

Disaster hacks should stick to the facts



BILL DURODIE

As if the twin calamities of a huge earthquake followed by a devastating tsunami were not enough, much of the coverage and commentary relating to recent events in Japan has displayed a distasteful desire to project a third – nuclear – catastrophe onto the situation.

It is almost as if there is no disaster too big today that it cannot be made worse – or at least imagined so – by an army of self-styled disaster specialists in search of salacious copy. These variously seek to draw out an array of pre-determined conclusions – from the supposed moral lessons to be drawn from societies held to be developing too far or too fast, to assumptions about the presumed fallibility of technology.

And all this, despite the actual evidence emanating from Fukushima consistently pointing to the reality of its being a relatively localised problem; one being addressed by a small number of dedicated professionals whose courage in truly risking it all for the benefit of everyone else we should seriously respect.

The self-oriented projections of certain commentators – many, but not exclusively, halfway around the globe from the site of the incident – reflects the sad emergence of a confused culture today that always starts from the question: “What does it



Anti-nuclear activists, wearing headbands that read ‘No nuclear in order to save Taiwan’, shouting slogans during a protest in Taipei yesterday. It is no surprise that anti-nuclear groups are using the catastrophe in Japan as an opportunity to promote their existing agenda. REUTERS

mean for me?”

This is the very opposite of the humane disposition best exemplified by the majority of Japanese people whose calm dignity, fortitude and cooperativeness at this time we could all do to learn from.

Some ill-informed invective has gone

so far to suggest that this is what we should come to expect in an age when – driven by climate change or human development – natural disasters will become more frequent or intense.

Such hacks could do with learning a little more history before reaching for their keyboards. Worse or equivalent earthquakes, both in terms of severity and human impact, have been recorded going back over 500 years.

That these are more costly today is a measure of how far we have actually progressed. For the truth is, that in any other period and in most other countries, such an episode would have cost considerably more lives than they have here.

It is a testament to Japan’s remarkable development and resilience that this was not the case. This development relied at base on the provision of plentiful quantities of energy – much of it nuclear.

THE ANTI-NUCLEAR AGENDA

That anti-nuclear groups are using this event as a vehicle to promote their pre-existing agenda is hardly surprising.

In almost all crisis situations today, there is a small army of risk entrepreneurs who seek to benefit by using particular incidents to confirm conclusions they held in advance, even – as is the case here – when the real evidence flies in the face of their theories.

To give credence to these, as some Western governments appear to have done, by enacting a moratorium on nuclear

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power generation, is to pander to populist prejudice in a way that may yet prove far more costly than any future mishap.

It is equivalent to taking at face value the gratuitous text message rumours that have also been circulating recently and saying that their existence somehow proves their validity and the need to pay credence to them.

In fact, the reverse is true. Now, more than ever, such views should be robustly rebutted.

People’s fears are not simply based in fact. Outlooks are shaped over protracted periods, determined by a vast number of social, cultural and political variables, such as the impact on people’s imaginations of books, television programmes and films that project dystopian visions of the present and the future, as well as their interpretation of the various forces shaping their lives, such as presumptions as to whether we live in a particularly dangerous world, or whether we should trust strangers and the authorities charged with ensuring our well-being.

That individuals succumb to the contemporary climate of cultural pessimism may be understandable. Thus the huge demand for Geiger counters in Germany, a country not renowned for major tremors. But that the authorities act accordingly and make the knee-jerk gesture to close down half its power plants is blinkered in the extreme, and points to their own inner crisis of resolve and direction.

It is indeed sad that, at such times, rather than supporting people in need, some focus more on projecting their puerile fantasies and latent prejudices onto the situation and thereby ignore the real demands of the situation. ■

Bill Durodie is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University,

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