Nuclear Disarmament

Four MPs show how Canada could change the world

JIM CRESKEY

Four MPs, one from each party, came together last week on Parliament Hill, vowing to put Canada in the forefront of a practical plan that would lead to a worldwide nuclear weapons ban.

It’s an ambitious goal, but if this session’s visionary parliamentary partnership can vaporize around it—as these four MPs have proved is possible, and as it did in unanimous motion of the Commons and the Senate last year—it could have a chance. Of course, the four MPs—Conservative House of Commons defence critic Scott Armstrong, Liberal House of Commons foreign affairs critic Bob Rae, NDP counterpart Paul Dewar and Bloc Quebecois defence critic Claude Bachand—aren’t the only ones working. They will have to find support in their own caucuses and, for Armstrong, in the Harper Cabinet.

It is not necessarily an easy job for an issue that, though it might be motherhood, doesn’t poll very high in Canadian politics. That is, it doesn’t command great individual responsibility. An agenda for both substance and procedure would be developed.

On substance, these measures would be identified for action:
- an undertaking not to be the first to use nuclear weapons;
- an assurance to non-nuclear-weapons states that nuclear weapons will never be used against them;
- an end to the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes;
- an end to the production of new nuclear weapons;
- a schedule for all states progressively to engage in nuclear disarmament.

On procedure, the meeting would seek agreement on how to develop and codify these elements and whether one whole Nuclear Weapons Convention should be constructed. What is especially needed from this first meeting is agreement that these topics are apposite and will lead to shutting the gap on any further production and use of nuclear weapons while opening the gate to their elimination.

After an opening plenary, the meeting would split into working groups on the various topics drawing up the terms of reference for technical papers to be prepared later by experts under a mandate from the secretariat-general. A second preparatory meeting a year later would examine the papers and start drafting texts for presentation to the diplomatic conference in 2014.

This consultative approach would, in effect, put central focus on the end result of elimination. Until now, nuclear disarmament has consisted of disconnected steps without an end goal—which is why there are still more than 22,000 nuclear weapons held by nine states and the threat of proliferation grows constantly.

“It’s time to refuse to accept any more tem- porizing assurances by nuclear weapons states that they mean well and they’ll do better next year,” says ambassador Richard Butler, chairman of the Middle Powers Initiative. “The time is upon us now. It is not enough to constrain nuclear weapons to history; new wars will be found to justify their continued existence.”

Butler, an Australian who led the way in having the UN adopt the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, believes a new negotiating process is essential for nuclear weapons.

The 65-nation Conference on Disarmament, headquartered in Geneva, has been deadlocked for more than a decade as a result of the consensus rule in which one state can and does block the progress desired by others. It has not even been able to start a dedicated discussion on nuclear disarmament.

Canadian Ambassador Marius Giroumi, who chaired the conference in January, calls the body “an oblivious island of inactivity” devoid of political will. Similarly, review meetings of the Non-Proliferation Treaty have been too timid; moreover, the treaty does not include India, Pakistan and Israel, three nuclear-weapons states. When President Obama convened his Washington summit last year, he specifically included the three states.

“If Canada can seize this moment and start the ball rolling, it will be doing a service to the world,” says Butler.

With solid credentials in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, NATO, La Francophonie, the Commonwealth as well as trusted relationships with the US, UK and France, Canada is internationally placed to play a role in hosting an initial meeting. It was this kind of Canadian invitation to governments to come to Ottawa in 1996 that led to the Anti-personnel Landmines Treaty.

Since President Obama himself is such an ardent advocate of a nuclear-weapons-free world, it is highly likely the US would attend a preparatory meeting in Ottawa.

China has already voted at the UN for the start of negotiations on a Nuclear Weapons Convention and would likely attend. The UK is moving in this direction. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has committed his country to global negotiations.

Within NATO, Germany and Norway are calling for stronger nuclear-disarmament measures. Austria and Switzerland have explicitly called for a start on a convention.

The New Agenda Coalition countries—Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden—are deeply commit- ted to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The Canadian government naturally would want “good company” for a meeting in Ottawa. The chances are excellent that it would be proud of the guest list. Working with Ban Ki-Moon to bring governments to Ottawa to start work on the foremost security issue in the world would be a brilliant act.

For many years, nuclear disarmament has been a discredited, distant goal, doing little to stir public imagination. But now an attrac- tive and single-focused idea—a Nuclear Weapons Convention—is here. It provides the way to rid the world of all nuclear weapons, in a safe and secure way. And Canadian hospitality can lead the way.

Former Canadian ambassador for disarmament and senator Douglas Roche is author of the newly published How We Stopped Loving the Bomb.

DOUGLAS ROCHE

Two events have coincided to give the Canadian government a powerful opportunity to play a key role in the growing effort to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

Both the Senate and House of Commons have unanimously adopted a motion calling on the government to deploy a major worldwide Canadian diplomatic initiative for nuclear disarmament. At the same time, a draft resolution asking Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to convene a diplomatic conference in 2014 to start negotiating a legal ban on nuclear weapons is circulating among governments.

In light of both these developments, 550 Order of Canada members have signed onto an initiative calling on the Canadian government to convene a diplomatic conference in 2014 to start negotiating a legal ban on nuclear weapons; and to engage in nuclear disarmament.

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The path towards eliminating nukes is clear-cut