Australia and the bomb

The collections of the State Library reveal diverse themes and tangents of opposition to the bomb. These coexisted with a widespread unease about possible regional and global conflict that characterised the postwar years.

My research into these strands of antinuclear thought and protest from 1945 has traversed the Library’s large collections of pamphlets, periodicals, manuscripts and ephemera relating to the broadly defined ‘peace movement’ and its many organisations, groups and influential figures. These collections depict a complex web of national organisations and their local chapters, political parties (and factions thereof), advocacy groups and unions, with the cross-pollination of individuals, ideas and resources between them all a major and enduring feature of peace activism in these years.

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In 1945, the new atomic bomb signalled to pacifists, trade unions, communists and other concerned Australians that the victorious Allies intended to use the bomb to shape the postwar world in a dangerous manner. This threat of nuclear war and the insecurities of the looming Cold War, coupled with concerns about the effect of the postwar economic boom on living standards, prices and jobs for ordinary Australians, were key features of the peace movement's program in the immediate postwar years. A Communist Party election leaflet from 1946, for example, objected to the Allies' 'atomic diplomacy' and the 'dollar imperialism' of foreign policy. Communists linked the pursuit of Cold War policy by Australia and its allies with cuts in social spending, and advocated for an Australia committed to democracy at home and abroad.

The formation in 1949 of a national body — the Australian Peace Council (APC) — marked the beginnings of a postwar tradition of formal peace organisation that continues today. The records of People for Nuclear Disarmament (PND), held at the Mitchell Library, offer a unique insight into this organisational history, and highlight the ongoing concern with the persistent danger posed by nuclear weapons, their testing and the threat of their potential use.

The APC and its state bodies were at the forefront of peace activism in Australia in the 1950s. Alongside the Communist Party, many left wing trade unions and factions of the ALP, the APC mounted various campaigns
against the wave of atomic testing that enveloped Australia and the Pacific Ocean from the late 1940s.

It also organised large peace congresses, many of which featured prominent overseas speakers. In April 1950, for example, the Australia Peace Congress held in Melbourne was host to the Dean of Canterbury, Hewlett Johnson. Johnson's outspoken support for communism — he was often referred to as the 'Red Dean' — marked the Congress as a target for many conservatives eager to denounce the peace movement as a puppet of Soviet propaganda. Such 'Red-baiting' would continue to harass those opposed to nuclear weapons for the remainder of the Cold War.
The PND records also reflect a steadily increasing anxiety regarding nuclear testing. Although the United States had been testing nuclear weapons in the Marshall Islands since 1948, the announcement of British plans for a series of tests to be held in 1952 off the coast of remote north-west Australia aroused further opposition. At the same time, the peace movement in Australia was involved in the Stockholm Appeal, an international campaign to gather signatures appealing for a peace pact between the five major powers and calling for the prohibition of nuclear weapons. Petition literature — many examples of which are held in the Mitchell Library's pamphlet and ephemera collections — avowed that ‘the key to world peace is your signature’ and that ‘a five power peace pact will bring prices down’.

Britain’s nuclear testing program moved to South Australia in 1953, and tests of varying magnitude would continue there until 1963. Peace activists argued that British testing in Australia and on several atolls in the Pacific (currently part of the Republic of Kiribati), and joint British–American data-sharing arrangements placed Australia in a perilous position at the mercy of the Allied powers’ imperial ambitions. Annual demonstrations grew in visibility, often taking place at Easter, on the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima (6 August), and on the traditional labour holiday of May Day.

Demonstrations also grew more dramatic — in 1962 a ‘Radial March’ involved contingents of protestors walking from Sydney’s outer suburbs into the city. Symbolising the outer reaches of destruction should Sydney be attacked in a nuclear war, contingents marched from Blacktown, Cowan, Cronulla, La Perouse, Liverpool, Newport, Sutherland and Watsons Bay. Later that year, a cavalcade descended on Canberra from points as far away as
Cairns to present the government with petitions calling for a nuclear-free Southern Hemisphere.

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By the early 1960s, Australia counted the United States among its strongest allies. The announcement of an American military base on the Exmouth Gulf in Western Australia, then, was met with derision from the peace movement, which alleged that potentially nuclear-armed US bases on Australian territory placed Australians at risk.
of a nuclear attack. As a Sydney Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament flyer stated: ‘H-Bombs IN Australia means H-Bombs ON Australia: We must not become a nuclear base!’
Reports of American nuclear-powered submarines, U-2 spy planes and secret military sites on Australian territory further incensed those who argued that these developments signalled that Australia was intent on ‘sacrific[ing] more fully our independence of thought and action in international affairs’ (according to a 1961 joint meeting of the state Peace Councils, reported on by *Peace Action* magazine in March 1961). These developments also risked a peaceful relationship with Australia’s Asian neighbours, especially communist China, itself a member of the nuclear club from 1964.

Around the same time, France announced a new nuclear testing zone in the South Pacific, scheduling a testing program to begin in 1966. Despite the vast distance between Australia and French Polynesia, the announcement of the French testing program aroused considerable opposition in Australia, which would increase substantially in the 1970s. That France was not a signatory to the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963 was of utmost concern. France continued to explode nuclear bombs atmospherically, rather than underground, substantially increasing radioactive fallout across the Pacific. Opposition to French testing often focused on the effect fallout from the tests may have on children. For example, groups such as the Union of Australian Women and Women for Peace engaged in symbolic protests, utilising milk bottles filled with ‘radioactive’ milk, and empty prams representing stillbirth.

In the mid-1960s, though, just as France’s Pacific nuclear testing program began in earnest, the peace movement turned its head to South-East Asia. Australian peace activists started to campaign against conscription and Australian military involvement in Vietnam, often to the detriment of the large and visible campaign against the upcoming French nuclear tests. A 1967 protest by the Committee Against Atomic Testing, which involved sailing an ex-Sydney to Hobart yacht from Sydney to the South Pacific, was ill-timed in a number of ways. Inexperience and lengthy repairs ensured that the boat failed to reach France’s exclusion zone by the time of the last planned explosion for 1967, and news of the action was largely drowned out by demands for peace in South-East Asia, perhaps a more pressing concern in those tumultuous years.

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