

"Canada targets nuclear warheads Government, impressed by arguments of former hawks, will lobby to destroy weapons"

Article from Globe & Mail, Metro Page A4

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March 11, 1999

Ottawa -- The Liberal government wants nuclear-weapons states to get rid of all of their warheads, Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy said yesterday. It's just a matter of how and when this goal can be accomplished, he said in an interview after a meeting with prominent U.S. Cold Warriors who now oppose Washington's nuclear weapons policy. He said the federal government's ultimate objective is to try to wean its nuclear allies -- the United States, Britain and France -- and other nuclear-weapons states like Russia and China from dependence on nuclear weapons in their defence strategies. For Canada, "the question is how best to influence" the nuclear weapons debate, he said, adding that the cabinet will soon take up the issue.

Mr. Axworthy said he was impressed by the arguments of former U.S. Defence Secretary Robert McNamara and retired U.S. Air Force General Lee Butler, hawks who have turned doves. The pair testified at a parliamentary committee yesterday, urging Canada to confront Pentagon orthodoxy and take the lead in forcing a review of NATO's nuclear policy. "These are very, very serious and experienced guys" and their arguments against the nuclear weapons policies of their own government and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization carry a lot of weight, Mr. Axworthy said.

The elimination of nuclear weapons is moving to the centre of the political agenda in Ottawa and in other NATO countries as the alliance reviews its strategic doctrine in preparation for a 50th anniversary meeting in Washington next month. The Clinton administration says there is no need to change NATO nuclear policy. The Commons Foreign affairs committee recommended recently that NATO review its policy, which leaves open the possibility that the alliance might be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict.

Gen. Butler, who was the officer in charge of all U.S. strategic nuclear forces when the Cold War ended, said the committee's report is a helpful reminder to Americans of the importance of morality in defence policy.

"This is a report my government should have written many years ago," he said. Mr. McNamara, who had his finger on the U.S. nuclear trigger during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, said the committee's "superb" report could have gone even further and specifically called for a NATO no-first-use policy.

Reform Party foreign-policy critic Bob Mills said the witnesses were naive to believe that nuclear weapons could ever be eliminated. "We must accept the fact there will always be the risk of nuclear proliferation" and thus NATO should keep its own warheads as a deterrent.

Mr. McNamara called for an unequivocal political commitment by all the nuclear powers to the goal of total abolition of those weapons. This would be followed immediately by the removal of all nuclear weapons from alert status, the physical removal of warheads from missiles, and a declaration that the countries would never be the first to use nuclear weapons and would never use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.

"We can indeed put the genie back in the bottle," Mr. McNamara said. "If we do not, there is a substantial and unacceptable risk that the 21st century will witness a nuclear holocaust."