



The Senate of Canada  
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CANADA

# **The Right to Peace**

**By Senator Douglas Roche, O.C.**

**Address to Royal Roads University Convocation**

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I thank Royal Roads University for your wonderful honour to me, which I will try hard to live up to. It doesn't seem fair that this year's graduates have had to work so hard to get their degrees while I receive mine just by showing up. That life is not fair is, of course, one of the great lessons that everyone learns sooner or later. But the effort to make life fairer is what I want to speak about for a few minutes. If I speak longer than just a few minutes, it will certainly be unfair to the graduates, families and friends who deserve the celebration awaiting.

I want to speak about peace, and more precisely the human right to peace. You may quickly say: "What right?" Is not our world fractured by wars, terrorism, poverty, and countless human rights abuses? Is there not suffering on massive scales in societies torn by conflict? Is there not duplicity in governments that speak of peace but prepare for war?

Our world is both terrible and wonderful at the same time: the news of another suicide bomber and a glorious sunset; the AIDS pandemic in

Africa and another medical breakthrough to save lives; a shooting in yet another school by a deranged killer and the United Nations Summit to improve the lives of children.

Despite its beauty and creativity, the world continues to be dragged down by violence, intolerance, and exploitation. This is the stuff of the daily headlines. It is hard not to become discouraged that we can ever make this Earth a home fit for all. Some have become cynical even about the word “peace.” Others regard it as a sentimental concept.

I would like to speak against this current of thought that relegates peace to only a distant goal. The curve of history is actually bringing progress toward peace: nuclear weapons are being cut; Russia and NATO have become partners; the International Criminal Court to prosecute mass murderers is coming into existence.

The time has come to affirm that peace is a pragmatic necessity, that every human being has a right to peace, and that much important work is being done to make the achievement of peace a reality.

In an age when we have perfected weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical, biological – it is imperative to get these weapons under control and then eliminate them before a catastrophe of monumental

proportions occurs. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, should serve as a wake-up call to build a body of enforceable international law so that terrorists cannot get access to weapons of mass destruction.

Vital as it is for peace, the work of stopping the spread of weapons is not enough. We must also deal with the causes of alienation and conflict. Tomorrow's terrorists are the children in today's refugee camps and shantytowns. Poverty, squalor, lack of education and health facilities – these are the seeds of future conflicts. Governments must properly fund the development process instead of spending so much money on arms. It staggers the imagination to envision how many schools, water and sanitation plants, health facilities and environmental clean-up operations could be built with just a fraction of the \$800 billion that governments spend on arms every year.

Moving governments to stop the spread of weapons and root out the causes of wars may seem a Herculean task. But many people are, in fact, devoting their energies to these goals. That is the good news, perhaps not fully appreciated but real nonetheless. And it provides us with a basis for hope that the combination of a blossoming of human intelligence and the

rise of an informed, dedicated civil society can move our society forward to enduring peace.

There are many manifestations of this ongoing work. To mention only one: The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict has found that deadly conflict is not inevitable and that violence does not inexorably emerge from human interaction. It has also found that the need to prevent deadly conflict is both urgent and possible.

Though terrible suffering occurred, it is a fact that warring parties have put down their arms in El Salvador, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, South Africa, Guatemala and the Philippines. Peace accords in the Middle East and Northern Ireland seem elusive, but not even ancient enmities can stand forever in the way once the idea of peace takes hold in the minds of people.

What does peace mean to me? Here is what I want for a peaceful world.

I want a world that is human-centered and genuinely democratic, a world that builds and protects peace, equality, justice and development. I want a world where human security, as envisioned in the principles of the United Nations Charter, replaces armaments, violent conflict and wars. I

want a world where everyone lives in a clean environment with a fair distribution of the earth's resources and where human rights are protected by a body of international law.

I have traveled widely through every region of the world, and I have found that the desires of most people of every race, religion and background are no different than my own desires. I have spent time with a farmer in Kerala, India; an Ibo teacher in Nigeria; a labour leader in Venezuela. I have talked to the mothers of destitute children in India and engaged with disarmament diplomats at the U.N. These experiences have made a profound impression on me and made me a strong advocate of a culture of peace.

Too many governments have given people a culture of war when they really long for a culture of peace. It is not violence that people want. It is non-violence.

I was recently at the U.N. for a celebration put on by the organization known as the Season for Non-Violence. This U.S. organization of civil society leaders annually observes the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Jr. with events to create an awareness of nonviolence principles and to practice ways to heal and bring peace into our lives and

communities. The grandchildren of Gandhi and the daughter of King spoke of their hopes that nonviolence be taught at every level in our societies. The U.N. room, jammed with people from many walks of life, reverberated with the enthusiasm for nonviolence.

The culture of peace is not something vague or undefined. It is very precise indeed. It is based on values that include: respect for life and for all human rights; rejection of violence in all its forms; devotion to the principles of freedom, justice, democracy, tolerance, pluralism, and cultural diversity.

Work on realizing the human right to peace by extending knowledge about a culture of peace has been undertaken by UNESCO – the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization, which has sponsored hundreds of projects all over the world.

UNESCO has also drafted a Declaration on the Human Right to Peace. It asserts that war, armed conflicts, violence and insecurity are intrinsically incompatible with the human right to peace, and stresses that peace is not only a human right but also a duty. Through its Culture of Peace initiative, UNESCO hopes to give life to previous U.N. statements that: “Every nation and every human being, regardless of race, conscience, language or sex, has the inherent right to live in peace.”

Obviously, the world community has much work to do before the “right to peace” is codified in the same way that the political and civil and economic and social rights of people have been codified in the covenants to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But the fact that we have made this much progress in even recognizing and defining the right to peace is a sign of the advance of civilization. We will obtain the fullness of this right when we demand it and work to obtain it.

I want to emphasize: education is the key to public understanding and political action to actually obtain for every person the right to peace. That is what universities are for. Ideas matter at universities. But such work also belongs to each one of us in the daily education of our lives. It should be a daily effort for each of us to understand others better, to overcome biases and get at the sources of marginalization, indifference, resentment, and hatred. In short, peace will not be obtained only by institutional progress but by human love. This is the essence of the culture of peace and thus your great challenge as you go forward.

In this wonderful age of constant world-wide communication, we can download whole catalogues of information about planet Earth; but to make

peace a reality, we must also upload into our community the desires of the human heart.

When we both know enough and love enough, a culture of peace will finally overcome the culture of war. The world needs peace, and we can make peace of the world.