

It's the Future, Stupid!

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Address to Seminar

Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons

Ottawa, October 16, 2008

Much of my public career has been marked by dissent. I'm not stopping my protest now. I dissent from the anti-humanitarian policies of war for peace. I dissent from the perpetuation of poverty through the greed of the rich. I dissent from the despoliation of the planet by short-sighted industrialism. Most of all, I dissent from the fabric of lies spun by the proponents of nuclear weapons who would have us believe that these heinous instruments of mass murder make us safer.

I am outraged at what has happened to the Canada I love. This country, which used to be rated by the U.N. as No. 1 in the world in human development terms, has become a pale imitation of the United States, itself torn by the belligerent policies of the Bush Administration. Canada, blessed beyond belief in natural resources of land, minerals, forests, water, space, stable population base, industry and technology, has become stingy in aid to the developing countries. Too many politicians cater to a me-first attitude to the diminishment of the common good. Peace-keeping has been virtually abandoned as military spending has risen to its highest level since World War II. The highest military commanders brag about the Canadian military's ability to kill in Afghanistan. Our culture is now being militarized by those who think that the soul of our country can be found in combat.

The once proud boast by Canada that we don't have nuclear weapons and will work hard to rid the world of them has given way to a whimper at the Conference on Disarmament, the United Nations First Committee and the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Canada has stopped standing up for nuclear disarmament and now sits quietly in the back row. When the U.S. barks, Canada is petrified.

The perpetrators of militarism are succeeding, for the moment, because they are trading on fear. Our political leaders are failing – disastrously – because they fear to speak out against fear. Political leadership today is bereft of vision not just for Canada but the world. Never in the history of Canada have we been so lacking in political courage.

All this I dissent from.

‘Wooden-headedness’

The eminent historian Barbara Tuchman adroitly observed that governments are afflicted with “wooden-headedness,” the source of self-deception. “It consists in assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts.”

Governments go on pretending that military might and bombing innocent civilians will bring security. They continue to ignore the

technological reality that the world has become one place, inter-locked in all its dimensions, and that national borders mean nothing in terms of “protection.”

It isn't that globalization is just too much for us to figure out, that we lack the brain power or the international instruments to bring stability to a world in change. Far from it. We have immense stores of knowledge and we have, in the United Nations, the essential machinery to address the problems of armaments, poverty, pollution and violations of human rights. But the captains of our society – the politicians, the diplomats, the media and the corporate structures cannot, do not, will not – all in varying degrees – lift up their vision and work together to make the world a fitting habitat for all of humanity.

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 U.N. 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.

To my critics, who say that this is just Doug Roche dreaming again, I say: have you got better policies for the future? The policies of the past have brought us untold wars and suffering, massive poverty, environmental destruction, repression of human beings and taken us, with the invention of weapons of mass destruction, to the edge of human annihilation. Isn't it time to try something better? Isn't it time to bring our heads and hearts together to produce true human security? Isn't it time to raise up the standards of civilization for the sake of survival? Spare me the charge that this is mere "idealism." The agenda for survival is no longer a dream but a demand of the human race.

Let my critics write a book and state why 25,000 nuclear weapons are good for the people of the world, why it is good for the global economy that a quarter of humanity lives in destitution, while the profits of arms merchants soar, why it is good for the planet that the glaciers are melting and the sea waters rising. I want my critics to explain to me why it is coherent for governments to pledge to help the children of the world, but fail to provide the necessary money because it is diverted to war. I need to hear from my critics a rational argument why the United States and Russia keeping nuclear weapons on high-alert status – meaning they can be fired on 15 minutes' notice – makes the world a safer place. And why it is "mission

impossible” to put a plan into motion to rid the world of nuclear weapons by 2020.

To the policy-makers of the present, I say, if I may paraphrase Bill Clinton’s famous election cry, “It’s the future, stupid!” Get over your wooden-headedness. We are hurtling into a future of more discord, more terrorism, more danger. As Kofi Annan said: “We are asleep at the controls of a fast-moving aircraft.”

‘Upstream’ vs ‘Downstream’

As the human security issues play out, particularly in the inter-twined relationship of development and disarmament, I have found myself in many political battles. I have the scars to prove it. In my career as a parliamentarian and diplomat, the greatest lesson I learned was how difficult it is to get governments to focus on problems “upstream,” i.e. before they have happened, while they react with alarm, often panic, when the problem occurs “downstream.” Governments will devote political energy and money to dealing with the effects of a problem, but it is virtually impossible to obtain attention and finances to problems over the horizon. It is not hard to predict that nuclear weapons will one day be used if they continue to proliferate among countries, to foresee rising terrorism that exploits discrimination and inhuman living conditions, to anticipate that rising

temperatures and waters will force the dislocation of millions of people who will swamp already overcrowded systems.

Adjusting our thinking, conditioned by centuries to deal with that which we can touch, to the broader realities of planetary existence is painful, threatening and just plain hard to do. It seems that we have to drag our minds into the future that, ironically, we are at the same time creating. We have opened up that future by our delineation of human rights and our invention of weapons of mass destruction. The two are incompatible. Two sides of our human nature are struggling for control. Denial, apathy, delay, obfuscation – these and a host of other reactions delay the human journey.

Governments have shown that they cannot muster the will to lead publics to a peace that is now necessary in the age of weapons of mass destruction. So it is the leading edge of civil society that is today trying to lead governments to public policies that would emphasize the core values of respect for life, freedom, justice and equity. The real creativity of today is found in civil society movements.

I have found that for myself personal creativity is the best way to overcome the political intransigencies. Parliamentarians for Global Action and the Middle Powers Initiative provided outlets for me to inject energy into the political systems. Both of these instruments have spurred progress.

Rather than taking satisfaction at this, I regard the achievements of both organizations as beacons of hope. Dissent can become creative when we care enough about failed public policies to do something to move forward. Out of our griefs and anxieties, we build a new basis of hope.

The Net Is Closing

Despite the setbacks on the road to abolition, the net is gradually closing on the possession of nuclear weapons. The gains may seem slight, but they are occurring. Governments around the world have voted overwhelmingly at the U.N. for steps to a nuclear weapons-free world. Even in the U.S. and Russia, large majorities (73 percent of Americans and 63 percent of Russians) favour undertaking the complete elimination of nuclear weapons once advanced methods of international verification are established. Four senior U.S. political figures, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Sam Nunn and William Perry, who all previously defended U.S. nuclear arsenals, have come out for active steps to abolition.

With the indefinite extension of the NPT, the 1996 ruling of the International Court of Justice and the “unequivocal undertaking” pledged at the 2000 NPT Review all serving as backdrop, I feel that current events are beginning to provide a historical opening toward the end of nuclear weapons. The tensions and dislocations of the moment often cloud our

judgment about long-range gains. By stepping back, we can see better the evolution of societal thinking against war and the means of destruction. The world is still afflicted by the forces of greed, power and corruption. But change is coming.

Perhaps the change won't occur in my lifetime. After all, the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said that nothing worth accomplishing can be achieved in one's lifetime. I take heart whenever I walk in the mountains and see a flower blooming in the rocks. That flower had resilience. It defied the odds. Its beauty lies in its staying power.

What I feel most is that the human journey cannot be stopped. We are, often in spite of ourselves, raising up our civilization. An alliance of civilizations lies ahead – if we can avoid blowing the Earth up. The photo of the Earth taken by the astronauts in space reveals our wholeness and, street-fighting notwithstanding, our unity as a human family. Our vulnerabilities are apparent. But so is our strength – a strength in knowledge, technology and creativity.

The abolition of nuclear weapons is no longer just a lofty goal, a noble aspiration, an idealistic thought. It has become the irreducible essential for survival. Peace is impossible as long as the threat of nuclear war hangs over our heads.

A nuclear weapons convention, prohibiting the production as well as use, of all nuclear weapons in all circumstances is urgently needed.

Lawmakers – i.e., politicians and government bureaucrats – must be awakened by public demand to pass such legislation. An ironclad law prohibiting all nuclear weapons must be made.

The organization Mayors for Peace, now numbering 2,200 Mayors in 130 countries, has called for the implementation of a Nuclear Weapons Convention in 2020. That year will mark the 50th anniversary of the Non-Proliferation Treaty – which was supposed to lead to a nuclear weapons-free world.

The end of slavery, colonialism and apartheid – all great evils of their time – came when a critical mass of public opinion arose. So too the end of nuclear weapons, the ultimate evil, can be achieved when enough activists and parliamentarians speak out, recognizing that time frames are necessary to energize political processes.

The old ways of war are increasingly being challenged as a result of the deeper understanding of human rights. The vanguard of this movement to raise up the politics of hope is already being heard from. The 200,000 Germans who assembled to hear Barack Obama in Berlin are a dramatic sign of the hunger for a new, higher and more inclusive political process.

Human rights for all and the abolition of nuclear weapons must become a single dynamic issue. Then we will know that hope can triumph over fear.