

The Legacy of Douglas Roche

I Demand a World of Peace

Editor's Note: Douglas Roche, the founding editor of the Western Catholic Reporter who went on to become a parliamentarian and diplomat and a leading Canadian advocate for nuclear disarmament, turns 90 years old in June 2019. ICN asked him to write a brief memoir of his public life that could be considered his legacy.

I never dreamed when I started my public career almost a half century ago that nuclear disarmament would become the central focus of my work. When I was first elected to Parliament in 1972, I specialized in the development issues of what we then called the “Third World,” that vast sea of humanity in Africa, Asia and Latin America that had, for the most part, been exploited by ravaging colonialists and needed, desperately, to connect to a new international economic order. I studied the lives of an Ibo school teacher in Nigeria, a Communist labour leader in Venezuela, a farmer in the rice paddies of Kerala, India. One day in Bangladesh, a mother of six children and who lived a life of extreme poverty, offered me the only delicacy at hand, a glass of warm palm date juice. That woman taught me about humanity.

Then, in the late 1970s, I visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki for the first of what would become repeated visits. I came face-to-face with the *hibakusha* and the terrible scenes of suffering in the museums. I saw the photos of whole blocks completely obliterated, the charred clothing, and the depictions of survivors, their burnt

skin hanging from their arms and heads. In a two-kilometre radius from the centre of Hiroshima, the earth was so scorched that the city appeared to have been buried in molten lava. What made the horror even more unbearable was a huge globe in the centre of the museum showing all the places nuclear weapons are still stored, ready to inflict the same suffering all over again.

My political philosophy turned global. I became preoccupied with a central fact of modern life: we were entering a totally new period of our planet's history. For the first time, the opportunity existed to bring about a better life with larger freedom for the world's people. Yet the situation was tragically ironic: never before had we had the potential to free the world from the threats of hunger and war, but never was the world so hungry and the threat of war more monstrous. Yet we went on, seeking out our self-interest, oblivious to the depths of the danger or the magnificence of the challenge. I found the words of the poet T.S. Eliot stunningly accurate: *"Here were decent godless people, Their only monument the asphalt road. And a thousand lost golf balls."*

In 1982, I received an invitation from the Canadian Association of the Club of Rome to give a paper, "Development in the Year 2000." The assignment challenged me. How did I know what would happen nearly two decades into the future? I decided to take a couple of months to research the subject as best I could. The more I poured over statistics and reports the more I found the world painfully off-balance: opulently rich in the forces of death, yet poor in providing for the needs of human lives. Behind the statistical shadows of income disparities, inflation and repressed growth were hundreds of millions of individuals trapped by shocking neglect. I found this social deficit a threat to world security because the festering problems, neglected in favour of armed might, promised rising public anger and social upheaval.

No indicator more graphically showed the incredible destructive power loose in the world than the many thousands of nuclear weapons, whose combined power was a million times greater than the Hiroshima bomb. I came to the conclusion that a breakthrough in development for all of humanity would not come while military expenditures were so high. Excessive militarism impeded human development.

My shift in thinking occurred just as Parliament's Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence conducted a special study on security and disarmament. The U.S.-Soviet Union nuclear arms race was flaring out of control. With some colleagues on the committee, I wanted Canada to support a nuclear freeze, but the majority out-voted us. I authored a minority report signed by six members of the committee. "The development of still more fire power never ceases," we wrote. The minority report was hailed by disarmament groups across the country and denounced by U.S. supporters in Parliament.

The Canadian government, surprisingly, named me a consultant to the Canadian delegation to the 1982 U.N. Special Session on Disarmament, which, unfortunately, was road-blocked in trying to formulate a time-bound comprehensive program of disarmament by the intractability of the two nuclear superpowers. One million people marched from the U.N. to Central Park in New York in a massive demonstration of protest against nuclear buildups.

I became chairman of Parliamentarians for Global Action, a network of parliamentarians from around the world, whose first major project was the Six-Nation Initiative, which sought to move key states to take their anti-nuclear weapons protests directly to Washington and Moscow. This work did not enhance my domestic political life. World politics had become so distorted that anyone who advanced the cause of development and disarmament, the two great building blocks of the structure of peace, was seen as a radical. Anyone who pleaded for sanity in

the use of the world's resources to build up humanity rather than the arsenals of war was considered idealistic.

I was now so deeply immersed in the human security issues that I decided I wanted to work in this field full-time. I did not run in the next election, and when a new government was formed, suddenly I was appointed Canada's Ambassador for Disarmament. I found myself at the U.N. in New York chairing the Western ambassadors dealing with the disarmament agenda and becoming Chairman of the U.N. Disarmament Committee. Outwardly defending Canadian nuclear policies while inwardly trying to change them required some artfulness.

I have not to this day felt any antipathy to those in the government who did not see the world as I did. I had had special experiences that formed my view that long-term benefits to humanity require higher societal standards to protect the next generations from the dehumanizing force of endless nuclear arms buildups, the rich-poor gap, human rights violations and destruction of the environment. Short-range "practical politics" just cannot produce a long-range survivalist ethic.

So when the term of my appointment expired, I did not seek renewal. I returned to private life, at least I thought I was. But, in 1998, the Senate of Canada beckoned and here, as an Independent, I plunged back into nuclear disarmament work, particularly as Chairman of the Middle Powers Initiative. I took many MPI delegations to capitals to push the middle power states to be more aggressive in demanding that the nuclear powers honour their legal obligations to commence comprehensive negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The Non-Proliferation Review Conferences of 2000 and 2010 produced some hope that the world would turn away from nuclear Armageddon. But the current scene has turned bleak. The money the major powers are now spending on nuclear weapons modernization is unconscionable. The U.N. rules-based system ap-

pears upended. But the humanitarian forces that brought about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons have shown us that hope is very much alive.

The military-industrial complex is still a colossus to be fought. But the trendiness of history are on our side. Slowly, wrenchingly, humanity is moving from the old culture of war to a new culture of peace. We now understand better that the elimination of nuclear weapons is inextricably linked to the building of a new architecture for peace that includes resolving the climate change crisis, economic and social development through the Sustainable Development Goals and the advancement of the human rights agenda everywhere. The agenda for peace is huge and we must respond to the new generations already crying for social justice in the world.

The world is changing before our eyes. What a magnificent time to be alive. What a privilege it is to be part of this process. What a blessing I have in my health. So I may be 90 years old, but I'm not quitting. As long as God gives me the strength, I'll be there — at my computer, at a microphone, at a meeting — arguing passionately for a world I know we can have. A world without nuclear weapons, with economic and social justice, with environmental protection, with the human right to peace emblazoned on every public policy. I demand a world of peace.

