DAVID LANGE
AT
THE OXFORD UNION
Friday, 1 March 1985

Most of us will remember Lange's Oxford Union debate, though it was 30 years ago tonight. A confident premier propelled up on the world stage, telling a young interjector to hold his breath: "I can smell the uranium on it".

But before we talk about the debate, we need to talk about the argument.

The nuclear argument

ANZUS was a product of the Korean War. The United States wanted to normalise relations with Japan, and enable its rearmament, to counterbalance the influence of China and the Soviet Union in Asia. Australia and New Zealand, still traumatised by the Pacific War less than a decade earlier, insisted on a formal security relationship with the US as their price for consent to a new peace treaty with Japan, bringing the occupation of that country to an end.

So ANZUS was driven by the minnows, rather than the whale.

Under its aegis we went to Malaya and Vietnam. Misgivings about Vietnam obviously developed. But ANZUS itself gave rise to little controversy for 30 years.

The French, however, were another matter. As David Lange once said, "The only thing worse than being incinerated by your enemies, is being incinerated by your friends."

In 1963 New Zealand had joined the British, US and Soviet governments in signing the Partial Test Ban Treaty prohibiting atmospheric tests. France did not. Having lost its grip on Algeria, it shifted its atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons at the Mururoa atoll in 1963. National governments in the 1960s and early 1970s protested. But they were mindful of the French influence on access of New Zealand dairy products to the European markets.

In 1972 a more activist Labour Government was elected. The new premier, Norman Kirk's first action as PM was to write to the French in protest.

New Zealand and Australia took France to the International Court of Justice in 1973. The French refused to recognise its jurisdiction, or to comply with the Court's request that it cease testing pending the final hearing.

Kirk had previously advocated sending a frigate to Mururoa. Greenpeace activists were already up there, in a higgledy piggeldy flotilla of vessels of marginal seaworthiness. Remember the names *Boy Roel* and the *Fri*? The *Greenpeace III*, skippered by Greenpeace movement founder Dave McTaggart was there too.

Now the *HMNZS Otago* would join them. Symbolically, a cabinet minister joined the crew.

I was about 15 at the time. My memory is that these moves had broad public support.

In 1974 France, embarrassed and to a degree humiliated, and facing large protests of its own in its Pacific colonies and at home, announced it would end atmospheric testing.

Interregnum

Between the 1972 Kirk and the 1984 Lange governments, we had the parlous Muldoon ministry.

It is hard to describe that period objectively. Frankly, I loathed Muldoon. It was not that his economic ministry of carless days and rent and wage freezes was so ramshackle and ineffectual. It was his character I detested.

Some admired him as "strong". I simply thought he was poisonous and mean-minded.

His treatment in the house of Colin Moyle, a hapless former Labour cabinet minister who had been caught, perhaps soliciting, perhaps not, in a Wellington street, was the lowest moment in politics I can remember. [In fairness to Muldoon, he later said it was the single act he was least proud of as a politician.]

In one of politics' pretty ironies, Muldoon's attack forced Moyle to resign his seat. That seat was then taken by David Lange.

David Lange

David Lange was a huge man. 27 stone at one point. In part as a defence mechanism, he developed profound talent as a speaker. He had wit and warmth. Words flowed from him. You could close your eyes and just be carried along in the torrent.

In some ways the genius of the Oxford Union debate was in pitting two preachers against each other.

Lange was a man of ideas; a man for the moment. He had trouble stringing this constant eruption of ideas into a consistent policy. Lange was a wonderful human being, but a weak strategist.

I think it was Lange's cabinet colleague, and cousin, Michael Bassett, who said you could read Lange by looking at the kind of lawyer he had been before politics. Despite that quick brain, and all that oratorical talent, he scratched about in the District Court doing small criminal cases. Restless; disinclined to take on the long haul, heavyweight work.

The 1984 election

Lange was Leader of the Opposition less than 18 months before a catastrophic miscalculation by Muldoon propelled him to the premiership.

And that takes us back to the argument about nukes.

US warships visits to New Zealand harbours was regarded, by the US at least, as part of New Zealand's burden under ANZUS.

Visits from vessels such as the *USS Truxtun* in 1976 had engendered large protests. By 1983, 73% of the population opposed the reception of nuclear-armed ships.

In June 1984 the National government narrowly defeated a Richard-Prebble sponsored Nuclear Free New Zealand Bill. It would have prohibited the visit of US nuclear ships to New Zealand. But National won only with the assistance of two renegade Labour MPs (one being Kirk's son). Two National MPs, Marilyn Waring and Mike Minogue, voted with the Opposition. After that defeat, Waring wrote to the chief whip, effectively withdrawing from the National caucus.

That night an embittered, and gin-fuelled, Muldoon called a snap election. A month later, on 14 July 1984, National was pitched out of office.

I was flatting in Aro Street. Not a National-voting area, by and large. But the National-voting areas had shrunk that night in any case. As the evening wore on, and the election result became clear, people came out into the street and talked, neighbour to neighbour, stranger to stranger. The sense of relief, and of joy, at Muldoon's exit was palpable. Someone brought out a ghetto-blaster. People danced. I danced with them.

The next morning I left David Lange and his new government to manage on their own. I flew to Europe, en route to Cambridge to commence a Masters degree. It felt good to be a New Zealander again.

Saying "No" to the US

The day after I left, the US Secretary of States, George Shultz, arrived in New Zealand. Muldoon insisted on hosting him, but obviously he met Lange. Labour's anti-nuclear stance was patent. But Shultz left with the impression that Lange would search for some concession in his caucus, perhaps permitting the visit of nuclear-*propelled* vessels.

This was typical of Lange. The eloquence obscured the message. And he was not fond of delivering unpalatable messages at the best of times. He was similarly delphic with his caucus, who gleaned no sense of compromise.

But Lange did grasp the nettle in a gloved hand. He sent the Chief of Defence Staff to see the US Navy's Pacific Fleet CinC in Hawaii, seeking a suitable vessel to test his party's resolve.

Admiral Crowe chose an "old diesel rustbucket" called the *USS Buchanan.* It wasn't nuclear-armed either, and Lange knew that. But the US would neither confirm or deny that.

In February 1985 New Zealand refused permission for the *Buchanan's* visit.

The reaction

The United States was completely dismayed. It was as if New Zealand had invited the US to a party, and then very publicly spiked the invitation, while continuing the party with other guests.

It was worried that Lange would become a sort of "Pied Piper of pacifist countries". There was unease that Australian and Japan would follow.

President Reagan, at his emollient best, said that it was his "deepest hope" that New Zealand would "restore the traditional cooperation that has existed between our two countries. Allies must work together as partners to meet their shared responsibilities".

But Margaret Thatcher was at her hectoring best:

> New Zealand, I am as disappointed as you are in the approach taken by the New Zealand Prime Minister. He is very much aware of my views.

As Lange headed to London, en route to Oxford, he stopped in Los Angeles. There he was collared by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Bill Brown. Lange described him as "junior official", although he was rather more than that. But he told Lange that the US had been deeply hurt by the unexpected rejection of the *Buchanan*. After that, the country "could not expect to receive the benefits of good ally".

David Lange's invitation to a debate

In late 1984 Lange had received an invitation to speak at the Oxford Union. It invited him to debate nuclear deterrence with the Rev Jerry Falwell. Falwell was a television evangelist, president of the so-called "Moral Majority", and friend and confidante of President Reagan.

The invitation had been engineered by a New Zealand who was Secretary of the Union, Jeya Wilson. The debate was arranged directly between the Prime Minister's Office and the Oxford Union. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs first heard about it through the back door, from a New Zealander at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Lange kept treating the whole affair as if it were a private visit. Only two weeks before he travelled to Oxford, he still had not made any arrangements to call on Margaret Thatcher, or any other British minister.

In the end he met Baroness Young, a foreign office minister, the day before the debate, and Mrs Thatcher on the morning of the debate. He seems to have practised some of his best phrases for the debate the meeting with Baroness Young. He told her that when the British High Commissioner had come to see him in Wellington, "I could smell the uranium on his breath". Apparently she did not laugh.

There was confusion over what the debate motion was to be. Falwell seems to have accepted an invitation to debate the motion:

> That the western nuclear alliance is morally indefensible.

Our diplomats were horrified at that motion. In fairness, Lange saw the risk too. It would have been seen as Lange siding (whether he did or not) with the Soviet Union against the United States, Britain and Western Alliance.

New Zealand was in delicate renegotiations over butter and lamb access to the European markets. Every EEC country had a veto, and the French and Irish ministers were being truculent. New Zealand depended on British support to outmanoeuvre them. If there was to be butter, there had also to be guns.

The final motion "that nuclear weapons are morally indefensible" was only settled while Lange was in London. Lange simply refused to debate anything else. Jerry Falwell, it seems, had flown from Washington assuming it was still the western alliance motion. Generously he did not make a fuss about it. But he did say in his speech that he was pleased the motion had "not changed since this morning".

My invitation to the debate

I had flatted with the son of the Deputy High Commissioner in London. He was worried about Lange's reception. He invited me to help organise a group of young New Zealanders from Cambridge to attend in support of Lange. Reserved seats at the Union debate would be arranged for us cheerleaders.

The day of the debate Suzanne Clark, and Arthur Tompkins – two friends of mine from Caius – and a young America, Liz Kopleman, whom Arthur vouched for – packed into my rather ratty E-type Jaguar. There wasn't much room in the back. It probably helped that Liz was cox of the Ladies' Blues Boat.

All went well until we hit the outskirts of Oxford. At that point there was a tremendous downpour. I turned the windscreen wipers on to "fast", and the wiper cable broke. It was about 5.00 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and the Jaguar garage was closed. We crawled through the rain to Balliol, where we were staying.

We donned our dinner jackets and party dresses, and joined David Lange and Jerry Falwell for drinks ahead of the debate, in the Union library. This was no close intimate meeting. We were just part of a great throng.

Then there was dinner in the Macmillan Room at the Union. We were some way from the head table. Our table was mainly young New Zealanders. But, rather curiously, there was a rather raffish grey-haired north American in his 50s sitting at our table. He kept to himself, and said little. One of our number, a Cambridge doctoral student in law, Duncan Currie, became convinced that he was a CIA plant at our table. He became quite agitated about it.

Eventually, more to shut Duncan up than anything, I told him to go over and introduce himself properly, and find out who the stranger was. To our astonishment, it transpired that he was in fact none other than Dave McTaggart, the founder of Greenpeace who had been one of the flotilla members at Mururoa. Duncan was staggered. A few weeks later he went see McTaggart in London. Eventually he went to work for him, as legal and then general counsel of Greenpeace. As far as I am aware his doctorate remains a work in progress.

The debate

After dinner we headed across the Union gardens and entered the Union hall. A grand two-storey building with large stained glass windows and upstairs galleries. There must have been 800 people in the room.

The debate itself was televised back to New Zealand, where it was played on Saturday morning. Large parts of the debate – although it lasted three hours – can be seen on YouTube. As Lange's cheerleaders we had seats immediately behind Lange and his official entourage.

Lange and Falwell did not speak until late in the debate. Lange, before Falwell.

There were many good speakers before them. Most were undergraduates.

[Perhaps the best undergraduate speech was from an American called Christopher Keyser, a graduate law student (and later script writer for *LA Law*). He supported Falwell. He invoked the memory of Lord Beloff, returning to the Union just a few years earlier, speaking to atone for his error in 1933 in supporting "the King and Country" motion, and to atone for the subsequent death of his friend who had

become President of the Union and who then died in the ensuing war. His name was recorded on a plaque above us. You could have heard a pin drop.]

When Lange got up to speak, he received a standing ovation. His speech was warm, and it was witty, and we frankly basked in it. He came to make no case for unilateral disarmament, but it was clear that nuclear weapons subverted the best of all intentions. There was a quality of irrationality about such weapons. A system of defence to guarantee the security of those it defends, by guaranteeing the insecurity of those it defends.

At about that point another eloquent young American interjector was given the floor – as is the Oxford and Cambridge Union way – and put to Lange that "Whether you are snuggling up to the bomb or living in the peaceful shadow of it, New Zealand benefitted." When was New Zealand going to do "the honourable and consistent thing," and pull out of the ANZUS alliance? That was the question to which he would like an answer.

And that was the moment when Lange said:

> And I will give it to you, if you will hold your breath just for a moment. I could smell the uranium on it as you lean towards me.

From that moment, if not before, Lange held the audience in the palm of his hand.

Winding up he said, unequivocally, that New Zealand would "form no part of a nuclear alliance". I remember being staggered by the clarity of this pronouncement. Was this policy on the run? What about ANZUS, the point he'd deflected with a well-practised joke?

Lange concluded:

> New Zealanders are being told they cannot decide how to defend New Zealand. … To compel an ally to accept nuclear weapons, against the wishes of that ally, is to take the moral position of totalitarianism, which allows for no self-determination. And it is exactly the end we are supposed to be fighting against.

On that rousing note he ended. Another standing ovation.

Falwell followed. His speech was a conventional (if that is the right word) defence of nuclear deterrence. He longed, as a Christian minister, for the day when nuclear weapons would no longer exist. But it was naïve to put our heads in the sand and pretend the Soviet Union did not have them. While it did, so too must we.

In my diary, I wrote that his speech was a "good-humoured tirade against the Soviet threat, and largely irrelevant". Watching it again over the weekend, I think I was too dismissive. Falwell was a good speaker, and he used charm and wit himself, if not as well as Lange.

But he was a pastor from prairies, with no real world view apart from an obsession with the Soviet bloc. And his speech was only half rewritten to accommodate the altered motion. When he finished the President of the Union and one or two of his entourage stood. But there was no standing ovation for the Rev Falwell.

In the end the motion that nuclear weapons are morally indefensible was passed 298 to 250. Icing on the cake, but in itself irrelevant.

The aftermath

There was a very positive public response to Lange's performance at Oxford back in New Zealand. Geoffrey Palmer has called it Lange's "defining moment". From that point Lange's position – so equivocal a few months earlier – became unequivocal.

Just four months later French DGSE officers sabotaged the *Rainbow Warrior* berthed at the Port of Auckland. As it sank, a crew member died. The French could hardly have bolted down Lange's stance any better. In another of those pretty political ironies, as the French saboteurs fled, they spent a night in a motel unit owned by Lange as an investment property.

Inflated by both adulation and events, Lange then overplayed his hand against the French, a hand he thought Oxford had loaded for him. His grasp on the economic reforms being wrought by his Cabinet, while world affairs distracted him, loosened until he had an epiphany and the famous cup of tea all at once. (Cups of tea seem to have dogged New Zealand's Prime Ministers).

Confusion, Cabinet and caucus crisis, and an increasing public antipathy towards political radicalism – which resulted in New Zealand eventually adopting a proportional representation electoral system – brought the Lange ministry to an abrupt end after two rollercoaster terms.

There was no dancing in the streets in 1987, or in 1990.

But, that night, back in March 1984, we left the Oxford Union full of the joys of being a New Zealander, leaders of the free, the nuclear-free, world.

The next day Arthur, Suzanne, Liz and I piled into the Jag and drove, wiperless, for Cambridge, hoping for a clear day's drive. Ten minutes later we were hit by another downpour, and we pulled into a layby. At which point an idea struck us.

We crawled to a nearby garage, and bought a ball of string. This we tied across the motionless blades, with the ends through the side windows. And Arthur sat in the back and punkah-wallahed us home.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can't help think my woeful windscreen wipers were a metaphor for what was about to befall David Lange, the hero of that night, those 30 years ago.

Justice Stephen Kós
A talk to the Cambridge Society
Wellington
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