

Peaks and troughs of the protest movement

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By John Goulter

The Cold War, McCarthyism and atmospheric testing of the hydrogen bomb were in the international wings when the New Zealand peace movement first came into prominence 20 years ago.

"One world or none," was one of the rallying calls, a Christchurch author and activist, Elsie Locke, recalls. It could be useful again this time around, she says.

Elsie Locke, 70, is excited at the international resurgence the peace movement has seen over the past few years. Hundreds of thousands of people, all over the world, have taken up the cause that has been a passion in her own life.

For a few years during the late 1950s and early 60s, peace was a powerful issue. Then it faded away.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament — CND — was the name of the game then. And in Christchurch at least, CND wasn't just the domain of the duffle-coated trendy or the beatnik student, she says. It had the support of a lot of people, including professors, trade unionists and mothers.

Intellectuals and artists figured high on the list of supporters CND published — Colin McCahon, Louis Johnson, Helen Brew, Maurice Shadbolt, the Rev Alan Brash, Doris Lusk, Archibald Baxter (father of the poet), and Dr Margaret Dalziel.

To join that band, all you had to do was pay up your five shillings annual subscription — and care about the future of the world.

"Nuclear weapons are futile," CND was saying more than 20 years ago. "Nobody could win a nuclear war, or gain its supposed military objective. There would be no victory — only devastation, and reversion to a barbarism in which the 'way of life' that nations seek to 'protect' would certainly go under."

Hiroshima

The horror of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was widespread throughout the 50s, Elsie Locke says. But it was when the United States and Britain began testing hydrogen bombs that the movement took off.

If the European deployment of cruise missiles is the crucial issue behind the 1980s peace movement, in the 50s it was atmospheric testing of the H-bomb.

New Zealand's CND picked up a lot of impetus from the British movement, Elsie Locke says. In Britain, CND made its mark with a series of marches on the Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Research Establishment.

In one of its biggest successes, CND saw the British Labour Party pass a resolution in favour of unilateral disarmament at its 1960 conference.

Fired by those successes, New Zealand's fledgling CND ran yearly Easter marches of its own. For one march from Waikanae to Wellington, supporters were asked to pack their



Elsie Locke, 70 — "Any bomb is a bad bomb."

haversacks with requisites such as strong boots, thick socks, foot powder and energy rations of chocolate, raisins or nuts.

They could also bring along a lilo, water-bottle and musical instrument — and a simple sign on a single pole.

CND also marked Hiroshima Day each year and, says Elsie Locke, got a very good press for several years from such activities.

Education

But the important work was education, with pamphlets, touring speakers and meetings. There was also lobbying of MPs and attempts to reach groups like the RSA with their message.

The campaign's big success was a 1962 "No bombs south of the line" petition. An impressive 80,000 people signed the call to declare all the world south of the Equator nuclear-free.

It wasn't just an attempt to make "our little neck of the woods safe, regardless of the rest of the world," says Elsie Locke. It was a first practical step towards world disarmament, to turn back the arms race landslide.

Like its successors today, CND was accused of being soft on the Russians.

"But it's only our allies we can influence," Elsie Locke says. "What could we do to influence the Russians? Damned all."

Elsie Locke says the real leader of CND was another Christchurch woman, Mary Woodward. She was national secretary of the campaign for several years. Mary Woodward was a history graduate, the mother of a young family, and a Quaker. All three factors were behind her work with CND.

Mary Woodward moved with her family to Australia in the mid-60s, and now lives in Auckland.

But by the time she had moved,

CND had had its day. A big part of the platform had been opposition to atmospheric testing, and the 1963 signing of the partial test ban treaty went a long way towards defusing the international situation.

Of the nuclear powers, only China and France were out in the cold, and French testing in the Pacific hadn't taken off as a public issue.

Elsie Locke sees other reasons behind the decline of CND. Vietnam was one of them.

"Once we became involved there, Vietnam rightly became the central peace issue. There are only so many people who are willing and capable to work in any movement, and that's where the energy went."

A Christchurch businessman and peace campaigner, John Boanas, has studied the New Zealand peace movement as a university post-graduate research topic. He sees the rise of CND as part of a cycle of popular and political issues. Only in the 1980s has it been eclipsed, as peace again has taken off as an issue.

The early CND had a hard job cutting the ice, John Boanas says. The climate after World War 2 was conservative, and most people didn't want to hear about global issues.

While the campaign had a lot of members, like Elsie Locke herself, with a long background in Left-wing politics it was careful to maintain a "responsible," non-extrovert image as a pressure group, he says.

Took off

It was only in 1972 when the Labour Party was elected, with a nuclear-free Pacific as part of its platform, that the peace movement began to take off again, he says.

The action of the Prime Minister (Norman Kirk) in sending a frigate to the French test zone at Muroroa was seen as the vindication of years of CND campaigning. But the fervour from that action was short-lived.

The impetus again was soon fragmented off into pockets of action like the Peace Squadron's attacks on visiting nuclear vessels and the Values Party's policies in its own flirtation with New Zealand politics.

Today's peace movement has a wider base than ever, Elsie Locke says. And again, she says, a lot of the push behind the movement has come from overseas. This time, it is Europe, where nations such as Germany have found themselves pinched between the nuclear threat of the United States and Soviet Russia.

"They are right in the middle of the sandwich with the cruise and Pershing II placements. The European countries stand to be destroyed completely, and they haven't got any power themselves to control who pushes the button."

A strength of the current peace campaign is the link it sees between nuclear issues and others like the independence of Pacific states. Elsie Locke is heartened that the cause has been taken up again by a new generation of campaigners.