Expanding the Human Rights Agenda:
The Human Right to Peace

By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

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I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this honour tonight. To be

honoured by the John Humphrey Centre, which does such marvelous work in

raising the standards of human rights, is overwhelming. And to stand here, even in the shadow of that outstanding and unforgettable Canadian, John Humphrey, a man I knew and respected intensely, is beyond my dreams.

My first words to the John Humphrey Centre are: Go on with your work of advancing the human rights agenda. Expand it. Build on it. Never extinguish your dreams. Never lose your courage. Raise your voice for the full application of human rights in their civil and political and their economic and social aspects. Set your sights on the human right to peace.

My message to you is that the people of the world have a sacred right to peace. We must insist on this truth and let no one dissuade us from it by the false claims of "impracticality." Nothing is more practical. Gandhi showed the power of non-violent resistance to social injustice. Martin Luther King upheld non-violence to defeat segregation. Nelson Mandela overcame apartheid without a blood bath.

The time has come to resist the greatest social injustice – the institution of war. War causes starvation, deepens poverty, ruins environments, forces migrations of peoples, wrecks the rule of law, multiplies the gap between rich and poor, and causes prolonged misery for the most vulnerable people. War with its weapons of mass destruction will kill us all. The only way humanity can survive is by overcoming the culture of war, which has brought us to the unacceptable state of now being the authors of our own destruction.

Is it incongruous that I speak of the human right to peace at a time when the "war on terror" seems endless? My answer is: now is the time to speak up and say plainly that war will not stop terrorism. The war in Iraq is both a failure and a disaster. Only the full application, world-wide, of human rights to end the social injustices of poverty, discrimination and exploitation will curb the ability of terrorists to develop support for their causes. And only the full development of the rule of law will make it impossible for terrorists to inflict their carnage.

Our society needs to regain its confidence that the processes of peace can work. Instead, we are fed a daily diet of fear. We must wage war, we are told, to avert coming attacks. So world-wide military spending is going through the roof and this year will exceed $1 trillion. A ballistic missile defence system, costing $90 billion so far, is underway to construct a fortress North America.

The politics of fear is driving this excessive military agenda. The political structure of the United States is so consumed by fear of terrorism that politicians support policies that would have been unfathomable five years ago. For example, policies of pre-emptive war, new "usable" nuclear weapons, and the deprivation of human rights are now openly supported in Washington. It is time for Canada, a good neighbour to the U.S., to call on that country to return to its historic destiny of keeping the peace through the

implementation of international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We in Canada must not succumb to the politics of fear. We must espouse the politics of hope. The politics of fear builds walls and the politics of hope builds bridges. Fear closes doors and hope opens doors. Fear produces rigidity, hope inspires creativity.

It sometimes seems that the culture of peace can hardly be heard, let alone obtain the political attention and government funding to make an impression on electorates. In addition to being fearful, many are cynical about peace ever being achieved in such a turbulent world. The arms manufacturers, who mount such powerful lobbies in the legislative halls of Western countries, discount the elements of peace as so much naïveté. Worse, to challenge militarist thinking is to run the risk of being considered unpatriotic. The fences enclosing creative thinking are indeed high.

In the past, the machinery of war has not built the kind of world in which people everywhere can achieve human security. Why can it be expected to do so today? Rather, it is the slow, painstaking construction of a new culture of peace that offers hope for a better future. The values of such a culture are well worth the time developing them takes. The momentum of history, buttressed by new life-enhancing technologies, is on the side of the culture of peace.

What do I mean by a culture of peace? As outlined in U.N. and UNESCO documents, a culture of peace is an approach to life that seeks to transform the cultural tendencies toward war and violence into a culture where dialogue, respect, and fairness govern social relations. In this way, violence can be prevented through a more tolerant global ethic. The culture of peace uses education as an essential tool in fostering attitudes supportive of non-violence, cooperation and social justice. It promotes sustainable development for all, free human rights, and equality between men and women. It requires genuine democracy and the free flow of information. It leads to disarmament.

The culture of peace prepares the way for greater recognition of what the United Nations has already declared: "The peoples of our planet have a sacred right to peace." The Declaration on the Right of Peoples to Peace was first adopted by the U.N. in 1984. One does not need to be reminded of the countless deaths in wars that have occurred in the two decades following. Such a recounting does not invalidate the U.N. Declaration, it only underlines the point that this right needs to be better understood before procedures are developed to enforce it under the rule of law.

Despite the wars of our time, efforts are continuing at the U.N. to develop the legal basis for the right to peace, but they still lack the necessary Western backing. And I am sorry to say that, in this instance, our own country of Canada is shying away from supporting current resolutions that

would affirm the right to peace and that resources released through disarmament measures should be devoted to the economic and social development of all peoples, particularly those in developing countries.

I believe that Canadians would readily support the right to peace if they knew more about it. The pioneering work at the U.N. has divided the right to peace into three inter-related components. The first defines peace as a human right, understanding that all human beings have a right to peace inherent in their humanity. War and violence of any kind, including insecurity, are considered "intrinsically incompatible" with the human right to peace. The second elaborates on the duty of all global actors, including individuals, to contribute to the maintenance and construction of peace. The third emphasizes the culture of peace as the route to achieving the global implementation of the right to peace.

I would like to encourage the John Humphrey Centre to make better known this ongoing work at the U.N. to codify the human right to peace. Through your programmes, you can expand public understanding of this concept and make a great contribution to strengthening the base of public support for forward moves by the Government of Canada.

Never doubt the ability of your important organization, bearing such an illustrious name, to influence the development of public policy on human rights issues. You deserve the financial support of important contributors to make this happen.

If, in previous times, it could be said that humanity did not possess the tools of peace but only the tools of war, that condition no longer exists. The U.N. gives us the base of international law to resolve human conflict. No government or group can any longer legitimately employ the old concept of a "just war" in pursuit of its goals.

We have not yet reached sufficient maturity of civilization to enforce the right to peace. Governments, at least some of them, are still too strong and are able to overcome the wishes of those who have turned against war. But this situation will not prevail forever. It will give way to those who demand the right to peace, just as the forces of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid gave way when the opposition became strong enough.

That is why developing the elements of a culture of peace – education, sustainable development, respect for all human rights, equality between men and women, democratic participation, understanding and tolerance, free flow of information, and human security for all – is so important. A culture of peace will not only make the world a more human place, it will lead inexorably to the acquisition of the human right to peace.

Future generations, when they have tasted the fruit of a culture of peace, will recognize almost intuitively that peace is their right. They will demand it. Our role, as the twenty-first century begins, is to nourish the seeds of peace so that the blossom appears.