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Editorials

Facing up to the aftermath

NEW ZEALAND has been handed a "get real" message from the Planning Council with the delivery of its study of the effects on this country of a Northern Hemisphere nuclear war.

The popular view, fostered by years of books, films and television programmes aimed at Americans and Europeans, is of a population destined to die as clouds of radioactive fallout waft southwards from northern battlefields.

In recent years the fears of nuclear winter have been added to the public imagination. New Zealand, it was argued, would play out its last hours with its people starving in the gloom of a perpetual twilight.

Now the Planning Council has debunked those perceptions. Fallout, it says, would not be a problem, with only a 1% rise in cases of cancer to contend with. Nuclear winter would not bite deep here either, with only a small drop in temperature and the country still able to produce sufficient food.

But, if those particular horsemen of the apocalypse have been returned to the stable, there are plenty of others left in the post-nuclear race to destroy New Zealand society.

Lack of medicines, lack of imported technology, lack of jobs as the world economy vaporised and the psychological trauma of knowing millions had died would all be contenders for ending life as we know it.

The Planning Council's plea for planning to hobble those runners can only be applauded.

Unpalatable as it may seem, the Government and New Zealanders at large have to start thinking about the unthinkable, and deciding how to cope not only with the day after, but also the week after and the year after.

The Government, while embracing the report and saying its call for comprehensive contingency planning will be answered, has indicated that answer will be some way off.

There will be more public consultation and another report prepared before the process gets into full swing.

That is fine, but it is to be hoped that attitude does not mean the work is being put on the backburner.

The Government moved swiftly on the other aspect of its nuclear policy. Prime Minister David Lange and his colleagues had been in power only a few days before the Americans were told very clearly their nuclear weapons were not welcome here.

Mr Lange did not feel the need to consult the public at every turn on that policy, nor have an endless stream of reports prepared on the consequences of scuttling out from under the nuclear umbrella.

The Planning Council report has handed the Government the chance to prove that its nuclear policy is not just an opportunity to grandstand on nuclear ship visits, but a serious attempt to deal with the problems of surviving in a nuclear world.

For it to retain credibility, that chance has to be seized with both hands.