

# Canada can't hide behind NATO in refusal to sign treaty on nuclear weapons prohibition

By [DOUGLAS ROCHE](#)    SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

**Justin Trudeau has not yet learned how NATO contravenes the basic idea of nuclear disarmament, for he called the negotiations that led to the adoption of the Prohibition Treaty 'useless.'**



Lloyd Axworthy, Jean Chrétien, Bill Graham, John McCallum, John Manley, and John Turner all signed an open letter, released on Sept. 21, that features 53 former high officials of NATO countries expressing support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It is an astonishing rebuke of NATO's moribund policies on nuclear weapons, and the most serious challenge to NATO's nuclear orthodoxy in the organization's 71-year history. Even two former NATO secretaries-general, Javier Solana and Willy Claes, as well as former UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, joined in this protest. *The Hill Times photographs by Andrew Meade and Hill Times file photographs*

EDMONTON—Lloyd Axworthy, Jean-Jacques Blais, Jean Chrétien, Bill Graham, John McCallum, John Manley, and John Turner.

These seven names hardly need an introduction to readers of *The Hill Times*, and certainly not to the Government of Canada. Two of them are former prime ministers, three are former foreign ministers, and two are former defence ministers, who ran and served Liberal governments.

All of them signed an open letter, released on Sept. 21, that features 53 former high officials of NATO countries expressing support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It is an astonishing rebuke of NATO's moribund policies on nuclear weapons, and the most serious challenge to NATO's nuclear orthodoxy in the organization's 71-year history. Even two former NATO secretaries-general, Javier Solana and Willy Claes, as well as former U.N. secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, joined in this protest.

The treaty, which bans the possession of nuclear weapons, was adopted by 122 states at the UN in 2017 and must be ratified by 50 states before it enters into force. To date, 44 states have ratified it, so it won't be long before the treaty becomes binding law for those who have signed it.



The Canadian government, under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, pictured Sept. 16, 2020, has said it cannot make such a commitment to sign the treaty because of its membership in NATO. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

But NATO, following the lead of the U.S., the U.K., and France, has vigorously rejected the treaty because it [“risks undermining”](#) the Non-Proliferation Treaty and supposedly creates divisions in the international community. It would be harder to find a more pungent example of nuclear hypocrisy. First, the treaty explicitly recognizes the NPT as the “cornerstone” of nuclear disarmament efforts. Second, it is the refusal by the nuclear weapons states to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons, as ordered by the NPT, that led to the development of the Prohibition Treaty.

NATO doesn't have a leg to stand on in maintaining that nuclear weapons are the "supreme guarantee" of security. It has now been called out by its own strongest supporters—former high officials in 20 NATO countries, Germany, Norway, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, and others, as well as the Canadians—who have signed the letter organized by the Nobel Peace Prize winning-International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons.

The letter accuses the U.S., Russia, the U.K., France, and China—permanent members of the Security Council that all possess nuclear weapons—of viewing the NPT "as a license to retain their nuclear forces in perpetuity." They are all flouting the NPT by modernizing their arsenals.

The letter adds: "With close to 14,000 nuclear weapons located at dozens of sites across the globe and on submarines patrolling the oceans at all times, the capacity for destruction is beyond our imagination. ... Without doubt, a new nuclear arms race is under way."

The [prohibition treaty is explicit in its condemnation](#) of nuclear weapons, stating: "Each State Party undertakes never under any circumstances to develop, test, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices."

The Canadian government has said it cannot make such a commitment because of its membership in NATO. But the letter contests this stand, arguing that nothing in the new treaty precludes a NATO state joining, as long as it never assists the use of nuclear weapons. This was the stand taken by Canadian Pugwash, a prominent civil society group, which said that Canada should sign the treaty and argue within NATO councils to get the nuclear policies changed. Indeed, Lloyd Axworthy, one of the signatories of the letter, went to NATO when he was foreign affairs minister to get the policy changed, but was rebuffed.

Pierre Trudeau, the father of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, once told me that NATO's obsolete policies were one of the biggest thorns he had to endure as prime minister. Justin Trudeau has not yet learned how NATO contravenes the basic idea of nuclear disarmament, for he called the negotiations that led to the adoption of the Prohibition Treaty "[useless.](#)" And his government has continued to use NATO membership as a block to the new treaty.

COVID-19 has upended the world order. It has dramatically shown the uselessness of piling up military hardware to provide human security. Many steps need to be taken to boost cooperative security. One of the most important would be to renounce nuclear weapons. That is what the Prohibition Treaty does. The nuclear weapons states' plan to spend \$1-trillion this decade on nuclear weapons is an outrage to a humanity crying out for resources to survive against the coronavirus.

The seven former Canadian high officials—all of them Liberals—have pulled the rug out from under the Liberal government's pathetic excuse for not signing the Prohibition Treaty. These seven are not alone among prominent Canadians calling for this action.

Other signatories include: John Polanyi, Ed Broadbent, John English, Gerry Barr, Bruce Kidd, Margaret MacMillan, Stephen Lewis, Ernie Regehr, Jennifer Simons, Clayton Ruby, Jane Urquhart, and many other distinguished recipients of the Order of Canada who have signed a letter to Prime Minister Trudeau by Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention, calling for Canada to make nuclear disarmament “a national priority.”

Another civil society organization, the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, representing 16 national organizations, wants Canada “to take a leadership role within NATO” to create the conditions for a nuclear weapons-free world. This was exactly what the House of Commons Committee on National Defence unanimously recommended in 2018.

Justin Trudeau and his deputy, Chrystia Freeland, should now look around and see what important people in the country are saying to them. Not least their own former colleagues.

*Former Senator Douglas Roche was also Canadian ambassador for disarmament.*

**The Hill Times**