

“Persistent, Aggressive, Demanding”: Building a Global Law to Ban Nuclear Weapons

**By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.
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The names Canadian Pugwash and Bill Epstein, one of the great figures of the Pugwash movement, are, for me, inter-twined. It is now nearly a quarter-century since Bill invited me to join CPG, and I still feel his commanding presence.

Bill joined the fledgling United Nations immediately upon his discharge from Canadian military service in World War II. He worked in the UN disarmament office and became a walking encyclopedia on nuclear disarmament. When he retired from the UN, he took up a new advocacy career, which centered on pestering the life out of the Canadian government to beef up its anti-nuclear weapons policies. When I was Ambassador for Disarmament, I was often on the receiving end of his needling for not doing more for abolition.

When Bill was 89, I decided to give a dinner for him in Toronto to honour his 90th birthday.

Unfortunately, when the day arrived, he was too ill to travel from his residence in New York, but we held the dinner anyway. A few days later, I brought a video of the proceedings to him. There were tears in his eyes as he saw the outpouring of love for him. He died a few days later.

The word “indefatigable” is not strong enough to connote the fire within Bill Epstein for the abolition of nuclear weapons. His tenacity, in fact, solidified Canadian Pugwash and made possible the long track record of your work for peace and human security in the world. “Never quit,” Bill used to say to me. He was right. There’s too much to do.

During the run-up to the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Middle Powers Initiative held a consultation at the Carter Center in Atlanta. Former President Jimmy Carter spoke to us, enjoining civil society to become “aggressive, persistent and demanding” of all governments. In other words, it isn’t enough to analyze what needs to be done to rid the world of nuclear weapons, we must advocate. From Bill Epstein and Jimmy Carter, the Pugwash movement can take a lesson in never faltering in our consistent and persistent demand of governments that they live up to their obligations to protect the planet from weapons of mass destruction.

Along with fortitude, we need to expand our vision and confidence that we are on the right side of history. For the abolition of nuclear weapons is the logical outcome of the movement for non-violence, which is gaining strength throughout the world.

We often feel discouraged at what appears to be a never-ending cycle of killings and violence. But the media seldom dwell on the long-term gains humanity is making. The still-young 21st century has already made a profound discovery: military force cannot bring security. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan proved to be grossly miscalculated. Their effect has actually created a rising belief in the

futility of war. In fact, the UN's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change noted that there were fewer inter-state wars in the last half of the 20th century than in the first half, despite the quadrupling of the number of states.

Over the past dozen years, the global security climate has changed in dramatic, positive, but largely unheralded ways. Civil wars, genocide and international crises have all declined sharply. It is true that there are still wars being fought, there are still gross abuses of human rights and deadly acts of terrorism; but it is also true that more than 100 conflicts have quietly ended since 1988. In the past two decades, more wars stopped than started. The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, headed by the Swedish diplomat Hans Blix, stated that "while people will always have their ideological and national differences, the vast majority of humanity appears to be seeking the benefits of an increasingly interdependent world and is not rallying to the idea of an inevitable clash of civilizations."

In his new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker shows the many ways that violence is declining in modern history. Globalization, communications, and the gradual build-up of international law are all having a profound effect on the human psyche. We should not be lulled into complacency, but the forces of history are moving to the reduction of violence.

Despite the frequent negative headlines of the day, something is happening that is actually lifting up humanity. An awakening of concern about how we humans treat one another and the planet is taking place. A new view of the human being, you and me, is coming into focus in the development of public policy. A new caring for the wholeness of life is being defined. Humanity is learning to understand all our human relationships, our relationship with the Earth, and how to govern for the common good. The groundwork for a culture of peace is being laid. This is the stirring of a global conscience.

Many people are calling for a new global ethic to make the world a more human place. The point I want to make here is that a new ethic is actually being formulated. From instances close to home – campaigns to stop drinking and driving, new societal concern for people with mental and physical disabilities – to international civil society movements – Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Grameen Bank – there are mounting displays of evidence of the march of humanity forward.

Perhaps the world will still have to endure yet more wars, more religious extremism, and a wave of nuclear proliferation. But the very forces of nature, business, communications, and world politics are building up a single society. The chief characteristics of this society are its common humanity and the need for a common law.

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Nowhere is the need for a common law more urgently needed than a global ban on nuclear weapons, and it is here that the work of Pugwash can be particularly helpful. The new campaign for a Nuclear Weapons Convention – a verifiable treaty banning the production and deployment of all nuclear weapons – is gathering strength around the world. Two-thirds of all governments have voted at the UN to start negotiations. The European Parliament has given its support. Mayors for Peace, representing 5,000 cities around the world, is campaigning for it. In short, the moment has arrived to build a global law banning all nuclear weapons.

In forty years' working in this field, I have learned one overwhelming fact: confining nuclear disarmament to a series of incremental steps will never achieve the elimination of nuclear weapons. Proponents of the step-by-step approach see elimination only as an "eventual" goal. But this approach

is a trap for the world. Despite incremental steps, expensive modernization programs by the nuclear weapons states drive forward the nuclear arms race, and keep “eventual” so far over the horizon as to be meaningless. In retaining “eventual,” nuclear defenders will so solidify the justification for nuclear weapons that proliferation to more states is bound to occur, and the more proliferation in the years and decades ahead the harder it will be even to claim that nuclear disarmament has legitimacy. The double standard of trying to stop the spread of nuclear weapons while allowing the nuclear powers to retain their guarantees that nuclear disarmament will always be but a dream.

A clearly defined goal must be set – and that is what a Nuclear Weapons Convention does. It is urgent to move beyond “eventual” and give the world a precise plan for the construction of a legal ban on all nuclear weapons.

I refuse to wait until a nuclear weapons attack obliterates a city before starting negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

I refuse to wait until a nuclear explosion causes international panic through the killing of millions and the shutdown of food, water, medical and transportation systems.

I refuse to wait until cooperative world politics breaks down completely under the weight of nuclear weapons hegemony.

Canada should be in the forefront, not a wallflower, in the movement now building up for a Nuclear Weapons Convention. The 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty affirmed that “all states need to make special efforts to establish the necessary framework to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons.” At the UN First Committee this fall, Canada voted in support of an “unequivocal undertaking” for the total elimination of nuclear weapons, but abstained on a resolution calling for the commencement of multilateral negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention. There is still a reluctance to work comprehensively on the nuclear weapons problem.

We must be “persistent, aggressive and demanding” in urging the Government of Canada to step forward and start working on a Nuclear Weapons Convention. There is now a solid basis for this action. Consider what has happened.

For the first time in Canadian history, a substantive motion on nuclear disarmament has been unanimously adopted by both the Senate and House of Commons. The motion endorsed Ban Ki-moon’s Five-Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament and encouraged the Canadian government to “engage in negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention.” It also called on the government “to deploy a major worldwide Canadian diplomatic initiative” for nuclear disarmament. Joint motions in both chambers occur from time to time, but never has there been one that so substantively addressed the nuclear weapons problem. The will of Canada’s Parliament is very clear.

The motion was stimulated by 550 members of the Order of Canada, who called on Canada to join a new worldwide campaign for international negotiations to achieve a Nuclear Weapons Convention. This action by prestigious Canadians cutting across all walks of life was also unprecedented.

Is the government listening to distinguished Canadians and to Parliament itself? Continued resistance to moving forward, even in a preparatory way, on constructing a global ban on nuclear weapons will leave the government open to the charge of thwarting the will of the people. The moment for action has arrived. We can make this action possible, for we have the knowledge, the strength, the passion, and the hope that are all required to make our world

a safer place.

For many years, nuclear disarmament has been a desultory process, doing little to stir public imagination. But now an attractive 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.

We have the power within us to aggressively demand this action. As we ourselves persistently act, we build up the hope of those around us that the world can be freed from the evil of nuclear weapons. Our own hope will inspire others. Hope will drive us toward our goal.