*. "If the Labour women want to play that [political] game, I'll play it too, but not out on a limb.

"It brings Wellington into disrepute and I won't be party to that," he huffed.

Fowler, who wrote in the *Sunday News* on April 11 that "pontificating about Wellington being a nuclear-free zone is similar to making a policy statement banning wild elephants in the street", had a smart record in the city's dealings with central government. He was expert in getting what the city needed without stepping on government toes.

Like many civic leaders, he held to the view that central government was the authority on defence matters and treaty interests. Visits of allies' ships to Wellington should be welcomed, he argued. Public politicking at the



Cast of characters: Helene Ritchie with Fran Wilde, left, and Sonja Davies distributing peace poppies to publicise Hiroshima Day in 1983. Below, Rob Muldoon and Michael Fowler share a chuckle overlooking the Beehive.

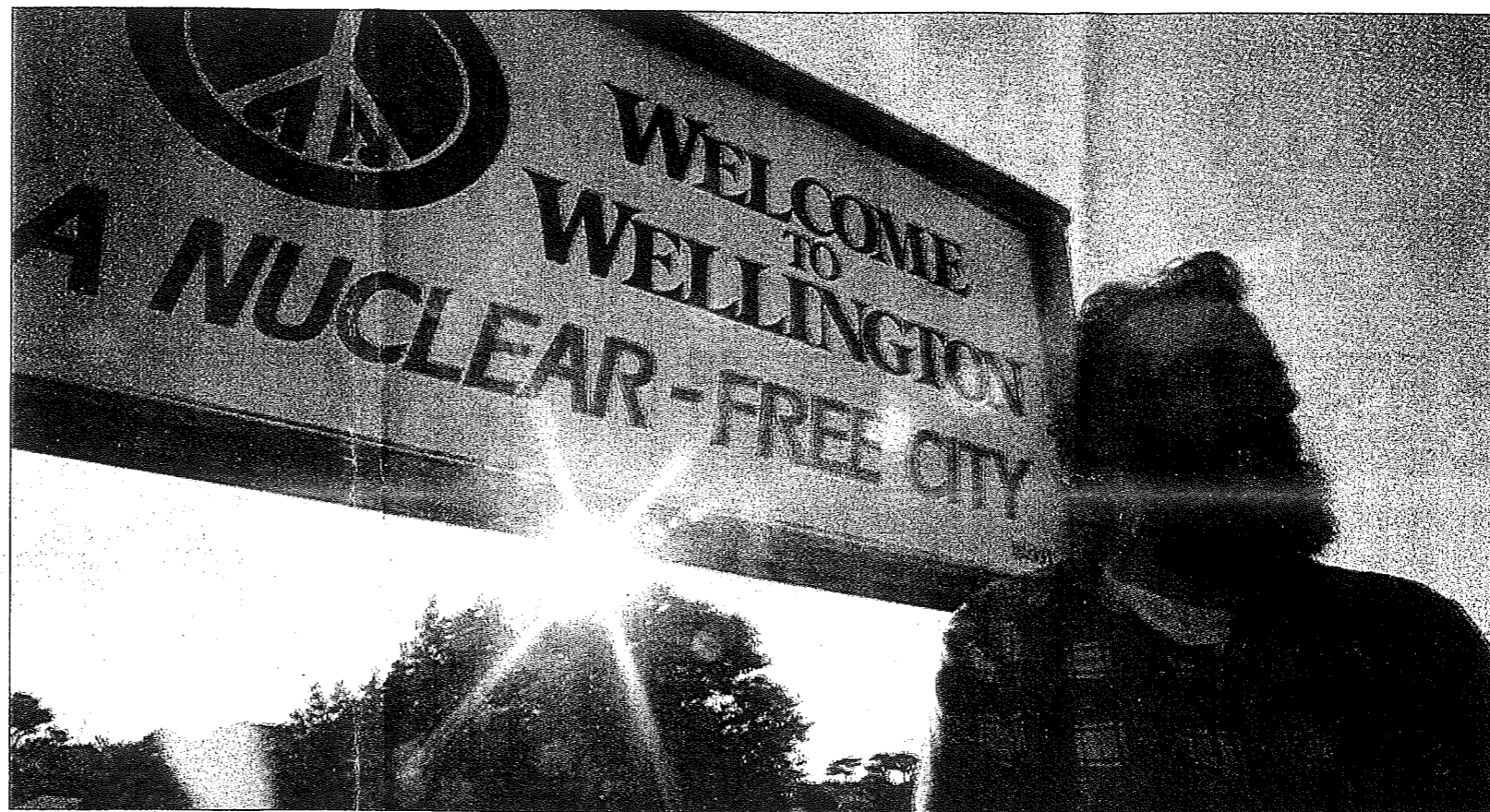
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time was not — as it is today — the preserve of a handful of selected politicians who speak when an approved position has been constructed. Members of Parliament and local body politicians were highly visible. They stuck their necks out, and for their pains were metaphorically throttled when they got things wrong or strayed from the chosen path.

Wellington, the capital city, was where opinions mattered. There was scarcely a month — the summer break excepted — when there were not street demonstrations over food prices, union matters, the Springbok tour, women's rights, military adventures abroad, French nuclear tests and nuclear weapons that may or may not have been on visiting warships.

Twenty-five years ago, however, the persuasive blanket of central government was



Sign of the times: Owen Wilkes stands with the original sign welcoming visitors from Wellington airport. It was summarily removed by the Prendergast-led council before being rewired and replaced.

beginning to fray, and local governments were on notice. The anti-nuclear ship visits lobby was not going away. Its support was widespread and growing.

The mayor was not the only person who thought the No Nukes people were daft and misguided. The prime minister, Robert Muldoon, dismissed the city council declaration as "fun and games". He thought women should stay out of defence considerations.

When the United States guided-missile cruiser Truxtun anchored off Kaiwharawhara on May 25, Muldoon had irrefutable proof that the declaration had no teeth and noting, besides, that the harbour board had not passed a motion to be nuke-free. He accepted a luncheon invitation on board, reporting later that he "had no glow" when he came ashore. The mayor attended as well. Fowler and the PM were in the same boat, however — they were on borrowed time.

The mayor, an architect, went back to his drawing board and a new life in business in 1983. National's fortunes would unravel in 1984, when Muldoon called a snap election. He

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said National MP Marilyn Waring's decision to cross the floor in support of a Labour bill on nuclear weapons made National's position untenable. The electorate turned on National and Labour was swept into power. National had undervalued voter views on nuclear ships and weapons, Labour had not. Wellington was not the first local authority to adopt such a policy — the Devonport Borough Council had done it in 1980, but the capital became a benchmark for others. By the end of 1984, 40 local authorities had nuclear-free policies and by 1988, 72 per cent of the population was living in 105 locally declared nuclear weapon-free zones. Though none of the declarations had legal force, they were effective representations of voter views.

By 1984 it was clear the US was increasingly unhappy with the tenor of the Labour Government's no-nuke policies, but by then no government could ignore public opinion, which, in July 1985, hardened thanks to French secret agents who bombed the Rainbow Warrior, and killed a Greenpeace photographer.

The New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act was passed in 1987 and by 1990 no political party was in favour of nuclear weapons and nuclear ship visits.

While doing research for a monograph on the Wellington declaration, Helene Ritchie found, in council archives, early letters asking the council to take a stand on nuclear ship visits, and dozens of congratulatory ones when the declaration was passed. To the best of her knowledge, none had made it to the council table. She believes a brief reply from the town clerk or the mayor was deemed sufficient.

Until 2003, a sign bearing witness to Wellington's nuclear-free position greeted motorists leaving the airport. It was removed by the Prendergast-led council without notice. After lobbying, a replacement eventually appeared with the words Welcome To Wellington, Capital of Nuclear-Free New Zealand.

■ *25 Years of Nuclear Weapon Free Wellington*, a monograph by Helene Ritchie, is in bookshops.