

The Chronicle-Herald
Opinion, Friday, July 11, 2008, p. A9

Placing N.S. at centre of disarmament movement

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AS ONE of the global council co-presidents of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND), I will have the privilege this weekend to collaborate with legislators from five continents and leading experts in nuclear disarmament who will be gathering in Pugwash. Through energetic and visionary efforts of Pugwash Peace Exchange, the goal of this international conference is to build the necessary political will to advance nuclear non-proliferation and, ultimately, a nuclear weapons-free world.

The Pugwash movement has been a leader in global disarmament efforts for 50 years. Its beginnings date to 1957 when industrialist and Pugwash native Cyrus Eaton invited 22 international scientists and philosophers to meet in the tiny Nova Scotia village. These leading minds were drawn together at the urging of Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Linus Pauling and Manhattan Project scientist Joseph Rotblat to confront the alarming proliferation of nuclear weapons.

This meeting was unique: American and Soviet scientists sitting down in a room together to solve a problem, and doing so behind closed doors, with absolutely no way for their respective states to know if the party line was being followed. Due to this unique format, all present agreed that the meetings had to continue, and bestowed upon it the name of "Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs." Fifty-seven conferences have taken place around the world since then, and in 1995, the Pugwash Conferences, along with Joseph Rotblat, were granted the Nobel Peace Prize.

Today, the need for the Pugwash Conferences is as great as ever. It was hoped that the threat of nuclear weapons would be removed with the end of the Cold War. Regrettably, with the spread of nuclear weapons technology to new states and volatile conflict zones around the world (India-Pakistan, Israel and the Korean peninsula), that has not been the case. A recent Simons Foundation survey found that 88 per cent of Canadians still feel that nuclear weapons are making the world a more dangerous place, and 73 per cent support eliminating all nuclear weapons through an enforceable agreement.

The concerns Canadians have expressed are not without foundation. In fact, 26,000 nuclear warheads remain throughout the world, including over 100 under the command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, of which Canada is a member. Many of the world's nuclear weapons remain on trigger-alert, ready for launch at a moment's notice. The risk of an accidental launch with the probability of nuclear retaliation is real.

For a long time, Canada has played a positive role in seeking to reduce this threat. Canada has championed efforts to de-alert launch-ready nuclear weapons, ban nuclear weapons testing, and impose strong sanctions for states in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty - the principal international agreement that commits the five permitted nuclear-weapons states (U.S., Russia, France, U.K. and China) to steady progress in the disarmament of their nuclear arsenals, and prohibits the pursuit of nuclear weapons for all others. Tragically, since 2006, Canada has shelved its anti-nuclear policies, embracing instead NATO's nuclear umbrella as the best way to protect Canadians from possible nuclear threats.

Pugwash has an important role to play in reminding Canada of its role in the fight for nuclear disarmament; and an overwhelming number of Canadians want to see this worthy goal achieved. For the third year in a row, the Pugwash Peace Exchange and the Pugwash Parkland Commission will assemble at the Thinkers' Lodge in Pugwash to build greater momentum and civic engagement with a new initiative: the creation of an interpretive centre on the original site of the founding of the Pugwash peace movement. This project will create a critically important opportunity to engage and inform Canadians on the need to confront the nuclear threat, and build the needed public and political will towards rejuvenating Canadian leadership on the global disarmament agenda.

As Nova Scotians, we are and will be forever indebted to the leadership of Cyrus Eaton and founding luminaries who first came together at Pugwash with the vision of creating a nuclear-free world. There is much we can learn from their example to help save all humanity from the calamitous danger of nuclear war.

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