

Opinion

Peace movement in Canada has a new leader, it's Cesar Jaramillo

Cesar Jaramillo has reached a critical point in his career. His effectiveness as a peace advocate will be judged by how well he finesses his critique of Canadian policies while not alienating his government listeners.

Douglas Roche

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EDMONTON—The peace movement in Canada, whose roots can be traced back to the 1950s when the Mennonites and Quakers and then the Voice of Women spoke out against war and militarism, has a new leader. His name is Cesar Jaramillo, a 45-year-old political refugee from Colombia, who, last week, guided a high-powered policy conference on new ways to build global security out of the Ukraine war.

Of course, there is no single “elected” leader of the string of civil society networks across the country working on arms control and disarmament issues. But Jaramillo, who is the chair of the prestigious Canadian Pugwash Group, has emerged as a dynamic peace activist, and who has the ear of the Government of Canada. When Jaramillo speaks, as he has at the United Nations several times, he projects a rare combination of vision and practicality.

He challenged the Pugwash policy conference on global security architecture, held at the Balsillie School of International Affairs in Waterloo, Ont., that, while Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is immoral and illegal, “can the West not acknowledge at the same time that there is such a thing as legitimate Russian security interests?”

His bold stance led the conference to prepare a set of recommendations to the government to pursue diplomatic solutions to end the Ukraine conflict and prevent nuclear escalation. Standing up for diplomacy these days, with Canada strongly backing the militarist policies of the United States, is not an easy sell. Jaramillo also vigorously pushes for NATO to end its reliance on nuclear weapons, and for Canada to join the Treaty on the Prohibition



tion of Nuclear Weapons, neither of which the government shows any enthusiasm for.

Whatever the senior officials of Global Affairs Canada think of Jaramillo’s positions, they respect him enough to have invited him to be a civil society member of the Canadian delegation to the recent review conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. When it was over, he wrote a scathing indictment of the nuclear weapons states for maintaining nuclear deterrence policies, which block

genuine progress on nuclear disarmament. Perhaps the officials appointed Jaramillo to the delegation knowing that he would criticize Washington in ways they cannot. The inclusion of civil society on Canadian delegations, says Heidi Hulan, assistant deputy minister for international security, “is something the Government of Canada very much welcomes.”

Underneath his easy-going appearance, Jaramillo bears the scars of warfare. Protracted armed conflict was all around

him while growing up in Colombia. He was conscripted into the Colombian army and served for a year before obtaining a degree in journalism and communications. Insurgent guerrillas in far-right paramilitary groups kidnapped his father-in-law and threatened to kill him. Jaramillo met them in a secluded mountain area and paid the ransom money. The whole family still felt under threat, and, in 2004, Jaramillo and his wife, with a suitcase each, fled Colombia to seek political asylum

Cesar Jaramillo, a 45-year-old political refugee from Colombia, guided a high-powered policy conference on new ways to build global security out of the Ukraine war last week. Photograph courtesy of Douglas Roche

in Canada. They reached the Christie Refugee Welcome Centre in Toronto. From there they made their way to Waterloo, where Jaramillo obtained a master’s degree in global governance from the University of Waterloo and became a Canadian citizen.

In 2009, he joined Project Ploughshares, the principal peace organization in Canada, which is sponsored by the Canadian Council of Churches and has a donor base of 5,000 people. In a short time, his skills in nuclear disarmament, outer space security, the protection of civilians in armed conflict, emerging military technologies, and conventional weapons controls landed him in the executive director’s chair.

That remains his day-time job, but last year he also took on the chairmanship of the Canadian Pugwash Group, the Canadian branch of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. The Pugwash movement started during the Cold War years when the Canadian-American investment banker Cyrus Eaton brought together American and Soviet nuclear physicists, and their colleagues from around the world, to figure out how science could work for peace.

Pugwash is not a mass movement (engaging with the public is for other groups). It is, rather, an intellectual centre, and its “power” consists of the high level of knowledge that underlies its recommendations to governments around the world. Membership is by invitation only. There are presently only 67 members of the Canadian Pugwash Group, mostly physical and social scientists and former diplomats.

The expertise that lies within the Canadian group is stunning: Walter Dorn on modern technologies for peacekeeping; Paul Meyer on outer space security; Peggy Mason on diplomatic initiatives. This is the group that Jaramillo leads.

Cesar Jaramillo has reached a critical point in his career. His effectiveness as a peace advocate will be judged by how well he finesses his critique of Canadian policies while not alienating his government listeners. The government’s security policies are shifting from full support for a UN-based liberal international order to backing NATO military dominance and more confrontation in a post-Ukraine war world. Retaliation is replacing reconciliation as a Canadian goal. The peace movement shudders at this.

Jaramillo’s mission is to speak truth to power. If he speaks the full truth, the government might not like him so much.

Former Senator Douglas Roche is a former Canadian ambassador for disarmament.

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