

The September Song

By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

An address to Canadian Pugwash Group

Dinner in Honour of Douglas Roche

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Dear Friends,

The great advantage of receiving a life-time award is that you get to hear a lot of nice things said about you while you are still alive. On such occasions, hyperbole seems to be permissible, and I must say that you have rather over-indulged. I would rather present myself, with a higher degree of honesty, as a cantankerous, irascible and increasingly cranky old man who won't let go of the nuclear weapons issue.

First, a little bit on age, a subject I am becoming an expert in. Among my heroes are three men who have both mentored and influenced me greatly: Joseph Rotblat, the Nobel Peace Laureate and principal founder of Pugwash, who died only a few days ago at the age of 96; Bill Epstein, one of the great figures in the Pugwash movement, pestering the life out of the Canadian government to beef up its anti-nuclear weapons policies, who died at 89; Gary MacEoin, the journalist and author spurring the Church to more intense action for social justice, who died at 94. Are you getting it? When these men were only 76, they were just getting going. Maybe I'm taking this life-time award fraudulently because I have no intention of going away or retiring or resting for a long time to come.

Still, I am conscious of – and I can hear it now – Frank Sinatra singing the September Song. *This is the prime of my life. I'm having the*

time of my life. But the days, of course, are dwindling down. Perhaps, for me, it's no longer September. But it certainly isn't December. November does not appeal to me. I prefer to think of myself as -- mid-October. The leaves of autumn are flaming in their colour and have not yet fallen to the ground. The days are warm, but the nights are cool. We know what is ahead, but we revel in the softer sun. Each day is increasingly precious. Time is racing. Life is full.

A swim every day, my iPod with 1,600 of my favourite songs at hand, my laptop as my roving office – all these are the stuff of my life. I've got my health, my wife, my family, my friends, my Church, my work, my country, my world. As Sinatra would sing, "I've got everything I need." Or as Gershwin would put it, "Who could ask for anything more!"

Just as it is pleasant to hear nice things about me while I am still breathing, perhaps I too should say things that ought be said before it is too late. To my family: I love you all intensely. I will never forget Eva, and I am overjoyed that Patricia is in my life. The support I have received over the years from those closest to me has buoyed me up. "No man is an island," John Donne wrote. How true. Each of us is affected by the people around us.

Donne, several centuries ago, talked about each individual's involvement with humanity. And then his warning: "Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Today, the bell is tolling for humanity – and for each person on the planet. The bell is warning us – the tsunami devastation, the New Orleans calamity – of our physical, structural and political frailties. If humanity's infrastructure is so vulnerable to natural disasters, how will we cope with the aftermath of a nuclear weapons attack when the very infrastructure of life support systems will itself be obliterated?

The bell is tolling. But few are listening. Secretary-General Kofi Annan is trying to warn governments and the public of the distinct possibility of a nuclear catastrophe. So are many of us in this room. So are many NGOs across the world. But our voices are still not loud enough. The politicians still haven't heard the message; actually, in the case of many politicians, they don't even know that they don't know about this greatest threat to human security the world has ever faced.

However, we must not think that the public is devoid of basic knowledge of nuclear weapons. A recent international poll of citizens in 11 countries, including the U.S. and Canada, showed that 86 percent of people either strongly agree or agree to some extent that all nations should sign a

treaty to ban all nuclear weapons. In Canada, 91 percent of the public holds this view. But people are not actively demanding that governments move towards such a treaty. It is our job to animate that public demand. If there is one thing I have learned in 34 years in public life, it is that governments only move to solutions of problems when the heat is turned up on them.

We ourselves – and I speak of the extended Pugwash community – must also realize that we are part of a historical momentum closing the net on nuclear weapons. The indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995, the ruling of the International Court of Justice in 1996, the “unequivocal undertaking” to total elimination of nuclear weapons given by all States Parties to the NPT in 2000 – all this has shown that we are on the right side of history. The proponents of nuclear weapons have been reduced to absurd arguments for their retention. Still, the obstacles we face are huge. The ideologies, the military-industrial complex, the so-called strategic thinkers won’t let go. They continue to manipulate the public with their nuclear lies. And so the present crisis deepens.

But it is in times of crisis that the nuclear disarmament movement has been strongest. This was true in the 1980s when there were massive protests against NATO’s deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe.

Today, the Abolition 2000 movement is gaining strength, and the number of expert non-governmental activists in dialogue with governments is growing.

Exposures of the myths, the growing maturation of nuclear disarmament work by the highly informed leaders of civil society, and the inherent dislike of nuclear weapons in the general public are now combining to lift up the prospects for action towards nuclear disarmament. One day, future generations will look back in disgust that a supposedly civilized society accepted the absurdity of nuclear weapons as high government policy.

The abolition of nuclear weapons is no longer just a lofty goal, a noble aspiration, an idealistic thought. It has now become the irreducible essential for survival in the world. Peace is impossible as long as the threat of nuclear war hangs over our heads. Moving the world beyond the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into a new frontier of human living now claims world attention.

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I will go on proclaiming the urgent need for the abolition of nuclear weapons as long as I live. Nobody will stop me. Nobody will intimidate me. Nobody dare tell me to “give it a rest.” This is wake-up time in the world. The bell is tolling. My grandchildren – and your grandchildren –

deserve a better world. Let us use every ounce of energy we have for as long as God gives us the strength to give them a world of true human security.

Thank you, Pugwash. Thank you all. I love you all. God bless you.