

New Zealand's Nuclear Journey by Vienna Serpa

Kia Ora, ko Vienna toku ingoa. Hello, my name is Vienna Serpa and I am so blessed to be representing the voice of a Rangatahi or young person from Aotearoa New Zealand today. I will begin with a prayer which I invite you to personally dedicate however you like.

Dear Lord,

Today we lift up to you the victims of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those directly affected, the families of those affected, the friends of those affected and those affected by the aftermath. We thank you for those involved in sending aid and in helping the victims.

We thank you for the nuclear peace experienced since. Lord, as you ask us to pray for those we disagree with, we pray for those developing nuclear weapons today. We lift them up to. Let your spirit be with them in all they do. Let your advocacy for peace come to them today.

Lord, we thank you for bringing us together today. For gathering people with a purpose. We ask for our actions to take root and enact change.

I pray, that your spirit will be with me as I speak. That your call for peace and action will shine through my words.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

The intense grief that was felt worldwide after the bombing of Hiroshima and shortly after Nagasaki represents a failing of humanity. I must give space for this now. For the victims at the time and today, for the lives changed and the damage that will never be undone. I am sorry and that will never be enough.

Before I begin, I feel it is also important to acknowledge my positionality with the issue. I am blessed to live in a nuclear free country. I come from a generation that have a severe disconnect with nuclear development and weaponry as we grew up with it as a given. I am a white, middle-class woman. My immediate family and friends have never dealt with a nuclear death. I am overly invested in the climate future of the globe. While not all of these positionalities may seem to have a large impact on the way I approach the topic of nuclear development, they shape my understanding of the world in which nuclear development happens. I want to state these things in order to approach a serious topic with the appropriate amount of respect. In Aotearoa we have a concept known as "tuakana teina" which describes a sibling esq mentor-mentee relationship. I want to acknowledge my position as "teina" not "tuakana" in the nuclear field, my personal bias and to give insight to those listening as to how and why I've formed my ideas.

Over the years, New Zealand has had a complex relationship with nuclear weapons and armament. Throughout my talk today, I will walk through some of this history, reflect on the current state of affairs and share my hopes for the future.

Nuclear physics began or better or for worse in Aotearoa. When Sir Earnest Rutherford split the atom and forever changed the course of history. I think a lot about what Rutherford was thinking when he split the atom. Did he consider the scientific discoveries his experiments would be the foundation of? Did he know that he would be considered a “founder of modern physics”? Did he think about the implications of nuclear power on the world? And most of all, I ask myself; did he consider the weaponization of his work? The weaponization of science is perhaps one of the most complex issues facing the field today. With every new discovery made the possibility and quite often reality of it being weaponised is there. As scientists ask themselves if the benefits of their discoveries outweigh the costs the answer is almost always no. The deaths of millions, the trauma and sickness left in the air and in souls is not a cost that can be “outweighed” and shouldn’t be considered as such. But where does this leave us with scientific advancement? This is a question I am still reckoning with. Personally, I feel that the United Nations need to be more active in the relationship between science and warfare to properly promote peace.

From Rutherford, Aotearoa’s nuclear journey became one of support by compliance. We were allied with the United States when they bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We entered into the ANZUS alliance in 1951 with knowledge that the defence and allyship we signed up for was nuclear backed. We allowed nuclear power into our waterways. However, in the 1960s we began to flip the script and a theme of protest against nuclear development emerged, with Green Peace finding a strong support in Aotearoa citizens. In 1973, with Australia we took France to the ICJ in an attempt to ban their nuclear tests in the Pacific. We even sent protest boats with a cabinet minister on board to nuclear testing zones. Despite being actively anti-nuclear weapons, Aotearoa continued to be neutral on nuclear power. It wasn’t until the nuclear-powered USS Texas visited New Zealand in 1983 that protest began to speak to nuclear power as well as weapons. The famous Oxford Debates were held “I can smell the uranium on your breath” was uttered, and the nuclear-powered USS Buchanan was denied access to Aotearoa harbours in 1984.

It is impossible to visit New Zealand’s nuclear history without pausing at the Rainbow Warrior. Besides being an international scandal, the bombing and sinking of the ship shaped New Zealand nationalism and public opinion on nuclear weapons. For those unfamiliar with the story, the Rainbow Warrior was a Green Peace ship docked in Auckland harbour in 1985, waiting to depart on a protest against French Nuclear testing at the Mururoa Atoll in French Polynesia. New Zealand was basking in the light of leading the anti-nuclear movement. Then, just before midnight, on the 10th of July two bombs ripped through the hull of the Rainbow Warrior sinking the ship and killing Fernando Pereira, a crew member on board at the time. On the 24th of July, two French Secret Service agents were arrested for the bombs and charged with murder. They pleaded guilty to man slaughter and were sentenced to 10 years in

prison. However, France saw this as an embarrassment to their reputation (which it was) and began to boycott New Zealand exports to France. Eventually, the matter was settled by the United Nations and France were charged \$13 million in reparations to Aotearoa and ordered to issue an apology. The two Secret Service agents were both released from their sentences early, decorated and promoted when they returned to France, much to the dismay of the New Zealand public.

Finally, in 1987 New Zealand became officially nuclear free. With this decision came an international spotlight, and a recognition of being a “leading country in calls for nuclear dis-armament”. However, in recent times New Zealand has not been the country it once was in calls for peace and in recognising the urgency of nuclear matters.

In preparing to give this speech, I asked my classmates for their reflections on the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their thoughts on nuclear arms. I was shocked and felt almost guilty at the lack of response. Many of them had never heard of the bombings, and those that had only knew the simplest version of events. They had no reflections on the tragedies and few opinions on nuclear arms. The lack of education visible to me did not represent the life changing tragedy I know to have happened. There is not only a lack of curriculum in schools, but a lack of conversation in society. In particular, there is a disconnect between the generation most passionate about nuclear development and the generation about to be greatly affected by it. Whether it's social media, a quickly changing news cycle or the centuries old distrust between those over the age of 50 and “teenage delinquents” the regression of Aotearoa as a nuclear peace advocate is not just in its international relations, but in its societal relationships. An unwillingness to learn about the imminent danger and relevance of nuclear weapons and a lack of urgency to pass on the knowledge has resulted in a gradual inter-generational erasure of a defining issue. I don't know if this generational gap is felt in all of the world, but here in Aotearoa majority of teenagers do not see calls for nuclear peace as relevant today.

This could not be falser, with tensions in the Middle East proving this now more than ever. The concept of Mutually Assured Destruction may keep the world “safe” from the nuclear weapons in existence, but it does not take away from the implicit pressure, aggression and immorality of producing them. At the same time, it is impossible to exist in a geo-politically tension charged space and ignore the nuclear codes. As we witness man-made famine in Gaza, escalating conflicts in Iran and wars erupting we must not forget the tension of the intense destruction that lies at the press of a button. An increasingly polarizing political climate serves only to further this. That is why it is important, now, to continue calls for nuclear dis-armament. We call the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a tragedy, yet we do little to stop such an event from happening again.

As a society, we must begin to again have these conversations. Between “tuakana” and “teina” between generations. We must bridge the gap in knowledge and passion left. I encourage you all to go out and have one conversation with one person about the complexities of nuclear development. I encourage you not to go into the conversation with any agenda besides discussion. I mentioned before an increasingly

polarising political climate, and while I could speak for another 20 minutes on that alone, I simply encourage you to fight against this polarisation in your conversations. Whether you are learning from the conversation, or imparting wisdom with it, be open and listen to the other side.

We must increase our protest and amplify our outrage against nuclear weapons. While this may seem oxymoronic to avoiding political polarization, it is not. While we must be open in conversation, it is important not to forget the outrage and emotion felt at the possible repetition of tragedy. Showing world leaders this emotion will remind them of the lives at stake in their decisions.

We must facilitate productive conversations about the weaponization of science. At a personal and organisational level, this issue must be treated with the importance it holds.

Finally, the government of Aotearoa must renew their call for international nuclear peace. Nuclear Free New Zealand may have been radical in 1987, but it is 2025 and the call for peace must go beyond our waters. It must go beyond generations, it must go beyond religion, citizenship. It must go global. World leaders need to renew their calls for peace before it's too late.