

Ottawa Declaration hits sensitive nerve inside federal government

With key meetings of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Prohibition Treaty looming, both of which challenge the integrity of Canada's nuclear weapons policies, the Ottawa Declaration has arrived at precisely the right moment.

Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—The Ottawa Declaration, a new document calling on Canada to begin the process of joining the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and signed by a number of high-profile Canadians, has hit a sensitive nerve inside the Government of Canada, which is now debating Canada's policies on nuclear disarmament.

A senior government official told me the document has been “flagged internally” and cannot be ignored because of the importance of the Canadians who signed it. I believe Rob Oliphant, parliamentary secretary to the minister of foreign affairs, supports it, but is not ready to make a public statement because the issue is still so sensitive. The government is struggling over how to advance nuclear disarmament measures in the face of hostility by the U.S. and NATO to the new Prohibition Treaty.

The Ottawa Declaration resulted from a high-level civil society conference, “Canada and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” convened by the Simons Foundation and Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention, Nov. 29-30, 2021. The declaration “urges Canada to join the prohibition treaty and calls on the government to begin the process by publicly welcoming the Treaty’s moral authority and legal mandate in the pursuit of a world without nuclear weapons.”

The signatories also want Canada to join Norway and Germany as an observer at the first meeting of the states party to the prohibition treaty and work to bring NATO into conformity with the treaty.

The declaration is signed by three dozen Canadian ex-



Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly, pictured Feb. 8, 2022, on the Hill. The Prohibition Treaty is already having an effect on world politics. Recently, the five major nuclear weapons states—the U.S., Russia, the U.K., France and China—issued a joint statement reaffirming that ‘a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,’ writes Doug Roche. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

perts on nuclear disarmament, among them, Lloyd Axworthy, Tom Axworthy, Margaret MacMillan, John Polanyi, Clayton Ruby, Gerry Barr, Peggy Mason, Paul Meyer, Tariq Rauf, Setsuko Thurlow, Cesar Jaramillo, Jennifer Simons, Ernie Regehr, and additional international experts.

The declaration was published as a full-page ad in *The Hill Times* on Feb. 7.

At the very least, it is influencing government thinking and strengthening the hand of those inside the government who want present policies changed. Whether the government will summon up the courage to break out of the stronghold that Washington and NATO have put on the growing desire in the world to ban nuclear weapons is another matter.

When the prohibition treaty came into existence in 2017, it was derided by the government, despite the fact that 122 nations voted for it at the UN (59 have since ratified it). Then the government warmed to it, stating Canada understood the reasons behind the treaty, namely that the nuclear powers have been ignoring their responsibilities to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons as mandated by the Non-Proliferation Treaty. When Ambassador Alexander Kmentt of Austria, president-designate of the forthcoming Prohibition Treaty meeting, visited Ottawa, he was courteously received by high-ranking government officials.

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What does the treaty do? It outlaws the possession of nuclear weapons for all those who sign on. This is the nub of the question. Such a declaration of illegality runs squarely against the military doctrine of nuclear deterrence by which nuclear weapons states threaten to annihilate each other. Such a policy should be morally condemned, which is exactly what Pope Francis has done.

But moving away from nuclear deterrence is vigorously opposed by the U.S. and NATO. They have denounced the treaty and, so far, have prevented any NATO state from joining it. Recently, 53 former presidents, prime ministers and foreign and defence ministers of 20 NATO states (including seven senior Canadians, Jean Chrétien among them) criticized NATO for its obstruction, and called for NATO to “embrace” the treaty.

The Canadian government, which wants nuclear disarmament but feels tied to a stultified NATO policy, is desperately looking for a way out. It clearly hears the words of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, which are the first words of the Ottawa Declaration: “Humanity remains one misunderstanding, one misstep, one miscalculation, one pushed button away from annihilation.”

But politics is getting in the way of revising security policies. There is no political leadership, officials are divided, and the crises in the international system, of which the Russian threat of invasion of Ukraine is but the

tip of an iceberg of international distrust. Fear has so distracted policy-makers that they are virtually ignoring the biggest security threat in the history of the world—namely, the existence of 13,000 nuclear weapons that pose catastrophic humanitarian consequences if used.

Some in Ottawa are indeed awake. NDP MP Heather McPherson, her party’s foreign affairs critic, has endorsed the Ottawa Declaration and wants the government to address “this existential threat urgently.” Senator Marilou McPheer, another endorser, has appealed for urgent government action to end “the death grip of current nuclear policies.”

The Prohibition Treaty is already having an effect on world politics. Recently, the five major nuclear weapons states—the U.S., Russia, the U.K., France and China—issued a joint statement reaffirming that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” This statement is a step forward, but the nuclear modernization programs of these very states belie their words.

With key meetings of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Prohibition Treaty looming, both of which challenge the integrity of Canada’s nuclear weapons policies, the Ottawa Declaration has arrived at precisely the right moment.

Douglas Roche, former Senator and author, has signed the Ottawa Declaration.

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