

Canada's most distinguished peacemaker

Douglas Roche has worn many hats in his long life of public service: author, parliamentarian, diplomat, academic. Hope drives his tireless quest for nuclear disarmament, but it's tempered with his grasp of the bitter realities of power politics

BY SHEILA PRATT, EDMONTON JOURNAL MAY 9, 2010



Protesters in New York rally against nuclear weapons earlier this month.

Photograph by: Chip East, Reuters, Edmonton Journal

In 1982, at the height of the Cold War, one million people gathered on the streets of New York to push the world's superpowers to halt the dangerous arms race and bring the world back from the brink of mass destruction. Doug Roche, a 52-year-old MP from Edmonton, was there and felt the mood of tension and anxiety.

"In 1982, I was one of a million people who marched from the UN to Central Park to protest nuclear weapons. That march woke up (U. S. President) Ronald Reagan and (Russian leader) Mikhail Gorbachev," Roche says.

Last Sunday, Roche, now a vibrant 80-year-old, was back in New York, this time joining the 10,000 who strode to the UN to protest against nuclear weapons.

"On Sunday, I marched for the same purpose. In 1982, there was a fearful type of energy. This time there was a hopeful energy," he said from New York.

It's been almost 40 years since Roche first began working on disarmament issues -- a very long journey for this distinguished Canadian, who served as Canada's ambassador for disarmament at the UN and in 1988 served as chairman of the UN disarmament committee, the main body dealing with security issues.

In the spring of 2010, his path is taking a positive turn. U.S. President Barack Obama has unexpectedly revived nuclear arms-control talks and is putting new life into the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty now under its regular five-years' review at the UN.

"It's a new moment of hope and profoundly so for me personally," says Roche.

He has taken part in five treaty review negotiations, and hope is a key force -- but it is always tempered by a good dose of realism about global power politics.

As Roche put it on the eve of these new negotiations: "Those who control the nuclear weapons also control the levers of powers. So who will win the day? The surging hopes of civil society representative here or the bitter realities of power politics?"

Doug Roche has had at least four careers in his long, productive and impressive life -- a journalist, MP and senator, disarmament expert at the United Nations and university professor -- as well as a husband and doting father of five children. Now, add three grandchildren. He's also done mediation work in the Catholic Church with sex-abuse victims. There's been a common thread in his life -- a concern for peace and security issues, a desire to make the world a safer place, and the courage to challenge the established powers.

Roche was brought up in the old-school ethic of politics as public service, respect for political opponents and reverence for Parliament as the central institution of democracy.

In the years before the rise of the Reform party, the big tent of the Progressive Conservative Party made room for many viewpoints. Red Tories, like Joe Clark and Robert Stanfield, stood in a long Canadian conservative tradition of progressive views on social policy and international affairs. Roche admired both men, so when Stanfield approached him to run, he said yes.

Joining the PC party was pragmatic, not an ideological statement, he adds. In the West, he had a better chance of getting elected as a Conservative.

Roche is uncomfortable with the hyper-partisanship of today's House of Commons and the ideological bent of Stephen Harper's Conservative party.

He's proud that he has served both Conservative and Liberal prime ministers. PC Prime Minister Brian Mulroney appointed him as disarmament ambassador to the UN (1984-89) and Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien appointed him to the Senate (1998-2004).

Over the years, Roche managed to annoy elements on both sides in the PC party. His strong opposition to abortion led him to oppose the Charter of Rights and Freedoms supported by Red Tories like Clark.

Meanwhile, the right wing dubbed him a foreign aid do-gooder because of his work on development issues. Some of the caucus resented his extensive international travel that took him away from the nation's business in Ottawa and Edmonton.

Roche, a devout Catholic, describes himself as ecumenical, open to all faiths. Despite many setbacks to his cause, he never fell into cynicism about the prospects for peace and possibilities for change.

His quick, analytical mind, as sharp as ever these days, absorbs the details of treaties, proposals for test bans, verification measures, and inventories of warheads.

One important thing: Don't ever call Doug Roche an idealist. "That's not me!" he says emphatically. "Anyone who calls me an idealist is showing ignorance about the state of the world.

"I'm a realist. What I'm talking about -- saving humanity from nuclear destruction -- takes pragmatic, hard work."

One other important thing to know about Doug Roche: He just doesn't slow down. He'll be 81 next month -- born the year the stock market collapsed and ushered in the Great Depression -- and still keeps a schedule that would exhaust people half his age.

He's up at five a.m. for a daily swim. He works for a few hours on his new books (he's written 20), and he keeps a close eye on developments at the UN and in Washington.

So what keeps Doug Roche going on this difficult road?

"I don't know, I just keep going," he said, with an engaging smile.

Scratch a little deeper and Roche adds that he keeps up his campaign for arms control for his grandchildren.

"I do it for the next generation because I know how dangerous the world has become."

But in the downstairs office of his comfortable house, hidden among the many piles of books and papers, is another motivator. The small wood-framed photograph sits on shelf at eye level. A distinguished-looking elderly man with a white beard looks out with a gentle smile.

That's Jo Rotblat -- Roche's inspiration in so many ways, for so many years.

Rotblat was a Polish scientist who stood up for his beliefs. He worked on the U.S. Manhattan project that developed the nuclear bomb during the Second World War.

When it became clear the Germans would not be able to develop a nuclear bomb, Rotblat believed the American project should be halted. If Germany was not developing the new bomb, Rotblat figured the Allies didn't need one either. He was so concerned about the dire consequences of unleashing this new weapon that he left the project on a moral grounds -- the only scientist to do so. He spent the rest of his life campaigning for peaceful uses of nuclear power and to control the dangerous arms

race that, as he predicted, would soon ensue.

In 1955, Rotblat joined with Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell in a key postwar manifesto calling for peaceful use of nuclear power, and the anti-nuclear movement was launched.

In 1995, Rotblat won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on arms control. He was still active in the disarmament movement when he died in 2005 at the age of 97.

"He's my mentor," said Roche. "I owe him a lot. Most of all, he gave me confidence."

Over the years, the two men worked together at the prestigious Pugwash Conferences, established in Nova Scotia in 1957 by American philanthropist Cyrus Eyton. It was a key forum for scientists, scholars and influential public figures to come together and address the threat from nuclear weapons.

Like his mentor, Roche figures he'll just keep going. In his closing speech to the Senate, Roche vowed: "I personally as long as God gives me strength will never rest until nuclear weapons, the ultimate evil of our time, are abolished."

Faith and family were cornerstones of Roche's early life -- though a childhood tragedy gave his family unique shape. Roche was a baby when his mother died. His aunt and uncle in Ottawa took in the six-month-old boy while Roche's two sisters were sent to a convent in Montreal. Their father would bring them all together on weekends, so the siblings grew up with close bonds, despite the distance.

Roche loved high school, wrote for the student paper, was active in the local parish and did manual labour in the summer.

Inspired by his cousin who became a priest, and a trip to Rome at age 19, Roche entered a seminary as a novitiate after high school in 1949. But after three months, he met with his religious superiors; both Roche and the priests knew the young man was meant for other things.

Roche walked out the religious door and right into a reporting job at the (now defunct) Ottawa Journal. He later worked for the Toronto Telegraph, covering a provincial election. Ontario Conservative Premier Leslie Frost asked him, at one point, if he wanted to run for the Tories. Roche declined, adamant he'd never be a politician.

After a stint chasing fire engines for the Telegram in Toronto, Roche became interested in working with the Catholic press where he could look at social and church issues that interested him. He moved to the U.S. for eight years and worked for a national Catholic magazine, The Sign. His young family lived just outside New York and fell in love with the big city, the theatre, the buzz.

Those eight years -- the early 1960s -- would be a turning point in his life. The magazine sent Roche to Africa, Latin America and India. It was a time of turmoil and change, the beginnings of liberation movements that would ultimately overthrow old colonial masters.

Roche wrote about the millions of people living in poverty in the so-called Third World countries. The growing gap between rich and poor became one of his major concerns. This exposure to the

emerging global village with all its potential for North-South conflict would eventually set the direction of his future political career.

"After travelling around the world, one day I woke up and realized most of the world was non-white and non-Christian and non-western. And I remember thinking, 'We have to start getting along,' " he recalls.

In 1965, opportunity knocked again. He got a phone call from Edmonton, a proposal to start a Catholic weekly newspaper. At 35, he moved West to become editor of the Western Catholic Reporter.

After five years as editor and with the newspaper running well, Roche decided to enter federal politics. In 1971, he ran for the Progressive Conservative nomination in Edmonton-Strathcona.

"Please note the 'Progressive,' " he says, with very deliberate emphasis.

In the 1972 election, Roche won his seat, but PC leader Robert Stanfield, who had recruited Roche, fell two seats short of victory. A Liberal era began and Roche was relegated to opposition benches for most of his years in Parliament from 1972-84. The exception was the nine months in 1979 of the short-lived government of Conservative leader Joe Clark.

Roche surprised many in his own party by becoming a champion of Third World development. He became known as the conscience of his party. In those years, he noted, his political philosophy increasingly took on a global perspective, and he pushed for Canada to become a bridge between North and South. Already, Roche could see a unique role for a middle power like Canada in international relations, a place to punch above its weight. And it was a short step, he says, from development issues to disarmament.

There are about 24,000 nuclear warheads in the world today, down from a high of 70,000 in 1986, according to international reports. Many have been decommissioned. Russia has 13,000 and U.S., 9,400.

While progress has been made, the disarmament road is never smooth and takes many detours. In 1997, Britain removed its many warheads from hair-trigger status -- which means they would take a day to launch, not a few minutes.

But four years later, in 2001, U.S. President George Bush issued a Revised Nuclear Posture, proclaiming the right to use nuclear weapons on a first-strike basis and announcing plans for a new generation of weapons. Bush also sent a negative signal to the test-ban treaty.

"The second nuclear age was born with that document," writes Roche in his newest book, *Creative Dissent: A Politician's Struggle for Peace*.

Leading up to the 2005 review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the world heard a grim assessment from Robert Mc-Namara, former U.S. secretary of defence.

He pointed out that 2,000 of the United States' 8,000 operational warheads were on hair-trigger alert, meaning they could be activated within minutes. "The risk of accident or inadvertent launch is unacceptably high," McNamara said.

Furthermore, the average U.S. warhead had a destructive power 20 times that of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, he said.

By 2007, the disarmament movement felt the dangers to the world were growing. They moved the hands on the famous doomsday clock forward by two minutes closer to midnight -- a clear signal more action was needed by the international community.

At that time, Roche described the world as facing a "double danger" -- the threat from thousands of nuclear weapons still sitting on hair-trigger alert, as well a new threat from terrorist groups trying to get their hands on nuclear bomb-making material.

No wonder Obama's new effort to redraw U.S. nuclear policy and revive the arms-control talks put a tentative spring in Doug Roche's step.

Roche rarely looks back. He prefers to move forward, seeking other ways to advance

his cause. While teaching at the University of Alberta in the mid-1990s, he began to look for a new vehicle to move the arms-control agenda. In October 1997, he became the founding chairman of the Middle Powers Initiative, a collaboration of middle countries and non-governmental organizations to pressure the big powers to address nuclear disarmament. It remains an important group today.

This winter, Roche and John Polanyi, a chemistry professor and Nobel Prize winner, looked for a new strategy to take advantage of "the Obama moment," as they called it. They wanted to find a way to nudge Stephen Harper to take a leadership role on the nuclear agenda and to support Obama. They came up with the idea of enlisting the support of distinguished and accomplished Canadians, their fellow Order of Canada recipients.

In an unprecedented move, they convinced more than 500 Order of Canada recipients to sign a document calling for Ottawa to pursue a Nuclear Weapons Convention that would ban the production of nuclear weapons.

The 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, for years the centrepiece of nuclear arms control, did not ban the production of nuclear weapons. Mostly, it required the nuclear powers (Russia and the U.S. have 95 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons) to sit down and negotiate how to reduce their arsenals.

But with the rise of terrorist groups and the spread of peaceful nuclear power across the globe, Roche realized stronger measures were needed.

"There is a pressing need to stop new production now," said Roche. "Otherwise, it will be impossible to get a nuclear-free world."

Nuclear arms have spread to nine countries -- the U.S., Russia, Britain, France, Israel, India, Pakistan, China and North Korea. Iran appears to be on the way, he noted.

On April 9, Roche and Polyani sat in the prime minister's office. Harper was about to leave for Obama's nuclear summit in Washington and wanted to hear their message.

The meeting was cordial, recalls Roche. "The prime minister was attentive and I'm hopeful there will be some concrete action."

Three days later, at the Washington summit, Barack Obama got 47 nations together to agree to take steps to prevent terrorist groups from getting their hands on loose nuclear material. Harper agreed to send a large portion of Canada's weapons-grade uranium to the U. S for reprocessing.

Roche says he is often asked whether -- especially after the terror attacks of 9-11 -- the world is a safer place now. Roche wonders. Last weekend in New York, he was one of the many people having dinner in Times Square when an SUV containing a bomb was discovered and people cleared the area.

"My first thought was what would happen if a nuclear bomb went off here. It would be an unimaginable catastrophe."

The experience reinforced his need to keep working.

"This isn't some marginal issue, it's a centrepiece of world politics," he says.

Roche dismisses the suggestion it's impossible to contain nuclear arms. "If we have a treaty banning biological and chemical weapons, why not banning nuclear weapons?"

"Of course you can't abolish weapons overnight. But to not start down this road will make things worse. "

In July, Roche will travel to Hiroshima, the Japanese city devastated by the first nuclear bomb dropped at the end of the Second World War. The mayor of the city leads a campaign to abolish nuclear weapons by 2020.

Roche will become an honorary citizen of Hiroshima to acknowledge his decades of work on arms control.

"It's a very humbling experience," says Roche. "And it increased my sense of responsibility to keep moving ahead with my goal."



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Photograph by: Chip East, Reuters, Edmonton Journal

