

# Neil Cherry

- Kate Dewes

Dr Neil James Cherry, Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM), died at home on 17 May 2003 aged 56. He had been diagnosed with motor neurone disease in November 2001. As with many leaders, Neil's controversial opinions about peace, energy, climate change and the health effects of natural and artificial electromagnetic radiation earned him both respect and scorn. He was derided as a "snake oil merchant" and a "charlatan" in the Australian Parliament and ridiculed by academic colleagues and corporate interests deeply threatened by his compelling and challenging research. More recently however he received many local, national and international awards in recognition of his outstanding leadership on a wide range of issues.



(Neil Cherry (l), Fran Wilde (the Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control), and Kate Dewes (r), Christchurch, 1989. Photo by Larry Ross)

His contribution to the peace and anti-nuclear movement is less well known. In December 2002 Neil was one of the recipients of the first eight Christchurch City Peace Awards given to local groups and individuals. The short citation read: *Neil Cherry has been a tireless worker for peace and disarmament research and education for many years. In 1985 he founded the Canterbury Branch of Scientists Against Nuclear Arms and convened the group until 1996. He was an active member of the US-based Union of Concerned Scientists and "Beyond War", the Aotearoa/New Zealand Peace Foundation, Students and Teachers Educating for Peace and the Riccarton Peace Group. He was a member of the local and national committees of the 1986 United Nations International Year of Peace and served as the scientific member of the Public Advisory Committee on Disarmament and Arms Control from 1989-1991. He was awarded the 1990 Commemorative Medal by the Government, for services to peace and disarmament research and education. He has also published articles about the dangers of nuclear power and nuclear winter, and the need for nuclear disarmament.*

In the early 1980s Neil was actively involved in the Riccarton Peace Group's campaign to get both the former Waimairi and Riccarton Borough Councils declared nuclear-free. Because of his growing media profile and church

and academic contacts, he was able to help convince conservative councillors of the symbolic importance of such zones. After four attempts Riccarton Borough Council was finally persuaded in 1985 and became the 100<sup>th</sup> nuclear free council. This campaign, in the heart of the only electorate in Christchurch held by National, spurred Neil to contest the seat for Labour in 1987 and to promote the nuclear free policy as one of his key planks. Many locals rallied to organise events, such as the Peace Train from Fendalton to Rangiora with the world-renowned anti-nuclear activist, Dr Hejen Caldicott, as keynote speaker. Although Neil lost by only 211 votes his campaign helped retain the nuclear free policy.

## Leading Peace Activist

As a member of the first Public Advisory Committee on Disarmament and Arms Control (PACDAC), Neil brought scientific expertise into debates with officials and Ministers on a range of issues. His academic credibility was vital in the exchanges between PACDAC and Dr James Hughes – the Head of the US Navy's Astronomy Division – when he visited the former US Naval Observatory atop Black Birch Ridge (Marlborough), in 1989, to defend

PACDAC's challenge that the Naval Observatory contravened the spirit and/or letter of the Nuclear Free Act. Neil played a key role in preparing questions submitted by the Minister to independent international experts. During this time Neil and I worked closely with Bob Leonard and others to ensure that issues raised in *Peace Researcher* were conveyed through the Committee to the relevant Ministers. These included the US base at Harewood; the safety of visits by US vessels carrying nuclear waste from a leaking nuclear reactor in Antarctica; the role of the French DORIS\* beacon; the establishment of the Waihopai spybase; membership of secret agreements such as UKUSA and Radford Collins\*\*, and the purchase of the Australian frigates. Neil took a leading role in the committee in doing the necessary research, speaking out with authority and conviction, and drafting many of the resolutions subsequently adopted by the committee.

\* DORIS (Doppler Orbitography and Radio Positioning Integrated by Satellite) beacon. This was a French automatic radio beacon covertly installed in the Chatham Islands in 1988, for the purposes of determining the position of French photographic satellites. It was one of an international network of such

beacons. In 1990, the Labour government ordered it removed on the grounds that it could be used to assist the trajectory of nuclear missiles and was therefore quite inappropriate in nuclear-free New Zealand. It had been installed by direct negotiation with Telecom, without consulting the Government.\*\* The 1951 Radford Collins Agreement, between the US and Australia, was revised in 1978 to include New Zealand. It was an agreement for surveillance and tracking of the Soviet Fleet. Each country was allocated an area of the Indian and/or Pacific Oceans. Ed.

During his illness Neil continued to work as an Environment Canterbury Councillor, Chair of the board of wind-turbine pioneers Windflow Technology, and Associate Professor of Environmental Health at Lincoln University. He chaired meetings from his wheelchair in his home of local groups concerned about the effects of electro-magnetic radiation right up until a few weeks before his death. One of the more poignant moments was when he appeared in his wheelchair before a local High Court Judge to present his affidavit in support of a nuclear veteran against the New Zealand Government for exposure to nuclear radiation during *Operation Grapple*\*. He spoke about how, on average the veterans are dying earlier, and many of their children and grandchildren have serious health problems consistent with their father or grandfather being exposed to genotoxic ionising radiation. He cited how the British government has taken the lead and granted compensation to the veterans and challenged the New Zealand government to do the same. "Few of the veterans are still alive, most having died in their fifties. Surely we should use today's knowledge to say we are sorry that they were ordered to do this and here is the compensation". \* *Operation Grapple. New Zealand military personnel were amongst those deliberately exposed to radioactive fallout from a series of British atmospheric nuclear tests in the 1950s and 60s, in the Pacific. Ed.*

Neil was a person who cared deeply about the wellbeing of all humanity – exposing threats and offering solutions. In 1985 he wrote a powerful piece entitled "Reflections on Peace and Justice – a Personal View". The excerpt below describes the elements of his alternative paradigm:

"They are individual to each person but have a commonality based on the love of the person for themselves, for other people and for the world, on a commitment to serious study and analysis as a prerequisite to action, on a commitment to daily action as a creative, non-threatening, loving (unfearful), wise person. You will know when you are with such a person because they are informed about local, regional and whole world issues and trends, they have a conscious, sensible context in which they work and live, and with them you experience not fear, powerlessness and despair but love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control. Do not expect these people to be perfect and always consistent. They aren't for they recognise their own shortcomings but are not guilty about them. Instead they take responsibility for themselves and strive to overcome their faults as much as possible. They have a vision of the future and are working towards it. As they proceed they are continually learning and therefore continually refining their vision and their strategy. So they are open to new and old ideas but they will judge them critically and set them against their existing data set and worldview (which ties all their knowledge together in a consistent way)".

There are not many who can describe an alternative paradigm and then fulfil the vision. Neil did just that. He will remain an inspiration to future generations through his many achievements. For more information about Neil's life and copies of his research papers see [www.nzine.co.nz](http://www.nzine.co.nz) and [www.neilcherry.com](http://www.neilcherry.com)