



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hailed the treaty as 'historic,' adding that it will 'form an important component of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime,' and set a new global norm against nuclear weapons. Photograph courtesy of Commons Wikimedia

Government clams up on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons Treaty which comes into force on Jan. 22

The 'democratic deficit' in Canada is shocking. The government is allowing NATO to bamboozle Canadians with its false nuclear deterrence doctrine. The Prohibition Treaty is an act of conscience by distressed governments and civil society leaders, and it deserves a hearing.



Douglas Roche

Opinion

EDMONTON—With NATO breathing down its neck, the Government of Canada has clammed up on what it will say about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which enters into force Jan. 22. The treaty, signed by 122 nations in 2017, is a breakthrough because it bans the possession of nuclear weapons for those states adhering to it. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hailed the treaty as "historic," adding that it will "form an important component of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime" and set a new global norm against nuclear weapons.

But NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg says the Prohibition Treaty "would

undermine the security of our alliance," and NATO has stiffened its opposition.

I asked Global Affairs Canada how the opposite positions of the UN and NATO heads could be reconciled. I thought it was a reasonable question to put, since, on Oct. 26, 2020, the government said: "We acknowledge the widespread frustration with the pace of global efforts toward nuclear disarmament, which clearly motivated the negotiation of the [Prohibition Treaty]."

The government went coy and, in its answer, referred me to the "pragmatic approach" of the Non-Proliferation Treaty "that takes into consideration the security considerations of all states." In other words: silence on the Prohibition Treaty. The government doesn't want to talk about it. Why?

The reason is easy to discern. When the Canadian statement recognizing the reason for the Prohibition Treaty reached NATO headquarters, it added to the "soft tones" now colouring the response to the treaty in some NATO countries. A study reported by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace showed that, in several NATO states, significant numbers of citizens and civil society organizations and their political representatives strongly

support the treaty. In Belgium, 77 per cent of the population is in favour of that country signing it. Fifty-six former high officials of NATO countries, including two former NATO secretaries-general, signed an open letter supporting the treaty.

With support building up, NATO struck back and, in December, the North Atlantic Council issued a withering denunciation of the treaty on the grounds that the Non-Proliferation Treaty "remains the only credible path to nuclear disarmament." NATO doubled down in its objection, saying it would "reject any attempt to delegitimize nuclear deterrence." Thus, NATO is intimidating countries like Canada, which had begun a move towards at least acknowledging the reasons for the Prohibition Treaty.

It needs to be remembered that three NATO states (the U.S., the U.K. and France) possess nuclear weapons, five others host U.S. nuclear weapons on their soil, and all NATO members subscribe to NATO policy that nuclear weapons are the "supreme guarantee" of security. These states, including Canada, cling to the Non-Proliferation Treaty even though its major demand, comprehensive negotiation toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, has been ignored for 50 years.

Two former Canadian prime ministers (Jean Chrétien and the late John Turner), three former Canadian foreign ministers (Lloyd Axworthy, Bill Graham, John Manley) and two former Canadian defence ministers (Jean-Jacques Blais, John McCallum) have openly rebuked NATO's moribund policies and supported the Prohibition Treaty. But the government won't even respond to these leading Liberal figures. Both Foreign Affairs Parliamentary Secretary Rob Oliphant and UN Ambassador Bob Rae declined to be interviewed for this column.

The government's ambivalence has sparked the overnight formation of a coalition of Canadian activists, comprising 90 groups and 100 individuals, pushing the government to hold a parliamentary debate on the Prohibition Treaty, followed up by parliamentary committees hearings. Anton Wagner, leader of the coalition, says: "What brings all these organizations and individuals together is the concern that there is a great democratic deficit in Canada where Parliament and our political leaders refuse to debate the existential threat that nuclear weapons represent to human existence and civilization."

The "democratic deficit" in Canada is shocking. The government is allowing NATO to bamboozle Canadians with its false nuclear deterrence doctrine. The Pro-

How the Government of Canada Responded to Questions on the Nuclear Prohibition Treaty

On Jan. 8, 2021, I sent the following questions asking about Canada's policy on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons to Global Affairs Canada:

1. How to reconcile the opposing statements of the UN Secretary-General and the NATO Secretary-General on the Prohibition Treaty?

2. Does Canada acknowledge the support of a majority of UN States for the Prohibition Treaty and its complementarity to the NPT?

3. Has Canada responded to the Open Letter of Sept. 21, 2020, by 56 former high officials of NATO countries supporting the [Prohibition Treaty], including two former Canadian prime ministers, three former Canadian foreign ministers and two former Canadian defence ministers?

Global Affairs' response, sent Jan. 11, to the above questions:

"Canada has long been an important player in global nuclear disarmament and remains committed to achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

"The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is at the root of every aspect of Canada's nuclear policy. With 191 States parties, adherence to the NPT is nearly universal. At a time of heightened global tensions, it is even more critical that we work together to reinforce our collective commitment to the NPT and advance our shared goals on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Canada will continue to act as a bridge-builder, working to unite States in taking concrete steps towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

"Canada maintains that progress toward nuclear disarmament is most effectively pursued through a pragmatic approach anchored in the NPT that takes into account the security considerations of all States. This approach aims to halt the spread of nuclear weapons, reduce existing stockpiles, and, ultimately, eliminate these weapons in a manner that is verifiable and irreversible."

hibition Treaty is an act of conscience by distressed governments and civil society leaders, and it deserves a hearing. Instead of ducking, the Canadian government should encourage a broad dialogue on how security can be maintained without nuclear weapons. It should acknowledge the Prohibition Treaty and work with NATO to bring the organization into conformity with it.

But there will be some parliamentary action, at least. Shortly, Parliamentary Green Party Leader Elizabeth May will introduce a petition in the House, calling on Canada to accede to the Prohibition Treaty, and the government will have to respond.

At this tense moment, a new Canadian foreign minister, Marc Garneau, takes stage. I hope this highly praised former astronaut, the first Canadian in space, lives up to the belief he showed when, in opposition, he signed the call by Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention for "all member states of the United Nations—including Canada—to endorse, and begin negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention."

Former Senator Douglas Roche's latest book is *Recovery: Peace Prospects in the Biden Era*.

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