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By Douglas Roche

Sadness best describes my feelings about Canada not showing up at the first meeting of states parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons held June 21-23 in Vienna. It is utterly sad that a country that once led the way in telling the nuclear powers to cool down the arms race, that once stood up against NATO's nuclear weapons policies, that once pioneered the Landmines Treaty wouldn't even attend as an observer a meeting that solidified the Prohibition Treaty as a permanent instrument to protect humanity against annihilation.

Canada has gone missing just at the moment the International Committee of the Red Cross told the meeting, "The continued existence of nuclear weapons is one of the biggest threats to humanity." And UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, "Let's eliminate these weapons before they eliminate us... We must stop knocking at doomsday's door."

The Prohibition Treaty, which outlaws the possession of nuclear weapons, came into existence in 2017, but it was immediately challenged by the powerful nuclear weapons states whose modernization programs of the existing 13,000 nuclear weapons belie their previous commitments to eliminate their nuclear arsenals

NATO took an aggressive stance against the Prohibition Treaty and warned its members away from it. Canada fell into line with NATO and even rebuffed the personal invitation to attend extended by Ambassador Alexander Kmentt of Austria, president of the Prohibition Treaty meeting. However, the governments of four other NATO countries, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Belgium did

choose to attend, which at least showed a willingness to engage in the discussions on this historic treaty; their positive act exposed the pusillanimity of the present government of Canada.

An array of distinguished Canadians pleaded with Global Affairs Canada to send a delegate, but the top officials who, in the same week sent a representative to a cocktail party at the Russian Embassy in Ottawa, said no. Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly has inexplicably displayed no interest in nuclear disarmament — a subject now at the forefront of world affairs given Russian President Vladimir Putin's threat to use nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war.

No wonder Canada didn't get elected to the UN Security Council. The collapse of values in Canada's foreign policy as shown by the shunning of UN peacekeeping, the government's disdain for the 122 countries that voted for the Prohibition Treaty, and its slavish adherence to the resurgent militarism of NATO all reveal the low level of thinking in the Pearson Building about the human security agenda. Sad, indeed.

What did Canada miss at the Prohibition Treaty meeting?

It missed a profound discussion of the present most dangerous threat of the use of nuclear weapons since the Cuban Missile Crisis 60 years ago; the establishment of new processes of coordination among states to alleviate the harmful health and environmental effects of nuclear weapons; the development of a Scientific Advisory Group to form a network of experts around the world to support the goals of the Prohibition Treaty to rid the world of nuclear weapons in the foreseeable future.

Not least among the accomplishments of the meeting was the naming of Ireland to explore ways for the Prohibition Treaty to cooperate with the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This is far more than a bureaucratic transaction. The nuclear weapons states have justified their rejection of the Prohibition Treaty by claiming

that the NPT, comprising most of the states of the world, is the only legitimate forum for negotiating the elimination of nuclear weapons. The problem with this argument is that the NPT, in its fifty years, has never launched such comprehensive negotiations because of the obduracy of the nuclear weapons states. Thus, the Prohibition Treaty was born out of the frustration with the NPT process. Far from setting itself apart from the NPT, the Prohibition leaders reaffirmed that the NPT is the “cornerstone” of nuclear disarmament.

Ireland is the perfect state to bring these two treaties into working collaboration, for Ireland has been widely regarded as the “father” of the NPT and also played an active role in creating the Prohibition Treaty. Canada would be well advised to go onto immediate consultations with Ireland to see how the present aloofness between the leaders of these two treaties can be overcome for the sake of deepening global cooperation for the elimination of nuclear weapons. A positive turnaround in Canada’s attitude in cooperating with states that really want to achieve nuclear disarmament would help to overcome the shame of its present evasiveness.

There is still much hostility to be overcome between NATO and the Prohibition Treaty. Germany, The Netherlands and Norway all used their position as “observers” at the Prohibition meeting to defend NATO’s stance as a nuclear alliance. They insisted they would not join the Prohibition Treaty. But the Vienna meeting answered these critics: “We regret and are deeply concerned that despite the terrible risks, and despite their legal obligations and political commitments to disarm, none of the nuclear-armed states and their allies under the nuclear umbrella are taking any serious steps to reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons.” This statement applies directly to Canada.

A striking note of the Vienna meeting was the participation of civil society led by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which now comprises 645 chapters around the world. The Prohibition Treaty has integrated civil society into its future work, a collaboration that is surely deepening the input of highly knowledgeable and deeply committed people into governmental decision-making on the future of humanity.

Former Senator Douglas Roche, author of Beyond Hiroshima, chaired the UN Disarmament Committee in 1988.

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