

Proceedings of the Seminar on the Social and Economic Effects of Earthquake Prediction, 12 October, 1977.

OPENING ADDRESS

Sir Patrick O'Dea*

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen :-

May I first of all apologise for the unavoidable absence of My Minister, the Honourable Allan Highet, who has asked me to say how much he would have liked to be present this morning to open this Seminar. What I am about to say is what would have been said to you by Mr. Highet had he been here.

Some may wonder if a seminar on earthquake prediction can really achieve anything, especially if one is not a scientist specialising in geological matters or seismic activity. The general opinion of many people on the possibility of any accuracy in earthquake prediction is to regard the idea with a great deal of scepticism. I can recall my mother saying that she always knew when an earthquake was to occur within a few seconds or minutes, by the agitation of the family's pheasants. There are still many who think we have not passed that stage. And it comes as some surprise to them to learn that, in fact, although by no means an exact science, earthquake prediction has advanced far beyond that stage. So I think it has been an excellent idea of the Department of University Extension at Victoria University and the N.Z. National Society for Earthquake Earthquake to organise this seminar which brings together people well qualified to speak on the social and economic effects of earthquake prediction, and then to throw their papers open for a forum discussion later on.

I am glad to see so many present. This surely reflects a very real interest by responsible people in the subject matter of your discussions today.

Although everyone in New Zealand knows that earthquakes can occur at any time and at any place, many take comfort in the fact that no severe earthquake close to any centre of population of significant size has occurred since Napier and Hastings were devastated forty-six years ago. Tremors are felt every year in our cities and towns sufficient to remind us of the potential destructive force. Little more than twenty-four hours ago there was a very severe shake in the Pacific not far from our shores. Nevertheless, there is a complacency about earthquakes due perhaps to the feeling that there is little one can do about something that may occur without sign or warning.

The possibility of earthquake prediction has long been on the horizon. It is only in recent years that scientific advances, illustrated graphically by the Chinese prediction of four out of five major earthquakes to be centred in that country in

1975 and 1976, have made it seem likely that the annual toll of human life from earthquakes around the world might be reduced.

If and when earthquake prediction can achieve a degree of probability and exactitude to be relied upon, governments will face some very difficult decisions. No government will want to alarm people unnecessarily, or to cause hardship and suffering, not to mention political damage in preparing for an earthquake that does not eventuate. On the other hand, a government would fail in its duty if it did not act decisively to safeguard lives and property given due warning that an earthquake of substantial force was likely to strike. As I said, there will be some very difficult decisions to make as earthquake prediction becomes more of a practical possibility especially if it ever reaches the stage that the occurrence of major earthquakes can be predicted to a given week or even closer. You will have speakers dealing with this aspect during the day, and I will not endeavour in these opening remarks to skimp over the ground covered in the many excellent papers you have before you. You will have some who will draw attention to the fact that even although earthquake prediction is not yet an exact science, nevertheless certain actions can be taken which can mitigate the effects of a major quake if and when it occurs. There may well be other steps which can be taken in advance, or legislative authority which can be given in anticipation. Certainly, our civil defence act even today could do with some revision and it may well be that when this revision takes place - and I hope it will not be far off - we can give some serious consideration to some of the views which are to be put forward by the distinguished panel of speakers you are to hear.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for this opportunity to say a few words and to welcome you all to this seminar. I trust that you will have an informative and stimulating discussion. Your findings on the social and economic effects of earthquake prediction will be at the heart of future political decisions and I can assure you that both the Minister and I will follow your discussions with great interest and that your findings will be studied carefully at government level.

It is now my very great pleasure, on behalf of my Minister, the Hon. Allan Highet, to declare this seminar to be formally open.

* Secretary, Department of Internal Affairs.