Chapter Three

Growing Concerns

The first person to dismiss the hope that Lange might prove to be another Hawke was Bob Hawke. The two met, barely two weeks after the Lange Government had taken office, at a regional Commonwealth meeting in Port Moresby. Australian officials were already worried that New Zealand's ban on port access would make ANZUS unworkable, but in briefing the Australian press they emphasised that at the meeting Hawke would merely probe and seek more information about Lange's thinking: 'He will not go in heavy-handedly.'*

He did not, but the impression he formed in the first few minutes of their meeting played an important part in the course of the dispute. Lange came to Hawke's hotel room at the Travelodge for an early breakfast. One of Hawke's economic advisers showed him in and Hawke introduced him. Lange said breezily that he had an economic adviser too but did not think he had met him yet. Successful politicians

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* The *Australian*, 7 August 1984. The *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted the same phrase, revealing a common background briefing.

are in the habit of making snap assessments of the people they meet and Hawke made his now: 'I felt I was dealing with a buffoon.'

Time was short (less than an hour) and they immediately got down to work as well as breakfast. Hawke's starting point was that 'defence, these days, has to be nuclear; everything follows from that'. He emphasised the importance of the ANZUS alliance, especially when the Soviet Union was working to expand its influence in the Pacific, and argued that ANZUS and ship visits could not be separated; the one required the other. Australia had worked through its problems over ship visits and he asked how the New Zealand Prime Minister saw the issue.*

Lange launched into a wordy explanation of the anti-nuclear policy but did not seem to believe it. The more he spoke, the stronger this impression became. When Hawke said, 'David, you don't seem really convinced by what you are saying', Lange simply said, 'That's right'. The nuclear-free policy had been fashioned by the Left and accepted by the party and there was little he could do about it. 'I told Lange I was angered by this and didn't understand how he could possibly conduct foreign policy in the best interests of New Zealand on the basis of such a compact. He shrugged resignedly and said that unfortunately that was the way it was.' Hawke thought to himself, 'What sort of fucking fellow is this?' and when Lange was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize he considered writing to the committee to say so (presumably in less Australian language).†

The New Zealand leader seemed embarrassed by his position, the captive of other people's doctrine, and Hawke judged him to be weak rather than anti-American. But the brief meeting settled Australia's position. Though privately angry over what it saw as New Zealand's irresponsibility, it would stay on the sidelines of the dispute and not attempt to mediate. The poor chemistry between the two leaders offered no chance of doing more. Hawke felt he had no basis with

* Hawke's annotated briefing notes, 221/1/4/4 Part 3, DFAT.
† Interview with Bob Hawke, 20 December 2011, and *The Hawke Memoirs*, William Heinemann Australia, 1994, p. 281.

Lange to help sort things out: 'As far as I was concerned, Lange had made a pact with the devil and had to live with it.'

He passed on his impressions to the Americans, saying that he had no respect for Lange – and indeed a 'contempt' – but would try to maintain a good professional relationship with New Zealand. He told Shultz that they should do everything possible to keep New Zealand in the loop and avoid retaliatory actions, and urged both him and President Reagan to give as much help to New Zealand as was possible in the circumstances. He did not ever believe that Lange would deliver on a ship visit – 'he was very damaging and very duplicitous' – and Shultz never gave him the impression that he had much hope either, despite the encouraging impression conveyed by Lange at their July meeting.*

The two breakfasters managed to convey their differing impressions of one another at their subsequent press briefings. Lange (whom I remember coming back from the meeting a little subdued) said that Hawke outlined his government's view of ANZUS responsibilities 'in a careful, non-threatening way', and suggested that these applied also to New Zealand. Still rather nervous from the thunderclouds that hung over their meeting, he felt compelled to say at least three times that Hawke did not threaten or try to coerce him: 'We simply talked.' He reaffirmed both that the port access policy was non-negotiable and that his government had no intention of withdrawing from ANZUS. He also hinted that if the issue of port access could not be resolved before the next naval exercise in March, then that exercise might have to be called off. There were, he said to the New Zealand journalists with him, a number of ways of fixing the problem, but he declined to be drawn on what they were beyond giving his grandmother's view that there were more ways to kill a pig than by choking it with butter.

* On the other hand, Hawke liked Geoffrey Palmer whom he thought decent and straightforward. Interview, 20 December 2011.

Hawke's comment to his own press following was briefer and bleaker. There might have to be a reappraisal of ANZUS if New Zealand could not reach an accommodation with the United States, but he did not think it helpful to speculate about this or how it might affect New Zealand. He made little effort to disguise his first unfavourable impression of Lange. When asked what had emerged from the breakfast meeting, he said: 'That he's got a bigger appetite than I have.'

They met again, just over two weeks later, at the South Pacific Forum held on one of the handful of coral atolls which had become independent as Tuvalu. Lange found Hawke tense and irritable, but denied the press's impression that they did not get on well – it was purely their difference over ship visits, 'that's all it is'. One of the topics for discussion was the proposal for a Nuclear-Free Zone in the South Pacific. It had originally been an Australian initiative and was making its leisurely way through successive Forum meetings. Officials in Canberra had done a considerable amount of work in the preceding months with the aim of getting the zone adopted at the next Forum. Lange's suggestion that he and others might promote a resolution endorsing this at the United Nations General Assembly was therefore rather resented by Hawke. When asked how he found working alongside Lange, he said: 'I didn't work alongside him. He was at the other end of the table. I found it fairly congenial.'*

On his way home Hawke decided to be more explicit about his misgivings. At a welcoming ceremony in Suva he showed his displeasure, departing from his prepared text to make the point more clearly. Hawke's sponsorship of the Nuclear-Free Zone, which was aspirational and did not affect either port visits or the passage of weapons on the high seas, was a gesture to his own Left. The journalists thought he was anxious to banish any impression that Lange, in his new enthusiasm for the zone, might be seen to be doing more

* Lange was more ingeniously positive about the Polynesian festivities, saying that 'anyone who can do a dance with the same man two nights in a row hasn't fallen out'. Ian Templeton in *The Bulletin*, 12 September 1984.

for disarmament than he was.* He may also have wished to reassure the Reagan Administration that his support for the zone in no way affected his view that the alliance was central to the region's security.

He said that American ship visits under ANZUS had worked to the Pacific's advantage for nearly four decades and it was vital to keep this in mind. The smaller Pacific nations, he believed, had been reassured by Australia's recommitment to ANZUS. 'It would be easy to take the soft option, selectively to adopt a passive attitude to those obligations of the treaty which might be difficult to shoulder. We will not do so.'† In the light of their earlier meeting it was clear that he thought the man with a passive attitude was his New Zealand counterpart. Lange got his retaliation in a few weeks later: 'The Government of Australia elected to pursue a different policy from that which it articulated before the election. I respect that.'‡

Next to Australia, Japan was the Pacific country which was probably the most worried about the direction New Zealand was taking. Whatever difficulties Hawke had with the left wing of his Australian Labor Party paled when compared to the delicacy of the Japanese position on port access. Japan, the only country to have suffered from the use of nuclear weapons, had an understandable phobia about them. There was unyielding political antipathy to the presence of these weapons on Japanese soil, and in 1967 the Japanese Diet (Parliament) adopted a resolution spelling out the three non-nuclear principles which had been official policy ever since: Japan would not manufacture, possess or permit nuclear weapons on its soil. This, however, had in some way to be reconciled with the presence of American bases in Japan. The following year the resolution was 'clarified' to specify that support for the three principles depended on continuance of the American security guarantee embodied in the Mutual Security Treaty agreed by the two countries in 1960. It was quietly made clear, in one instance by a paper prepared by

* That at least was the *Australian*'s view, 30 August 1984.
† Speaking in Suva, 29 August 1984, CBA 50/8/5 Part 1, MFAT.
‡ Speaking at a UN press conference, 27 September 1984, PM 111/3/3/1 Part 24, ANZ.

the Foreign Ministry, that if this guarantee failed or was withdrawn Japan would acquire nuclear weapons of its own, and it was only on this understanding that Japan signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1970 and, with some reluctance, ratified it six years later.

As part of the arrangements under the Mutual Security Treaty, much of the US Seventh Fleet was based in Japanese ports. Since this included large aircraft carriers, guided missile cruisers and submarines, it was a considerable test of faith to believe that none of these were nuclear-armed. Japan's situation, in the North East Asian triangle where the interests of four major powers converged, required this faith. The alternative to turning a blind eye to the armaments of the Seventh Fleet was an end to the Mutual Security Treaty and an 'independent' Japanese foreign policy backed by the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The security of the Pacific rested on the American–Japanese alliance and neither the Chinese nor anyone else wished to see it disturbed. Indeed, the Chinese, worried about the Soviet Union, wanted the continuing stability of all alliances in the Pacific, including ANZUS (a point they apparently made to the young Lange in 1981).* A conspiracy of silence about the weaponry of the US ships in Japanese ports was therefore a necessity and was universally observed.

Now both Tokyo and Washington were agitated by the thought that an inexperienced government in New Zealand, propelled by supporters whose overriding interest was opposition to nuclear weapons, might ignore the convention of silence and ignite an anti-nuclear movement in Japan which could have unforeseeable consequences. Wolfowitz said anxiously that any linking of New Zealand to the Japanese formula 'caused the Japan desk in State to leave the ground'.† Lange was occasionally tempted to comment on the difference between New Zealand's policy and Japan's which he said seemed to be one of 'heroic ignores', but warned on

* Colin James interview, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 August 1984.
† Lange–Shultz meeting in New York, 24 September 1984, PM 59/8/5 Part 1, MFAT.

various occasions by his officials he largely avoided the trap. Some of his supporters, however, were less restrained, and were prone to contrast the honest and open stance of New Zealand with the murky and discreditable one of Japan. Perhaps Japan would be inspired by New Zealand's lead and no one gave any thought to the likely consequences of the end of the Japanese–American alliance. This is the peril of single-issue politics: if one aim is made absolute and pursued at all costs, then other desirable aims are ignored and become part of the costs. As Margaret Wilson said of her party members: 'They did not in fact think much about the foreign policy implications – that was "not our world".'*

So an apprehensive Tokyo was anxious to get the measure of New Zealand's new leader. Soon after the government took office, the *Japan Times* said that '[r]igid application of non-nuclear doctrines would not contribute to the security of free world nations' and hoped a little nervously that the Lange Government would 'demonstrate realism'.† Hints about the need to step carefully were relayed by the New Zealand embassy in Tokyo. Then, meeting Lange at the United Nations in September, the Japanese Foreign Minister spelled out his country's non-nuclear principles and underlined the moral: 'He said the reality of the world today was that the balance of power is maintained by nuclear weaponry. It was important for Western countries to maintain unity among themselves.' He afterwards told the Japanese press that the New Zealand Prime Minister hoped to avoid any dramatic disruption, but when asked how, he said that Mr Lange had not elaborated.‡

Then chance, or rather the assassination of Mrs Gandhi, offered the Japanese Prime Minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, the opportunity to make his own assessment. There was a large gathering of leaders in New Delhi for the funeral and a member of Nakasone's staff approached me to say that his Prime Minister would like a meeting.

* Interview with Margaret Wilson, 4 August 2011.
† *Japan Times*, 20 July 1984.
‡ PM 111/3/3/1 Part 24, ANZ.

This was easily arranged, though it became clear that, rather against the normal protocol, we were being summoned to meet him. Nakasone sat aloof in his hotel room listening with eyes half-closed to Lange's explanation of his policy. Lange was nervous and his volubility was increased by Nakasone's unblinking regard and disinclination to say anything. When we left the room I did not think the assessment was favourable.

It was not. When Nakasone was about to visit New Zealand in January 1985, President Reagan and Shultz asked him to carry a message to Lange, seeking to break the stalemate on ship visits. The Japanese Prime Minister was reluctant to get more deeply involved beyond explaining Japan's non-nuclear principles. He may not have done even this. Lange's hopes of a serious conversation with him on a car journey through the Waikato were thwarted by Nakasone resolutely falling asleep in the back seat of the elderly Rolls. 'He went to sleep when we left and woke up again for lunch. When we left Ruakura he slept until we got back to Auckland.'* But Nakasone's attack of narcolepsy was diplomatic; the Canadian embassy reported from Tokyo that he had feigned sleep to avoid any discussion of the nuclear problem.

The British position was less sensitive since, as the Foreign Office pointed out somewhat haughtily, they were not party to the ANZUS treaty.† However, though distance and the end of Empire made visits by the Royal Navy less frequent than formerly, it was the only nuclear-armed navy apart from that of the United States likely to come to New Zealand. More important were the traditional links between the two countries, links which at the level of sentiment were probably even closer than those with Australia. As Mrs Thatcher's brief cable to Muldoon on his election defeat said: 'We were particularly grateful for your staunch support for our endeavours in the South Atlantic, and have been happy to argue New Zealand's case within the European

* David Lange, *My Life*, Viking, 2005, p. 203.
† When the treaty was signed Britain was aggrieved at being excluded.

community.' London was therefore an involuntary party to the dispute; the ties of feeling were such that at various times both the United States and New Zealand sought its help as a go-between.

The Foreign Office's first instinct was 'to lie doggo', recognising that the Americans might well ask them to join in protests to the new government.* Their presentiment was right; in mid-August, Washington asked its embassy in London to find out whether the British might be willing to help. The US and Australia, it said, were seeking a quiet dialogue and opportunities to convince New Zealand to reverse its policy. Given its special relationship, some quiet words by Britain could be particularly useful. Would the Foreign Office be willing to stress the broader implications of a New Zealand ban on ship visits? This would need to be done carefully; it was important that the US not be seen as orchestrating a diplomatic offensive given (in the words of another message) 'the unique ability of New Zealanders to perceive "heavying"', but there might be helpful opportunities, such as a meeting at the UN or a Lange visit to London, when something could be done.†

This overture encouraged the British to dip a cautious toe into the water. Three weeks later the High Commissioner in Wellington handed over an 'informal memorandum' warning that if New Zealand went beyond general statements about the undesirability of nuclear weapons to doing something about them, visits by the Royal Navy would be ruled out. A ban on port visits would be destabilising and would not bring peaceful disarmament any closer. It would in fact 'affect Western unity and would undoubtedly please the Russians'.‡

When Lange called at Downing Street at the end of September, Mrs Thatcher held to this line. She was in gentle mood, wanting like Hawke and Nakasone to make her own appraisal of the new Prime Minister, and British governments had a lengthy experience

* FCO Minute of 16 July 1984, FCO Papers.
† Washington cable of 17 August 1984, State Department Papers. The comment on 'heavying' came in a lengthy think-piece by Washington, 21 November 1984.
‡ Memo of 10 September 1984, PM 59/8/2 Part 22, ANZ.

of being indulgent towards New Zealand. The crisis was a worry but had not yet come to a head and until it did Britain was largely content to watch. Its High Commissioner in Wellington, married to a New Zealander, was optimistic, telling London at the end of the year: 'In defence, I have no doubt that New Zealand will continue as a reliable partner both in ANZUS and in the overall Western Alliance.'*

The ASEAN countries also wondered about the new government's intentions. New Zealand, like Australia, had made a helpful contribution to their security over the three previous decades and it still maintained a battalion in Singapore. Any immediate threat was long gone but Singapore preferred to retain the battalion in the meantime, arguing (and Lange agreed) that a withdrawal would give the wrong signal while Vietnamese ambitions were still unclear. In this situation New Zealand's membership of ANZUS was regarded, at least by Malaysia and Singapore, as a useful reinforcement. South East Asia had historically been a cockpit of great-power rivalry and its member states understood that their independence could best be preserved by maintaining a careful balance between the West and the rising power of China. While New Zealand was a member of ANZUS its battalion provided a tripwire for possible American involvement without risking the delicate balance which made it inadvisable for Malaysia and Singapore to have any direct security links with the United States.

Thailand was reported to be uneasy about any threat to ANZUS, and the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, said that ANZUS was important enough for his country to want it to continue – it was 'an arrangement that hurts nobody but gives a lot of benefit to the participants'.† Since Mrs Thatcher was due to visit Singapore and Malaysia, London was told that both would like to discuss 'ANZUS and the advent of Mr Lange as Prime Minister'.‡

However, Lange himself was the first to visit, coming to Singapore on his way home from London in early October and urged by his

* Despatch by the High Commissioner, Terence O'Leary, 29 November 1984, FCO Papers.
† 13 August 1984, PM 50/8/5 Part 1, ANZ.
‡ British cables of 13 and 16 August 1984, FCO Papers.

officials to spend some time with the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. This was something of a punt given their very different temperaments and backgrounds but it turned out to be a success. Lange said he had come to sit at Lee's feet and Lee replied, to Lange's delight, that this was rather a large bundle. Lee, long accustomed to dealing with the British Labour Party, deployed a silky charm which quite won over the New Zealander who told his subsequent press conference: 'I was probably far more impressed with him than he was with me.' Two years later Lange was still impressed, saying: 'I suppose he's the closest thing that I have to an adopted political father.'*

The two went gently over their differences on security policy after Lange had told him that the US relationship had exploded in a way he should have foreseen. Lee talked about the responsibility to maintain the balance of power in the world; Lange said New Zealand was firmly part of the Western alliance which could hardly be subverted by the absence of an occasional port visit, asserting (wrongly) that there had been none in 1972–75.

Then Lee hardened his tone and spoke more bluntly. It was essential to maintain US resolve, and he asked Lange to imagine the situation if the Americans were not in South East Asia. Everyone including New Zealanders had to realise how rapid air travel had changed the old world we had grown up in: 'In the present world there is no such thing as opting out.' Lange retorted that countries do not always have to opt in; Singapore did not have nuclear weapons there. Lee flashed out, 'Don't we?' and pointed to the nuclear-armed ships and submarines that regularly passed through the Johore Strait which was less than a mile wide. That was a risk but he preferred that to insecurity. The meeting ended amiably, with Lee suggesting that new Labour Prime Ministers should avoid foreign policy during their honeymoon period and take advantage of it to get unpleasant domestic tasks done.†

* Vernon Wright interview, 5 December 1986, Lange Papers, Box 1, ANZ.
† Meeting at the Istana, Singapore, 5 October 1984, PM 58/455/1 Part 8, ANZ.