

Influx of women into nuclear disarmament gives us hope, unless they work for a NATO country

By DOUGLAS ROCHE AUGUST 10, 2022

The women who make and present Canadian policy on nuclear disarmament stick to soft truisms and shun the bold actions called for by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who opened the conference, warning: 'Humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation,' writes Douglas Roche.



Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly, left, Defence Minister Anita Anand, and Canadian Ambassador Leslie Norton. Despite the enormous danger to the world from the aggressive nuclear modernization programs of the nuclear powers, who intend to spend billions of dollars to retain their nuclear arsenals for the rest of this century, the Canadian government still refuses to support comprehensive, time-bound negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons, writes Douglas

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EDMONTON—At 10 a.m. on Aug. 4, the fourth day of the month-long Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, Canadian Ambassador Leslie Norton stepped to the green marble podium of the UN General Assembly in New York and delivered a speech on behalf of 67 nations. A maple leaf broach emblazoned on her jacket, the ambassador called for “the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women across all disarmament processes.”

Improving gender diversity and “mainstreaming” gender perspectives into nuclear policy-making will strengthen the treaty process, she said. I believe this to be true as a general statement, but Ambassador Norton, who has had an admirable diplomatic career in humanitarian issues, unwittingly invited a spotlight on the performance of Canadian women officials working on nuclear disarmament. What the spotlight reveals is not complimentary.

In 2017, Chrystia Freeland, then foreign minister, proclaimed a feminist foreign policy, asserting that the world would be a safer place through the promotion of feminism, affirming the rights of women and girls, and particularly involving women as participants in the development of the human security agenda. This was followed up by the introduction of the Feminist International Assistance Policy. Canada became a world leader in advancing the interests of women in achieving peace and security.

This brought Ambassador Norton to the forefront at the NPT conference. Norton is by no means a singular female in the Canadian security policy arena. In addition to the foreign minister, Mélanie Joly, and the defence minister, Anita Anand, the three top security officials at Global Affairs Canada are all women.

Criticizing the performance of Canadian women in high positions in the Government of Canada is a risky thing for an older man such as myself to do, especially since I believe women generally bring a more humane understanding to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear warfare than men do.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which won the Nobel Peace Prize for its catalytic work in developing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, is run mostly by women. A young woman from Ukraine, Yelyzaveta Khodorovska, gave an outstanding speech at the NPT conference condemning nuclear deterrence policies. The Irish minister of state, Hildegard Naughton, criticized both the U.S. and Iran for their conduct, which has led to a breakdown in the international agreement ensuring Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons. The most penetrating analyses of the complicated NPT process were done by two women, Ray Acheson and Allison Pytlak, of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

But the women who make and present Canadian policy on nuclear disarmament stick to soft truisms and shun the bold actions called for by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who opened the conference, warning: “Humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation.” Despite the enormous danger to the world from the aggressive nuclear modernization programs of the nuclear powers, who intend to spend billions of dollars to retain their nuclear arsenals for the rest of this century, the Canadian government still refuses to support comprehensive, time-bound negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

It’s worse than that. Foreign Minister Joly didn’t even show up at the NPT conference, which was attended by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Christin Linde, to name but a few of the luminaries of the 191 states belonging to the NPT.

It cannot be said that the Canadian women officials I have named do not care about nuclear disarmament. But the policies they are carrying out are no different from those of their male predecessors. In other words, they have not broken out of the outmoded, and wrong-headed, nuclear weapons policies of NATO, whose spokesperson—a woman—had the effrontery to go before the NPT conference and once again oppose the Prohibition Treaty, which has so far been ratified by 66 states. When NATO speaks, Canada—male or female—goes mute.

A recent Oxford International Affairs study (written by two women, Laura Rose Brown and Laura Considine), made the ironic point that Canada, while professing the values of a feminist foreign policy, is nonetheless committed to NATO’s nuclear deterrence policies. The authors write: “The question of whether a gender-sensitive approach can fit into a nuclear policy space whose core institutions rely on an acceptance of the practice of nuclear deterrence, and if so how, is one that has so far been avoided.”

Let it not be said that Canada is doing nothing for nuclear disarmament. The Canadian speeches, in the early rounds of the conference, drew attention to Canada’s ongoing work in three groupings of states: the Stockholm Initiative, which provides a pathway of “stepping stones” to advance nuclear disarmament; the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative, which poses measures to reduce the risks of nuclear weapons; the Vienna Group of 10, which deals with the peaceful use of nuclear energy. None of these groups, however, addresses the outright delegitimization of nuclear weapons, as the Prohibition Treaty does, nor do they even dare to call out the U.S. for maintaining tactical nuclear weapons on the soil of five European countries, a constant violation of the goals of the NPT.

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Former Senator Douglas Roche headed the Canadian delegation to the 1985 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

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