

I Refuse to Wait:

The Role of Canada in Banning Nuclear Weapons

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This conference is premised on the idea that a Nuclear Weapons Convention is not only possible but necessary, and it is our task in this panel to examine the role of Canada.

Let us begin by paying tribute to those Canadian parliamentarians and officials who, through the years, have worked creatively in support of policies aimed at curbing nuclear weapons. Canada's scientific and political work advancing a set of verification principles set a U.N. standard. One can only wish that such leadership had been given a higher continuing priority.

Canada's official position on a Nuclear Weapons Convention was stated March 9, 2011 by Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon: "Canada supports the achievement of a world free of nuclear weapons, and recognizes the importance of nuclear disarmament and the growing impetus for a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Canada is not opposed to the pursuit of a comprehensive,

multilateral agreement banning nuclear weapons. However, we believe this goal is best built on a foundation of incremental agreements, such as the CTBT and a future FMCT...” Canada’s position can be characterized as a Nuclear Weapons Convention if necessary, but not necessarily a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Mackenzie King lives.

In forty years’ working in this field, I have learned one overwhelming fact: confining nuclear disarmament to a series of incremental steps will never achieve the elimination of nuclear weapons. Proponents of the step-by-step approach see elimination only as an “eventual” goal. But this approach is a trap for the world. Despite incremental steps, modernization programs by the nuclear weapons states drive forward the nuclear arms race, and keep “eventual” so far over the horizon as to be meaningless. In retaining “eventual,” nuclear defenders will so solidify the justification for nuclear weapons that proliferation to more states is bound to occur, and the more proliferation in the years and decades ahead the harder it will be even to claim that nuclear disarmament has legitimacy. The double standard of trying to stop the spread of nuclear weapons while allowing the nuclear powers to retain their guarantees that nuclear disarmament will always be but a dream.

A clearly defined goal must be set – and that is what a Nuclear Weapons Convention does. It is urgent to move beyond

“eventual” and give the world a precise plan for the construction of a legal ban on all nuclear weapons.

I refuse to wait until a nuclear weapons attack obliterates a city before starting negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

I refuse to wait until a nuclear explosion causes international panic through the killing of millions and the shutdown of food, water, medical and transportation systems.

I refuse to wait until cooperative world politics breaks down completely under the weight of nuclear weapons hegemony.

Canada should be in the forefront, not a wallflower, in the movement now building up for a Nuclear Weapons Convention. The 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty affirmed that “all states need to make special efforts to establish the necessary framework to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons.”

At the U.N., two-thirds of all national governments have voted in favour of negotiating a convention. In 21 countries, including the five major nuclear powers, polls show that 76 per cent of people support the negotiation of a ban. The European Parliament has voted for a convention, along with a number of national parliaments. Mayors for Peace, comprising more than

4,500 cities around the world, is campaigning for it. Long lists of non-governmental organizations want it. In Japan, 14 million people signed a petition for it. The Secretary-General of the United Nations is campaigning for it. There is no doubt that historical momentum is building up.

The reluctance of the Government of Canada in stepping forward with a commitment to start working on a Nuclear Weapons Convention calls into question the state of democracy in our own country. Consider what has happened.

For the first time in Canadian history, a substantive motion on nuclear disarmament has been unanimously adopted by both the Senate and House of Commons. The motion endorsed Ban Ki-moon's Five-Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament and encouraged the Canadian government to "engage in negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention." It also called on the government "to deploy a major worldwide Canadian diplomatic initiative" for nuclear disarmament. Joint motions in both chambers occur from time to time, but never has there been one that so substantively addressed the nuclear weapons problem. The will of Canada's Parliament is very clear.

The motion was stimulated by 550 members of the Order of Canada, who called on Canada to join a new worldwide campaign for international negotiations to achieve a Nuclear Weapons

convention. This action by prestigious Canadians cutting across all walks of life was also unprecedented.

In the public at large, there is a strong desire for an enforceable ban on all nuclear weapons. In a 2008 poll sponsored by The Simons Foundation and conducted by Environics Research, 88 percent of Canadians said they would support an enforceable agreement eliminating all nuclear weapons. The poll reported: “Canadians believe that nuclear weapons have made the world a more dangerous place, with the greatest threat coming from terrorist attacks. There is overwhelming public support among Canadians for the complete elimination of the world's nuclear weapons.”

Parliament, the Order of Canada, the public at large – what more needs to be done to move the Canadian government? Is the government listening to the people and their parliamentary representatives? Continued resistance to moving forward, even in a preparatory way, on constructing a global ban on nuclear weapons will leave the government open to the charge of thwarting the will of the people.

Where is the opposition to a legal ban coming from? What is holding back the Canadian government?

The first place to look is NATO. After decades of holding that nuclear weapons were “essential,” NATO has dropped that

word , but still holds that its strategic nuclear forces still provide the “supreme guarantee of security.” In the 2010 Strategic Concept, NATO said: “Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of our overall strategy. The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.”

The Cold War doctrine of nuclear deterrence still stands in the way of a legal ban on nuclear weapons. More than a decade ago, Canada tried to bring NATO’s nuclear policies into the post-Cold War era, but was rebuffed. Today, a number of leading states, notably Germany and Norway, are challenging NATO’s nuclear policies; they need the support of Canada. NATO itself has said: “We are resolved to seek a safer world for all and to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons.” Let Canada take up this challenge.

This conference should say to the Canadian government: how do you intend – in the words of the unanimous motion – “to deploy a major worldwide Canadian diplomatic initiative” for nuclear disarmament? In fulfillment of this obligation, Canada should give strong support to resolutions at the U.N. seeking to start negotiations and consider hosting a preparatory meeting open to all

states that want to move forward on a global legal ban.

With solid credentials in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, NATO, La Francophonie, the Commonwealth as well as trusted relationships with the US, the UK and France, Canada is instrumentally placed to play a role in hosting an initial meeting. It was this kind of Canadian government invitation to governments to come to Ottawa in 1996 that led to the Anti-Personnel Landmines Treaty.

Since President Obama himself is such an ardent advocate of a nuclear weapons free world, it is highly likely the US would attend a preparatory meeting in Ottawa. China has already voted at the UN for negotiations on a Nuclear Weapons Convention to begin and would likely attend. The U.K. is moving in this direction. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has committed his country to global negotiations. Within NATO, Germany and Norway are calling for stronger nuclear disarmament measures. Austria and Switzerland have explicitly called for a start on a convention. The New Agenda Coalition countries – Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden – are deeply committed to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The Canadian government naturally would want “good company” for a meeting in Ottawa. The chances are excellent that it would be proud of the guest list. Working with Ban Ki-moon to

bring governments to Ottawa to start work on the foremost security issue in the world would be a brilliant act.

For many years, nuclear disarmament has been a desultory process, doing little to stir public imagination. But now an attractive and single-focused idea – a Nuclear Weapons Convention – is here. It provides the way to rid the world of all nuclear weapons in a safe and secure way. And Canadian hospitality can lead the way.
