

The Power of Parliamentarians in Abolishing Nuclear Weapons

Address by Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

**To Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation
and Disarmament**

“Climbing the Mountain” Conference

Washington, D.C., February 26, 2014

At first glance, the elimination of nuclear weapons appears to be a hopeless case. The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva has been paralyzed for many years. The Non-Proliferation Treaty is in crisis. The major nuclear weapons states refuse to enter into comprehensive negotiations for nuclear disarmament and are even boycotting international meetings designed to put world attention on the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of the use of nuclear weapons. The nuclear weapons states are giving the back of their hand to the rest of the world. Not a cheery outlook.

But look a little deeper. Two-thirds of the nations of the world have voted for negotiations to begin on a global legal ban on nuclear weapons. Two weeks ago, 146 nations and scores of academics and civil society activists assembled in Nayarit, Mexico to examine the staggering health, economic, environment, food and transportation effects of any nuclear

detonation – accidental or deliberate. A UN High-Level International Conference on nuclear disarmament will be convened in 2018, and September 26 every year from now on will be observed as the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.

The march of history is moving against the possession, not only the use, of nuclear weapons by any state. The nuclear weapons states are trying to block this march before it acquires any more momentum. But they will fail. They can stall the nuclear disarmament processes, but they cannot obliterate the transformation moment in human history now occurring.

The reason that the nuclear disarmament movement is stronger than it appears on the surface is that it stems the gradual awakening of conscience taking place in the world. Driven forward by science and technology and a new understanding of the inherency of human rights, an integration of humanity is occurring. Not only do we know one another across what used to be great divides, but we also know that we need one another for common survival. There is a new caring for the human condition and the state of the planet evident in such programs as the Millennium Development Goals. This is the awakening of a global conscience.

This has already produced a huge advance for humanity: the growing understanding in the public that war is futile. The rationale and appetite for war are disappearing. That would have seemed impossible in the 20th century, let alone the 19th. The public rejection of war as a means of resolving conflict – seen most recently in the question of military intervention in Syria – has enormous ramifications for how society will conduct its affairs. The Responsibility to Protect doctrine is undergoing new

analyses, including the threat posed by the possession of nuclear weapons, to determine the circumstances when it can be properly used to save lives.

I am not predicting global harmony. The tentacles of the military-industrial complex are still strong. Too much political leadership is pusillanimous. Local crises have a way of becoming catastrophic. The future cannot be predicted. We have lost opportunities before, notably the singular moment when the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War ended, that prescient leaders would have seized on and begun to build the structures for a new world order. But I am saying that the world, soured on the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq, has finally righted itself and is on course to make inter-state wars a relic of the past.

Two factors are producing better prospects for world peace: accountability and prevention. We never used to hear much about governments accounting to publics for their actions on the great questions of war and peace. Now, with the spread of human rights, empowered civil society activists are holding their governments accountable for participation in the global strategies for human development. These global strategies, apparent in diverse fields, from genocide prevention to the involvement of women in mediation projects, foster the prevention of conflict.

This higher level of thinking is bringing a new potency to the nuclear disarmament debate. Increasingly, nuclear weapons are seen not as instruments of state security but as violators of human security. More and more, it is becoming apparent that nuclear weapons and human rights cannot co-exist on the planet. But governments are slow to adopt policies based on the new understanding of the requirements for human security. Thus, we are still living in a two-class world in which the powerful aggrandize unto

themselves nuclear weapons while proscribing their acquisition by other states. We face the danger of the proliferation of nuclear weapons because the powerful nuclear states refuse to use their authority to build a specific law outlawing all nuclear weapons, and continue to diminish the 1996 conclusion of the International Court of Justice that the threat or use of nuclear weapons is generally illegal and that all states have a duty to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons.

This thinking is feeding a movement now building up across the world to commence a diplomatic process for nuclear weapons abolition even without the immediate cooperation of the nuclear powers. The Nayarit conference and its follow-up meeting in Vienna later this year, provide and impetus to commence such a process.. Governments seeking comprehensive negotiations for a global legal ban on nuclear weapons must now choose between starting a diplomatic process to outlaw nuclear weapons without the participation of the nuclear weapons states or constrain their ambitions by working solely within the confines of the NPT and the Conference on Disarmament where the nuclear weapons states are a constant debilitating influence.

My experience leads me to choose starting a process in which like-minded states begin preparatory work with the specific intention of building a global law. This means identifying the legal, technical, political and institutional requisites for a nuclear weapons free world as the basis for negotiating a legal ban on nuclear weapons. It will undoubtedly be a long process, but the alternative, a step-by-step process, will continue to be foiled by the powerful states, which have connived to block any meaningful progress since the NPT came into force in 1970. I urge parliamentarians to

use their access to power and introduce in every Parliament in the world a resolution calling for immediate work to begin on a global framework to prohibit the production, testing, possession and use of nuclear weapons by all states, and provide for their elimination under effective verification.

Advocacy by parliamentarians works. Parliamentarians are well placed not only to lobby for new initiatives but to follow through on their implementation. They are uniquely placed to challenge present policies, present alternatives and generally hold governments accountable. Parliamentarians hold more power than they often realize.

In my early years in the Canadian parliament, when I served as chairman of Parliamentarians for Global Action, I led delegations of parliamentarians to Moscow and Washington to plead with the superpowers of the day to take serious steps toward nuclear disarmament. Our work led to the formation of the Six-Nation Initiative. This was a cooperative effort by the leaders of India, Mexico, Argentina, Sweden, Greece and Tanzania, who held summit meetings urging the nuclear powers to halt production of their nuclear stocks. Gorbachev later said the Six-Nation Initiative was a key factor in the achievement of the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which eliminated a whole class of medium-range nuclear missiles.

Parliamentarians for Global Action developed into a network of 1,000 parliamentarians in 130 countries and branched out on an expanded list of global issues, such as fostering democracy, conflict prevention and management, international law and human rights, population, and environment. The organization was responsible for getting the negotiations started for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and supplied the muscle to get many governments to sign onto the International Criminal Court and the

2013 Arms Trade Treaty.

In latter years, a new association of legislators, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, has been formed and I am proud to have been its first Chairman. I congratulate Senator Ed Markey for assembling in Washington today this important gathering of legislators. Under the leadership of Alyn Ware, PNND has attracted about 800 legislators in 56 countries. It collaborated with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, a huge umbrella group of parliaments in 162 countries, in producing a handbook for parliamentarians explaining the non-proliferation and disarmament issues. This is a form of leadership that doesn't make headlines but is extremely effective. The development of associations like Parliamentarians for Global Action and Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament is contributing significantly to expanded political leadership.

The voice of parliamentarians may in the future become stronger if the Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly takes hold. The campaign hopes that some day citizens of all countries would be able to directly elect their representatives to sit in a new assembly at the UN and legislate global policies. This may not happen until we reach another stage of history, but a transitional step could be the selection of delegates from national parliaments, who would be empowered to sit in a new assembly at the UN and raise issues directly with the Security Council. The European Parliament, in which direct election of its 766 members takes place in the constituent countries, offers a precedent for a global parliamentary assembly.

Even without waiting for future developments to enhance global governance, parliamentarians today can and must use their unique position in government structures to push for humanitarian policies to protect life on

earth. Close the rich-poor gap. Stop global warming. No more nuclear weapons. That is the stuff of political leadership.