Quote

Lange, D., 2004

(/great-new-zealand-argument/)
22:38 Oct 14, 2004

Nuclear Weapons are Morally Indefensible (/great-new-zealand-argument/nuclear-weapons-are-morally-indefensible/)

by Lange

Most New Zealanders watched David Lange contest and win the 1985 Oxford Union debate, arguing the proposition that Ênuclear weapons are morally indefensibleÁwith a mixture of pride and astonishment. After decades of knowing our place, and several years of government by homunculus, suddenly we had a Prime Minister who could stride the international stage with insouciance. And briefly, we seemed to matter.

Although New ZealandÂs nuclear-free policy did not become law until 1987, it was integral to early years of the fourth Labour government. The 1984 snap election that made Lange Prime Minister was called by Robert Muldoon when National MP Marilyn Waring withdrew her support for her party over the issue of nuclear ship visits. Labour won the election with a nuclear ban as a flagship policy.

The policy was popular among New Zealanders, but not without cost. Our relationship with the US deteriorated in the early weeks of 1985. On the same journey that took him to Oxford, Lange, four days before the debate, met with a US State Department official who outlined the retaliatory measures that the US would be taking against New Zealand. The ANZUS alliance of which New Zealand had been part since 1951 was effectively cancelled at that meeting.

New ZealandÂs anti-nuclear stance had long been infused with, as Jock Philips has put it, Êa postcolonial yearning for a new nationalismÁ So that was at stake as Lange prepared for the debate. The recording of his speech, in opposition to a team led by Moral Majority founder and Reagan confidant the Rev. Jerry Falwell, remains a remarkable document.

Lange was accorded a standing ovation , almost unprecedented, apparently , from both sides of the house as he approached the dispatch box. His booming voice and idiosyncratic, commanding phrasing, cannot be captured here, except through best efforts with punctuation.

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The basis of this transcript is the official speech notes kept by the Parliamentary library, which we have retyped and archived here (http://publicaddress.net/default,1574.sm).

But while the notes ran to 2000 words, the transcript below is well over 4000. In the speech, Lange is at his best sailing back after occasional interjections, impassioned and lucid. We believe this is the first published transcript of this important speech.

Update: the audio (/great-new-zealand-argument/nuclear-weapons-are-morally-indefensible-1/) of this speech has now been made available with the kind permission of TVNZ.

Nuclear Weapons are Morally Indefensible
(Argument for the affirmative, Oxford Union, 1 March 1985)
Rt Hon David Lange
Prime Minister

Mr President, honourable members of the union, ladies and gentlemen Í in fact if I could greet straight away, because I understand there is a direct feed to the White House tonight, if I could greet the President of the United States, who is of course of the very genesis of the proposition we are debating tonight.

A quote in Time magazine last year, an assertion by the President of the United States that nuclear weapons were immoral; his avowal reiterated in January this year in a statement over the space initiative known as SDI. And there again, he asserted that this system of the nuclear stare-out can not be sustained morally.

May I say to the honourable gentleman who preceded me, there is nothing of what I am about to say which has been conditioned in any way by my meeting with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom yesterday Í

[Laughter]

I did not meet her yesterday Í

[Laughter and applause]

I am meeting her on Monday. But I know the apprehension that he feels at his constant fear of being summoned to that carpet Í

[Laughter]

I also feel a considerable sympathy for the members of the opposite side, who have this extraordinary sense of destabilisation at the imminent prospect of peace breaking out.

The character of the argument, sir, is something which I find regrettable. So I can say very simply that it is my conviction that there is no moral case for nuclear weapons. That the best defence which can be made of their existence and the threat of their use is, as we have heard tonight, that they are a necessary evil; an abhorrent means to a desirable end.

I hold that the character of nuclear weapons is such that their very existence corrupts the best of intentions; that the means in fact perverts the end. And I hold that their character is such that they have brought us to the greatest of all perversions: the belief that this evil is necessary, as it has been stated tonight, when in fact it is not.

And I make my case against nuclear weapons the more vigorously because I distinguish

between them and all other forms of coercive or deterrent power. IÂve got no case to make against the policemanÂs truncheon. And the people tonight who have argued that you must go to the ultimate in force every time you seek to embark upon it, is of course a surrender to the worst of morality.

I accept, and do not wish to be heard arguing here against any proposition that the state must arm itself with military force to protect its citizens against aggression or to defend the weak and the helpless against aggression.

But I do not accept that the state must for those reasons arm itself with nuclear weapons. That is a case I do not easily or lightly make in Europe where governments have held it their duty to arm themselves with nuclear weapons. I do not doubt for one moment the quality of the intention which led to that decision or that series of decisions.

And I freely acknowledge that that decision is pursued in good conscience with the honourable intention of preserving the life and freedom of the people of Western Europe. Because those governments are faced with the close presence of an alien and relentlessly oppressive regime and obviously feel it their duty to prepare for their own defence by membership in what for most governmentsÂ policy now is straightforwardly a nuclear alliance. That is an assessment I understand and I do not come here to argue for any proposition in favour of unilateral disarmament.

And if I make that acknowledgement, I must then deal with the argument that it is the intention which determines the moral character of the action. My contention is very simply that the character of nuclear weapons is such that it is demonstrably the case that they subvert the best of intentions. And the snuggling up to the nuclear arsenal which has gone on with my friends on the opposite side tonight shows at what level of sophistication and refinement that subversion takes place.

There is, Mr President, a quality of irrationality about nuclear weapons which does not sit well with good intentions. A system of defence serves its purpose if it guarantees the security of those it protects. A system of nuclear defence guarantees only insecurity. The means of defence terrorise as much as the threat of attack. In Europe, it is impossible to be unaware of the intensity of military preparedness. In New Zealand, the visitor must make an effort to find a military installation or indeed any sign of military activity, although it does exist. There is no imperative in New Zealand to prepare for war; the result is that I feel safer in Wellington than I ever could in London or New York or Oxford.

The fact is that Europe and the United States are ringed about with nuclear weapons, and your people have never been more at risk. There is simply only one thing more terrifying than nuclear weapons pointed in your direction and that is nuclear weapons pointed in your enemyÂs direction: the outcome of their use would be the same in either case, and that is the annihilation of you and all of us. That is a defence which is no defence; it is a defence which disturbs far more than it reassures. The intention of those who for honourable motives use nuclear weapons to deter is to enhance security. Notwithstanding that intention, they succeed only in enhancing insecurity. Because the machine has perverted the motive. The President of the United States has acknowledged that, notwithstanding that my honourable friend opposite does not, and the weapon has

installed mass destruction as the objective of the best-intentioned.

The weapon simply has its own relentless logic, and it is inhuman. It is the logic of escalation, the logic of the arms race. Nuclear weapons make us insecure, and to compensate for our insecurity we build and deploy more nuclear weapons. We know that we are seized by irrationality, and every now and then some new generation technology comes in, the argument for which is that it will cause us to draw back from the nuclear precipice. And we are seeing right now another initiative, under a new title: the title of course in dispute as much as its efficiency will be. And that, Mr President, is the story of the whole saga of the nuclear escalation.

We know, all of us, that it is wholly without logic or reason, any sense at all, to have the means at the disposal of two particular sets of powers to turn this world into rubble time and time again. And yet in spite of that awareness, the world watches as two enormous machines enhance, refine their capacity to inflict destruction on each other and on all of us.

Every nuclear development, whatever its strategic or tactical significance, has only one result, and that is to add to an arsenal which is already quite beyond reason.

There is an argument in defence of the possession of nuclear weapons which holds that the terror created by the existence of those weapons is in itself the fulfilment of a peaceful purpose: the argument advanced here tonight that that 50 million killed over four years by concerted war in a conventional sense in Europe, and the argument that somehow the existence of this mutually assured destruction phenomenon has since that time preserved this planet from destruction.

It is I think probably an example of northern hemisphere or European arrogance that we overlook now the 30 million people in this world who have died in wars since then, while we are apparently beset from the two super-powers by a system designed to have people stop killing each other.

I believe that the fear they inspire is not a justification for their existence.

INTERJECTION: Sir, the one area of the world do you refer to then? How have those casualties in that area defended by nuclear deterrence? Namely Europe. Not one of those 30 million lived in Europe.

Have you considered the proposition for one moment that that war, that cost those casualties might have entrenched within people the yearning for peace, the growth of democratic institutions, the accountability of political representatives, so that none wishes to wage in conventional or nuclear terms, any war? Why attribute to the presence of that awesome potential clash of firepower a stability which your politicians have been arguing they created?

You canÂ have it both ways! Either you are hailing a new, United Europe, matching to glory and to the exclusion of certain primary production from other countries Í

[Laughter]

Or you have it there simply because you have counterpoised this terrible means of

destruction Í IÂm want to pass over Í yeah?