

Canadian Government Clams Up on New Treaty

Editor's note: We are sharing this column because the writer so deftly skewers the absurdities of the official opposition to the new Treaty.

By Douglas Roche

EDMONTON, Alberta, Canada — With NATO breathing down its neck, the Government of Canada has clammed up on what it will say about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which entered into force January 22. The Treaty, endorsed by 122 nations in 2017, is a breakthrough because it bans the possession of nuclear weapons for those states adhering to it. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hailed the treaty as “historic,” adding that it will “form an important component of the nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation regime” and set a new global norm against nuclear weapons.

But NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg says the Prohibition Treaty “would undermine the security of our alliance,” and NATO has stiffened its opposition. I asked Global Affairs Canada how the opposite positions of the UN and NATO heads could be reconciled. I thought it was a reasonable question to put, since, on Oct. 26, 2020, the government said: “We acknowledge the widespread frustration with the pace of [NPT] efforts toward nuclear disarmament, which clearly motivated the negotiation of the [Prohibition Treaty].”

The government went coy and, in its answer, referred me to the “pragmatic approach” of the Non-Proliferation Treaty “that takes into consideration the security considerations of all states.” In other words: silence on the Prohibition Treaty. The government doesn’t want to talk about it. Why?

The reason is easy to discern. When the Canadian statement recognizing the reason for the Prohibition Treaty reached NATO headquarters, it added to the “soft tones” now coloring the response to the treaty in some NATO countries. A study reported by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace showed that, in several NATO states, significant numbers of citizens and civil society organizations and their political representatives strongly support

the treaty. In Belgium, 77 percent of the population is in favour of that country signing it. Fifty-six former high officials of NATO countries, including two former NATO secretaries-general, signed an open letter supporting the treaty.

With support building up, NATO struck back and, in December, the North Atlantic Council issued a withering denunciation of the [new] treaty on the grounds that the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty “remains the only credible path to nuclear disarmament.” NATO doubled down in its objection, saying it would “reject any attempt to delegitimize nuclear deterrence.”



Thus, NATO is intimidating countries like Canada, which had begun a move towards at least acknowledging the reasons for the Prohibition Treaty. It needs to be remembered that three NATO states (the US, the UK and France) possess nuclear weapons, five others host US nuclear weapons on their soil, and all NATO members subscribe to NATO policy that nuclear weapons are the “supreme guarantee” of security.

These states, including Canada, cling to the Non-Proliferation Treaty even though its major demand, comprehensive negotiation toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, has been ignored for 50 years.

Two former Canadian prime ministers (Jean Chrétien and the late John Turner), three former Canadian foreign ministers (Lloyd Axworthy, Bill Graham, John Manley) and two former Canadian defence ministers (Jean-Jacques Blais, John McCallum) have openly rebuked NATO’s moribund policies and supported the Prohibition Treaty. But the government won’t even respond to these leading Liberal [Party] figures.

Both Foreign Affairs Parliamentary Secretary Rob Oliphant and UN Ambassador Bob Rae declined to be interviewed for this column.

The government’s ambivalence has sparked the overnight formation of a coalition of Canadian activists, comprising 90 groups and 100 individuals, pushing the government to hold a parliamentary debate on the Prohibition Treaty, followed up by parliamentary committee hearings. Anton Wagner, leader of the coalition, says: “What brings all these organizations and individuals together is the concern that there is a great democratic deficit in Canada where Parliament and our political leaders refuse to debate the existential threat that nuclear weapons represent to human existence and civilization.”

The “democratic deficit” in Canada is shocking. The government is allowing NATO to bamboozle Canadians with its false nuclear deterrence doctrine. The Prohibition Treaty is an act of conscience by distressed governments and civil society leaders, and it deserves a hearing. Instead of ducking, the Canadian government should encourage a broad dialogue on how security can be maintained without nuclear weapons.

It should acknowledge the Prohibition Treaty and work with NATO to bring the organization into conformity with it.

But there will be some parliamentary action, at least. Shortly, Parliamentary Green Party Leader, Elizabeth May, will introduce a petition in the House, calling on Canada to accede to the Prohibition Treaty, and the government will have to respond.

At this tense moment, a new Canadian foreign minister, Marc Garneau, takes stage. I hope this highly praised former astronaut, the first Canadian in space, lives up to the belief he showed when, in opposition, he signed the call by Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention for “all member states of the United Nations — including Canada — to endorse, and begin negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention.”

— *Former Canadian Senator Douglas Roche wrote this commentary for the Ottawa, Ontario Hill Times. His latest book is Recovery: Peace Prospects in the Biden Era.*

Nuclear Weapons Treaty Ban Needs Bold Advocacy

Editorial

The newly established Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) finally prohibits the development, testing, possession, and deployment of nuclear weapons among nations that ratify it.

After 70 years of campaigns to “ban the bomb,” “freeze” the arms race, create “nuclear-free zones,” and curb nuclear weapons proliferation — and after dozens of agreements among nuclear-armed states in which the perpetrators granted themselves permission for their ghastly arsenals — the TPNW makes concrete, detailed, and indelible an absolute, globally recognized rejection of what’s been called “the ultimate evil.”

Profoundly, the TPNW goes further and specifically forbids the illogical, civilization-endangering practice of “nuclear deterrence” by explicitly outlawing its terrifying definitional essence — the threat to use nuclear weapons.

In addition, the treaty also explicitly recognizes victims and survivors of the dirty and deadly uses to which nuclear weapons have been put — the human radiation experiments and globe-contaminating testing of, and rehearsals for nuclear attacks — that require specific reparations and compensation measures.

As with other struggles for justice and peace that have lasted multiple generations — the abolition of slavery, torture, the death penalty, child labor — the TPNW’s campaigners call the new law a major breakthrough, but still just “the beginning of the end of nuclear weapons.”

The new ban treaty follows earlier international prohibitions that outlaw lesser weapons of mass destruction: the Geneva Protocol (outlawing gas warfare), the Hague Conventions (forbidding poisoned weapons), the Chemical Weapons Convention, the

Biological Weapons Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the (land) Mine Ban.

The new Treaty’s compelling language nearly stings the ears, like an ambulance siren or a fire alarm, blaring repudiation of the world’s most despicable and appalling weapons, devices whose horrifying effects differ from the previously banned arms only in that they exceed beyond comprehension the accumulated evil of all the rest. (Respects to Justice Jackson at Nuremberg)

The long-delayed arrival of the TPNW is evidence of the enormous anti-democratic political and financial power and influence that the giant military industries — the only beneficiaries of continuously rebuilding nuclear arsenals — wield over whole nation states. How else to explain the time it’s taken for the community of nations to finally add nuclear weapons to the list?

The scope and power of the TPNW — and even the doddering incoherence of its rejection by nuclear-armed states — are cause for great celebration. The treaty’s detailed, comprehensive articles themselves constitute the best rebuttal of the scofflaws’ reckless endangerment. From the preamble:

“Cognizant that the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons cannot be adequately addressed, transcend national borders, pose grave implications for human survival, the environment, socioeconomic development, the global economy, food security and the health of current and future generations, and have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation...”

Still, nuclear-armed states all insist that their plans and threats to commit atomic violence are legal. The *US Navy Field Manual* says, “There is at present no rule of international law expressly prohibiting States from the use of nuclear weapons in warfare. In the absence of express prohibition, the use of such weapons ... is permitted.”

No more. The TPNW rebukes and nullifies this artful dodge and its entry into force is a monumental accomplishment. Forbidding nuclear weapons by name is also a triumph of harrowing urgency, considering the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists’* “Doomsday Clock” having been set at 100 seconds to midnight.

Countries with nuclear arsenals ignored the UN negotiations that produced the

TPNW and they ignore the law. They and over 30 allies were led in a boycott of the talks by then US UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, who said the treaty would end up disarming the nations “trying to keep peace and safety.” While she spoke, the United States was militarily occupying or at war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Niger. Haley’s fairy tale didn’t fool 122 UN ambassadors that voted to adopt the treaty July 7, 2017, the 86 current Signatory States, or the 54 States Parties that have seen to its ratification.

Our broadcast and defense of the TPNW must now be emboldened and amplified to expand awareness, and the law’s mandate must be fearlessly employed to confront widespread ignorance, denial, and forgetfulness about not just nuclear weapons, but the establishment’s ongoing preparations for nuclear war. —*JL*