

Threats to make attacks on public seem low risk

Is the publicity about cyanide threats all that it seems to be? DAVID SMALL has his suspicions.

By David Small in Otago Daily Times 14 March 2003

IF THEY ever catch the person behind the round of letters threatening all manner of heinous attacks on civilians, I bet we'll find out that he (very likely male) had never done this kind of thing before.

Why? Because, the usual strategy of depriving any publicity to the authors of hoaxes is, I am sure, as effective as that of painting out graffiti before anyone sees it. In my day, people doing paint-ups and paste-ups (before they became commercialised) soon learned which walls, despite being invitingly high-profile and sometimes reasonably low-risk, were simply not worth the effort.

Equally, people who issue bomb scares and the like must feel quite deflated when there is absolutely no response and pretty soon, one would expect, they would abandon the practice. Although every such threat is, one would hope, assessed reasonably seriously, it is also completely understandable that they are not all acted on. I don't know how many times Parliament has been evacuated in response to a bomb threat, but I am sure it would be far fewer than the number of bomb threats that have been received.

As the Springbok tour began to fade into history, senior police officers and newspaper editors talked openly about the number of serious threats of various kinds that were issued, only a small proportion of which were ever acted on or made public. Those that were taken seriously, for example, the perceived risk of a stolen plane crashing into a grandstand, were those associated with evidence of the perpetrator having the motivation and capacity to deliver on the threat.

The current prankster has demonstrated the capacity to do no more than write a threatening letter and get hold of a pretty common possum poison. Why then are the media, the police and, no doubt, other surveillance and law-enforcement agencies, taking this person so seriously?

The official reason is that the publicity might prompt some more law-abiding associate of the culprit to reflect on some odd behaviour they may have observed and contact the police. The police have even said the public need to be woken from their complacency on such matters, although I had the impression that, as in the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing, New Zealanders are pretty good at noting and reporting suspicious activity.

I would be surprised if the new go-public strategy flushes out the source of the latest threats. What is likely, however, is that ex-hoaxers who had been successfully ignored out of the game will come out of retirement in the hope that they will now be able to get the publicity they crave. It may also have the effect of inspiring other people to get in on the act, in the same way that publicity about white powder in the mail in the

United States after the September 11 attacks gave some bloke in Palmerston North the idea of doing the same thing here.

Notwithstanding the understandable anxiety about threats to security in the current climate of American plans to wage an illegal war against Iraq, I cannot see the justification for taking seriously threats from sources that have not shown a capacity to carry out the activities they have threatened.

Taking a lesson from leaders of doomsday cults, the perpetrator of the current threats promises to demonstrate such a capability in Wellington and Auckland at noon on March 28. I won't be holding my breath.

In New Zealand, threats from people with political motives that are associated with a demonstrated capability to inflict serious damage are mercifully rare. The last time there was publicity about such a hoax was in 1996. A package marked "Apec bomb" was placed outside the Christchurch City Council offices at the time of the Apec trade ministers' meeting in the city.

This incident was remarkable in that the package contained what bomb disposal experts identified was a sophisticated and accurately assembled time bomb, except that putty was included instead of explosives. That is, instead of just placing a box of junk and labelling it a bomb, the perpetrators wanted to demonstrate their bomb-making capacity. What is odd about this is that it was an isolated incident. It appears that no political group has repeated this display or sought to capitalise on it in having their threats taken more seriously.

There are also suspicious elements: the incident came just days after two Security Intelligence Service agents (who probably had bomb-making skills) had illegally broken into the home of a leading anti-APEC activist (and thought it had passed as a simple burglary); the agents deregistered their car just hours after the "bomb" was placed; and the police were unable to give a convincing account of why they searched a particular house, a search subsequently ruled to have been illegal. The police steadfastly refused to make any inquiries into the whereabouts of the agents at the time the bomb was placed.

Were it not for the publicity and legal challenges, the incident would have created the impression that political dissenters in Christchurch were capable of inflicting serious harm on the public, a view that would strengthen the hand of surveillance and law-enforcement agencies in securing authorisation for more extensive and intrusive operations.

Despite the court's condemnation of the agents' activities in 1996, and in the face of widespread public concerns about civil liberties, the government increased the powers and resources of the SIS. Then, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, they were given even greater powers and resources.

I suspect that part of the reason for the change of tactics in the current publicity over what is probably a hoax is that surveillance and law-enforcement agencies that have benefited from the enhanced powers and increased budgets as a result of the "war on

terrorism" want to be seen to be doing things to justify their newly acquired importance.

I have no doubt that the New Zealand public will continue to be as vigilant as ever in reporting suspicious activity. I trust we will also be just as vigilant in ensuring that surveillance and law-enforcement agencies do not take any further liberties with our liberties.

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