

Canadians want nuclear disarmament and our government should act

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Douglas Roche

Opinion

A strong majority across Canada want the government to join the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, despite pressure it may face from the United States.

That's the highlight of a new national survey conducted by Nanos, the polling organization. The result of this first poll in many years on what Canadians think of nuclear weapons challenges

signing and ratifying the Prohibition Treaty. About three-in-four Canadians agree (51 per cent) or somewhat agree (23 per cent) that Canada should join the Treaty, despite pressure it may face from the U.S. not to do so.

It is not surprising that 80 per cent of Canadians think that Canada is not prepared to handle a nuclear weapons emergency and that these weapons, now numbering more than 13,000 in the world, should be eliminated. What is notable is that three-quarters of Canadians want Parliament to debate the issue and have committee hearings. Politicians will undoubtedly note a finding that impacts them directly: Canadians are five times more likely to say a political party supporting Canada signing and ratifying the Treaty would make them more likely to vote for that political party rather than less likely to do so.

Canadians are certainly getting more serious about nuclear weapons. Seven-in-10 agree that they would withdraw money from any investment or financial institution if they learned it was investing funds in anything related to the development, manufacturing or deployment of nuclear weapons.

The data is clear. There is far more understanding in the public than the government has credited. Of course, it takes more than a public opinion poll to get the government to act. The government has been paralyzed by its professed desire for a nuclear weapons-free world and its political loyalty to NATO, which still asserts that nuclear weapons are the "supreme guarantee" of security.

Until now, Canada has been flummoxed about what to do: break out of NATO unity by joining the Treaty or succumb to a continuation of a step-by-step approach to nuclear disarmament that has utterly failed for 50 years. The new poll may give the government the conviction to follow through on what it is now considering: attending as an observer the first meeting of the states party to the Treaty, which will be convened by the UN secretary-general in early 2022.

The president-designate of that meeting, Ambassador Alexander Kment of Austria, says that Canada, by so doing, could signal that nuclear weapons are not "a sustainable security policy in the long run."

As director of arms control and disarmament for the government of Austria, Kment is a major figure in international diplomacy, and headed the humanitarian movement that brought together progressive governments and civil society leaders that produced the Prohibition Treaty. He has accepted an invitation from Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention and the The Simons Foundation to come to Ottawa next November to be the keynote speaker at a high-level conference on "Canada and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons." While in

Ottawa, he will extend personally an invitation to the Government of Canada to attend as an observer to the international meeting.

I am told by high-placed sources that the government will seriously consider the invitation. Kment, who will head the international meeting, says that non-signatories should attend because solving the issue of nuclear weapons requires broad participation of the international community. While nuclear-dependent states, such as Canada, may think they cannot sign the treaty right now for political reasons, Kment told me in an email exchange, "reducing their reliance on and moving away from nuclear deterrence and replacing it with other forms of deterrence could be formulated as a clear policy goal and an urgent priority."

He added: "Nuclear dependent states could, individually or collectively, set such a political objective, opening the door for a more constructive dialogue on the sustainability of nuclear deterrence, one in which the humanitarian consequences and risks of nuclear weapons for all humanity would be weighed against their perceived security benefits."

Kment's steady, clear-eyed explanation of why the treaty is a responsible step in reducing nuclear dangers offers Canada a way out of the nuclear dilemma. And now the Nanos poll, showing clearly that Canadians want action on the issue, may give the government the courage to move forward.

Douglas Roche is a former senator and former Canadian ambassador for Disarmament. His latest book is *Recovery: Peace Prospects in the Biden Era*.
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