

Disempowering the Bomb, Re-Empowering Ourselves: The Case for a Canadian Citizens' Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament

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I. Introduction: Disarmament and Democracy, Citizenship and Survival

I'd like to dedicate this talk to the memory of Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, who died three weeks ago. In the late 1980s and early nineties, I had the privilege of studying 'the Gorbachev revolution,' specifically the intimate link it drew between disarmament and democratization, citizenship and survival. The free development of Soviet society, Gorbachev believed, had been horribly stunted by the inseparable evils of militarism and repression, a self-defeating combination providing neither peace nor prosperity – and, in the atomic age, spelling doom.

His deepest wish was simple: to see his compatriots, so long forced to live like sheep, begin to act – awaken – as citizens. And his deepest conviction was that only such *rehumanization*, not just of Soviet but world politics, could provide the moral, creative, cooperative impetus – the necessary 'escape velocity' – for humanity to break free of the deadly atmospheres of state and nuclear terror. "You cannot," he insisted in a 2014 interview, "build a new society without involving the people," the 'ordinary people' ordinarily excluded from decisions vitally affecting their interests and lives. So I dare to think he would approve of the initiative we are launching today, for a Canadian Citizens' Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament, a democratic experiment that would indeed amount to a 'perestroika' – a radical restructuring – of relations between this state and 'its' people on issues of assuredly vital, life-&-death concern.

II. 'Bridging the Distance': Something Rotten in The State?

The 21st-century has seen a widespread, dramatic upsurge of interest in 'participatory' or 'deliberative' democracy at the municipal, regional, and national levels: Citizens' Assemblies, Policy Juries or Panels, Deliberative Mini-Publics, and other variants on the same, core theme:-cultivating, to quote British expert Graham Smith, "a politics of considered judgment," in which the citizenry functions as something far more influential, important, and dignified than a periodically-activated electorate.

To render such experiments both socially and politically legitimate, it is crucial: 1) that the citizens selected to participate reflect and embody the full diversity of the communities they're drawn from; and 2) that the topic under review be considered fully and fairly, with all relevant perspectives, expertise, voices and experiences meaningfully included and respectfully heard.

With regard to selection, this is usually conducted by a form of civic lottery, defined – by the internationally-renowned Canadian organization MASS LBP – as "an important tool that

governments and public agencies can use to broaden participation while also guarding against the disproportionate influence of organized interests hoping to move a crowd and sway an outcome.”

Such lotteries, as a guide produced by MASS LBP (‘Led by People’) explains, are “based on one of our oldest democratic traditions which is called sortition,” a “process for randomly selecting people to serve a public function much as we do when we convene a jury.” The difference here, of course, is that “rather than compelling people to serve, as governments do with jury duty, civic lotteries encourage randomly selected recipients to volunteer their time...” “In this respect,” the guide continues, the process employs “two randomizing filters: firstly, when randomly selected households receive an invitation to volunteer; and second, when participants are randomly selected from the pool of volunteers to broadly match a community’s demographic profile.”

Since 2007, MASS LBP has “worked with hundreds of public sector clients to find new and inventive ways to...bridge the distance between citizens and governments,” inspired by a concept “in political science known as the ‘all-affected interests principle,’” namely that “in a democracy those affected by a decision ought to have a chance to take part in shaping that decision.” “This idea,” they argue, “reflects a moral commitment to treating people as active agents who can self-govern, rather than as passive objects who must be governed.”

The case of Ireland is instructive – and inspiring. In 2012 a Constitutional Assembly (66 citizens, 33 members of parliament) was convened to consider the contentious issue of marriage equality. Its recommendation, in favour of such equality, was emphatically endorsed by referendum in 2015. The same year, a 99-member, all-citizens’ Assembly was established to consider the even more divisive issue of abortion, and its recommendation, in favour of abortion rights, was overwhelmingly approved by referendum in 2018. Prior to the two Assemblies, public opinion opposed legalizing either abortion or marriage equality, and it seems the transparent conduct of the sessions (avidly followed and discussed by press and public), the socio-economic and demographic representativeness of the participants, and the breadth and balance of testimony for and against the propositions, combined to help ‘move the dial.’ So paradigmatic has the shift proven that Citizens’ Assemblies are now a regular feature of Irish democracy, most recently addressing Gender Equality and Biodiversity Loss.

In Canada, Citizens’ Assemblies have been convened by three provinces – British Columbia, Ontario, and (ongoing) Prince Edward Island – to review options for electoral reform. And beginning in 2020 and concluding this year, three consecutive Citizens’ Assemblies on Democratic Expression are “examining the impact of digital technologies on society,” with findings and recommendations to be “presented to the Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression, the federal government, and in public fora.”

Such topics certainly meet the standard set by the ‘all-affected interests principle’. An even more obvious example is climate change, and a number of Citizens’ Assemblies, in the UK and elsewhere, have been convened – with many more being demanded – to shape and review policies, targets and mechanisms for averting terminal climate breakdown. But what about the only other existential threat to Mother Earth, the only other way Her ecosystems can be irreparably destroyed: nuclear war?

III. A Canadian Citizens' Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament: from Concept to Campaign

To our knowledge, no citizens, anywhere, have ever been asked, by any level of government, to convene to consider how best to combat the clear and present nuclear menace to existence. On August 6 – Hiroshima Day – after consultation with numerous groups and individuals (both supportive and skeptical), we released a 'Concept Paper' making the case for establishing the world's first Citizens' Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament right here in Canada. And today – by popular request – we are publishing a detailed 'model' of how such an Assembly might be structured, the key issues it could address, the range of voices it should hear from, etc. What follows is a pencil sketch only of the fuller picture painted in the Concept Paper and the Model – copies available today and on our website – which are themselves intended only as starting points, *sparks* to kindle, we dare hope, a broader conversation.

Our proposal, then, is that parliament convene a Citizens' Assembly empowered to make recommendations on policy related to Canada's commitment to achieving a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World. It is important to stress that the Assembly would *not* be asked to consider whether such a world is *desirable*: the focus, instead, would be on *feasibility*, verifiability, irreversibility, etc., on the *means* of achieving an uncontroversial end, rhetorically embraced by every Canadian government since 1945, and more importantly by the United Nations through its history, beginning at the beginning with the inaugural General Assembly resolution (January 1946) envisaging "the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons."

Like slavery, torture, and other vile violences, the international community rightly regards The Bomb as an abomination, an evil to be eradicated not regulated, ameliorated, entrusted to 'safe hands'; particularly as, unlike those other crimes against humanity, this one has the power to *eliminate* humanity. But while the desired end – Abolition – is not in dispute, neither, in today's unhinged and war-torn world, is it in *sight*, with bitter divisions – broadly speaking, between the Global North and South – over the best ways and routes to achieve Global Zero.

Where does this country stand? For over seven decades, Canada has been a member of a nuclear-armed alliance, NATO, which arrogates to itself the 'right' to use nuclear weapons (including using them *first*) in a range of war-fighting scenarios *not* limited to pre-empting or retaliating against nuclear attack.

Canada has never built nuclear weapons – but it has helped others build them, through large-scale exports of nuclear technology, expertise, and most crucially uranium, starting with the uranium mined – at devastating human and environmental cost – on stolen Dene land in the Northwest Territories, without which the world's first atomic bombs could never have been developed and dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Canada no longer hosts American nuclear weapons on its territory, and no longer permits their deployment with its armed forces, at home or overseas; but Canada *is* a member of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group which, as its chilling name suggests, actively plans and prepares for – just as Canada's NATO forces routinely practice – nuclear war.

Canada, in fact, is one of only 43 states (out of 195) claiming the right to base its defence on the threatened use of weapons capable of killing millions in moments, erasing cities in seconds, unleashing in the genocidal process eco-catastrophes ranging from nuclear famine (in a so-called ‘limited’ exchange) to nuclear winter. These 43 Apocalypse apologists fall into two categories: the Mushroom Cloud Club itself, the nine (so far) nuclear-armed powers – China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, UK, US – and their 34 military allies (29 of them in NATO), variously known as the ‘nuclear umbrella,’ ‘nuclear-dependent,’ ‘nuclear-endorsing,’ or ‘nuclear-supportive’ states.

Canada’s NATO nuclearism, however, is just one side of its split atomic personality: on the other lies a long track record of crafting and championing measures to contain and reduce nuclear dangers, most importantly the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a ‘grand bargain’ under which states without nuclear weapons agreed not to join the ‘nuclear club’ on condition that the five powers recognized by the treaty as belonging to that club – America, Britain, China, France, and Russia – agreed to disband it. The ‘P5’ – the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – were explicitly *not*, in other words, given a green light to become permanent nuclear-weapon states, but were rather required, under the Treaty’s famous Article VI, to enter “good faith negotiations” leading to the complete elimination of their arsenals. Yet today, a mere 52 years later, they have yet to spend a single *day*, even in *bad* faith negotiations, honouring their solemn, legally-binding promise to ‘go non-nuclear’: an epic failure leading inevitably to the formation of a parallel, non-NPT nuclear club (Israel, India, and Pakistan, which never joined the treaty, and North Korea, which abandoned it).

The fact that the P5 made a mockery of the NPT was hardly Canada’s fault, but it did present Canada, and all non-nuclear NPT states, with an increasingly unavoidable choice: to continue waiting – another half-century? – for the P5 to disarm, or work with others to finally outlaw nuclear weapons, just as biological and chemical weapons had long ago been banned. In the middle of the last decade, the great majority of NPT states (122) made such a move and negotiated the 2017 UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the ‘Ban Treaty’ which became international law in January this year. In the 1990s, Canada led a similar, successful charge to outlaw landmines, refusing to wait for the major mine-possessing states to do the right thing, but banning the damn things anyway: not as an empty gesture, but to ‘change the game’ – which it did – by creating a powerful new stigma, rendering the weapons politically radioactive. But where was Canada when the revolution in nuclear disarmament diplomacy (led by the Global South) was taking place? Outside the General Assembly, where the talks were held, dutifully following – like all NATO states, except the Netherlands – orders from Washington not to take part.

Last month, the tenth NPT Review Conference was held in New York. On August 22, Costa Rica delivered a ‘Joint Humanitarian Statement’ on behalf of 145 states, declaring that because “it is in the interests of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances...all efforts must be exerted to eliminate the threat of these weapons”. Canada, in lockstep with the rest of NATO (and Russia and China), refused to sign. Why? Because it took exception to the words ‘under any circumstances.’

In an indignant article in the *Hill Times* on September 5, a former Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament, Douglas Roche, exclaimed that “it degrades the moral standards of Canada that the

government believes there are circumstances when a nuclear weapon could be legitimately used.” But if you belong to a nuclear-armed alliance, and help it plan and practice for nuclear war, then *your* legitimacy and that of the *weapons* becomes fused: you force yourself into a nuclear box you *cannot* allow yourself to think outside of.

What do Canadians think about such boxed-in thinking? In April 2021, a Nanos national opinion survey found that 74% of respondents agreed that Canada should sign and ratify the Ban Treaty, “despite pressure that it may face from the United States not to do so.” A mere 9% agreed that it was “acceptable for countries to have nuclear weapons for protection” – this in a country that, as a NATO state, has claimed for 70+ years to be protected by nuclear weapons! Eighty-six percent agreed that because “no government...could respond to the devastation caused by nuclear weapons,” they “need to be eliminated”; and 81% said 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.”

Perhaps of greatest relevance to our campaign, just over three quarters of respondents agreed that “the House of Commons should have committee hearings and debate Canada’s position on nuclear disarmament”: something, absurdly, it has not done since 1998 – before many of you were born! – when the Foreign Affairs and International Trade Committee produced a powerfully pro-disarmament report entitled *Canada and the Nuclear Challenge: Reducing the Value of Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century*. The Nanos survey, of course, did not then ask whether, deep into that century, it is time for parliament to seek the opinions and advice of the citizens whose views it purports to reflect and represent.

There are two ways to interpret the results of the landmark Nanos poll – and comparable polling in other NATO states showing similarly overwhelming support for the Ban Treaty. One, ‘ordinary’ people *are* capable of grasping the extraordinary dangers of the nuclear age; two, they are *not*, they’ve missed something, known only to the experts, the nuclear guardians, theorists and practitioners, all the old and ‘safe’ hands capable (they claim) of ‘handling’ the Bomb. But even if you subscribe to this second view, shouldn’t you *support* the call for a Citizens’ Assembly, at which those guardians, experts, and other defenders of the nuclear-armed status quo would be given a fair chance – equal time and space – to make their case, to explain, enlighten and educate us?

Of course, such an Assembly would *also* have to hear from figures like former Ambassador Roche, and many other retired senior diplomats and officials who fear Canada has made a disastrous – and, as Roche says, degrading – choice in prioritizing nuclear-dependency over nuclear disarmament. And it would also have to hear from survivors of nuclear use, such as Setsuko Thurlow, a Canadian citizen since the 1950s but at 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945, a 13-year-old beginning her school-day in Hiroshima. In a recent speech – ‘A Survivor’s Journey’ – Setsuko described (using, tellingly, *the present tense*) the indescribable hell she encountered, recovering consciousness after “falling away,” “blinded by an unnaturally intense flash,” “into silence and darkness”:

Hiroshima has vanished. I crawl, stand, stare at the flames, watch ghostly processions go by, beings who used to be human: bleeding, burnt, blackened, swollen; parts of their bodies missing;

flesh and skin hanging loose; bellies burst open, intestines hanging; many blinded by the flash, some with eyeballs in their hands.

“That,” she said, “is how my story began: how the story of humanity in the Nuclear Age began. But I am here today to ask, not how *my* journey, but how *our* journey, will end.” In December 2017, Setsuko accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the leading civil society force behind the negotiation and adoption of the Ban Treaty. But both before and after she received that singular honour, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau refused to meet her; has not, in fact – she confirmed to me recently – even deigned to respond in writing to her many requests. What is he afraid of hearing; feeling; realizing? Shame on you, Prime Minister – but we thank you, too, for your unconscionable rebuff of a Hiroshima survivor only helps us make our case for a citizen intervention in the bad nuclear behaviour of the state.

I am thrilled to say that Setsuko is an enthusiastic supporter of our campaign, and I want to close, in a moment, with her words and thoughts on the subject. We have been deeply gratified by all the endorsements received in the build-up to this public launch: from, among others, Conscience Canada; the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Day Coalition; Nova Scotia Voice of Women for Peace; and the Canadian section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom; as well as from many individuals, in Canada and beyond, including, from Britain, Paul Rogers, Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies and a veteran voice of anti-war reason well-known to many Canadians.

IV. Conclusion: the Last Word on Survival...by a Survivor

In her recent speech – delivered to an ICAN ‘Ban Treaty Forum’ in Vienna – Setsuko expressed her consternation that, in the traumatic wake of Russia’s criminal invasion of Ukraine, “the leaders of Finland and Sweden” rushed “to join NATO’s nuclear club, without properly asking their people – or even themselves – what the real costs and dangers might be.” And she noted a bitter irony: that while that ‘rush’ was “justified as responding to public opinion and concern,” for “nearly five years, poll after poll in nation after nation, has shown supermajorities in support for our Treaty.”

Governments, it seems, *do* sometimes listen to the governed: when it suits *them*, and the vested interests – military-industrial vested interests particularly – they serve. And that’s the whole point of our campaign: to insist that when it comes to such mighty matters as nuclear policy – decisions that may well make the difference between global life and death – such selective and self-serving ‘responses’ are not enough, are not acceptable. In the nuclear age to date, the Bomb has proven stronger – has come to mean and matter more – than democracy, than citizenship, than humanity. It is high time to ask: in order to *disempower* It, might we need to re-empower *our selves*? Setsuko, for one, thinks the answer may be Yes –

There are voices in the Canadian peace movement calling for a ‘Citizens’ Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament,’ empowered to make policy recommendations to parliament. Such an Assembly would hear from all sides of the issue – including from my side, as a survivor. No such experiment has ever been attempted before, and I believe it is an idea worth carefully exploring, not just in Canada but every country that claims the ‘right’ to possess or rely on these heinous weapons of genocidal destruction.