

Building a world community

mondial

Special Election Section
September 2015

Hitting the re-set button: Canada's role in arms control and disarmament

By Douglas Roche

If, or when, a new political day dawns on Canada, there will not be a moment to lose to regain our country's involvement in the long struggle to free the world of the specter of nuclear weapons.

What, exactly, should a new Canadian government do? The first move should be to give a new priority to the subject. The continued existence of 15,850 nuclear weapons, 1,800 of them kept in a state of high operational alert, a broken Non-Proliferation Treaty, the storm clouds over a diplomatic deal to keep Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon are all front and centre on the world political stage. So too is a new humanitarian movement, built on huge conferences of governments and civil society in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna, which shows the "catastrophic humanitarian consequences" of any use of nuclear weapons. It has led, so far, to 107 states signing the Humanitarian Pledge "to identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons." All of this forms the run-up to a 2018 UN International Conference on Nuclear Disarmament.

A changed Canadian government attitude would give a priority to Canadian involvement with like-minded states now searching for the best legal route to a nuclear weapons-free world. Instead of shunning such work, as in the recent past, the government would embrace it and begin by implementing the 2010 unanimous motion in Parliament, which supported the UN Secretary-General's call for a Nuclear Weapons Convention and urged the government to take a major worldwide diplomatic initiative for nuclear disarmament.

A positive attitude to this work by a new government would re-energize parliamentary and civil society work in the development of public opinion to support Canada's efforts. Just changing the angle of the government's vision from negative obstruction to positive involvement would set a new course for Canadian action.

The changed angle of vision could be signaled by open support for the Iran nuclear deal as by far the best resolution of a verifiable way to keep Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon; signing the Humanitarian Pledge to show that Canada takes seriously the need to move away from

reliance on nuclear deterrence for global security; opening up a working relationship with the New Agenda Coalition, a group of middle power states seeking a way to start negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

These measures are, in government parlance, easily “doable,” when the government has the political will to take them.

This more holistic approach to nuclear disarmament would be a great improvement over the present slavish adherence to the discredited “step-by-step” approach, which has led, not to nuclear disarmament, but to the modernization programs of all the nuclear weapons states, which if unchecked, will carry their nuclear arsenals through the rest of the 21st century.

The draft Final Document of the [2015 NPT Review Conference](#) pointed to a new strategy. It contained a passage calling for a new working group to identify “legal provisions” to contribute to a nuclear weapons-free world. The Final Document required consensus to pass and, unfortunately, a dispute over a proposed conference to plan a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East derailed the whole NPT meeting. But the idea of an open-ended working group to plan legal work forward may yet survive at the UN General Assembly this fall. This would provide Canada an instant opportunity to roll up its sleeves and get to work.

Considering all the opportunities open to a revitalized Canada, the [Canadian Pugwash Group’s conference in July](#) at the Thinkers’ Lodge, Pugwash, N.S., recommended that Canada host an inclusive international meeting to explore effective legal measures for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. Such a meeting could elaborate elements of a working agenda for a multilateral process to achieve the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world. This is the kind of action Canada took in 1997 in convening interested states to start writing the successful Anti-Personnel Landmines Treaty.

The resistance of the nuclear weapons states (the P5) to the non-nuclear weapons states getting into active work for nuclear disarmament is, of course, well known. It takes courage to go up against the big boys, but the NPT has been explicit in affirming that all states have a responsibility to enter into this work. This means also challenging the NATO establishment, which still considers nuclear weapons the “supreme guarantee” of security despite the NPT’s “irrevocable undertaking” for elimination.

Canada, which once did inspiring, effective work on developing verification measures for arms control, can recover its leadership role and once again become a valued member of the international community whose leading members are working daily to find viable ways to peace in the 21st century. The rejoining of this effort with a changed attitude would be an accomplishment in itself.

A new government should move immediately to repair the damage done to Canada by its refusal, until now, to sign the Arms Trade Treaty, which has set new international standards for regulating the \$70 billion business that fuels conflict, undermines peace and security, threatens economic and social development, and causes widespread human suffering. With 130 states parties to the treaty (71 ratifications), the absence of Canada, for the spurious reason that it

would restrict domestic gun ownership, is a lamentable shirking of our international duty. This obduracy to the common good needs to be quickly swept away by a new government recognizing Canada's responsibilities to the world.

Similarly, quick action should be taken by a new government in closing the loophole Canada gave itself permitting Canadian soldiers in combined operations with allies to use cluster munitions. Such a provision, as 27 international lawyers and former ambassadors for disarmament have pointed out, undermines the legislation, which is aimed at ending cluster munitions. The fact that all Opposition parties in the House of Commons voted against this marred legislation indicates that a new government has plenty of scope to revise it.

A new day is ahead for Canada's role in arms control and disarmament. What counts is the political will to make changes.