What will Canada do about the continued threat posed by the 34,145 nuclear weapons in the world?

By Independent Sen. DOUGLAS ROCHE

What will Canada do about the continued threat posed by the 34,145 nuclear weapons in the world? A recent roundtable in Ottawa of 35 Nobel Peace laureates, think-tanks and experts charted a course for Canada to follow, which would involve the government building a new diplomatic bridge for global security.

An ambitious project, yes. But it is one that the new Martin government is perfectly positioned to undertake.

Prime Minister Paul Martin has clearly called for the re-launch of the challenge of re-building good relations between Canada and the United States while also reaching out to shore up the United Nations as the cornerstone of international security. The Ottawa Roundtable showed how to effectively pursue both priorities.

The roundtable had its origins in an international Pugwash conference held in Halifax in July, 2003. Pugwash, named after the Nova Scotia village where the industrialist Cyrus Eaton founded an organization of scientists to contain the development of nuclear weapons, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995. The Halifax conference urged governments to take new steps toward nuclear disarmament when the 35-year-old nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was reviewed in 2005 at the United Nations. The Canadian Pugwash group had been working along with the Middle Powers Initiative, an international organization that advocates in nuclear disarmament and that has three Nobel Peace laureates on its steering committee. The government has also organized a roundtable to produce a policy paper for Canada. The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade gave its support and financial help.

The most recent roundtable, held February 22-23, brought together such prominent figures as Maurice Strong, who advised to Prime Minister Paul Martin and personal envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Korean nuclear negotiations; Ambassador Sergio Duarte of Brazil, expected to preside over the 2005 NPT Review; Tariq Rauf, head of verification and security policy for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); and Canada’s Ambassador for Disarmament Paul Meyer, among the 35 Nobel laureates.

Meyer pointed to the central issue facing the NPT Review: the threat was supposed to be a bargain between the Nuclear Weapons States (the U.S., Russia, the U.K., France and China) and the rest of the world. Non-nuclear states understand not to acquire nuclear weapons in return for the nuclear powers negotiating the elimination of their – for example, following the Soviet Union’s announcement of its nuclear weapon program. There is no sensible alternative to nuclear disarmament if we are to see a more secure and safer international environment.

The Roundtable squarely faced the dilemma. Canada alone cannot stop the nuclear trend, especially since the development of a new nuclear age has been led by the Bush Administration. In the United States, Canada is under the United States. But it also wants genuine nuclear disarmament. What to do? Build a bridge, said Roundtable participants.

Despite recent progress in monitoring nuclear activity in Iran and Libya, the present trend of proliferation is undermining the strength and integrity of the NPT. The North Korean move to develop nuclear weapons is a blow to the NPT, said Maurice Strong, but there is a prospect for a diplomatic solution. However, clandestine weapons programs are now being pursued and terrorist groups will inevitably gain access to nuclear materials and technical knowledge. The last review of the NPT, in 2000, said that the only absolute guarantee against the use of nuclear weapons by terrorists is their total elimination.

The IAEA has verification and safeguards programs, but as Tariq Rauf pointed out, the budget for this work is only $100 million a year—the same amount of money the U.S. alone spends every day on the maintenance of its nuclear weapons.

Canada, as a loyal member of NATO, should build a bridge to the United Nations and the other countries to ensure that these important powers can strengthen the centre of the nuclear weapons debate.

What would Canada do to build this bridge? The roundtable had several ideas: encourage NATO states to work with other countries to get nuclear weapons out of Europe; seek agreement within NATO for a full-fledged review of nuclear weapons policy; Canada was successful in promoting this in NATO five years ago and should do it again with a stronger outcome in mind; organize regular meetings between NATO and non-nuclear countries to develop common positions. The Pugwash-Middle Powers Initiative Policy Paper will be issued in mid-March, in time for a preparatory meeting next month for the 2005 Review.

Such steps would help Canada to energize the global dialogue on nuclear weapons, and bridge the gaps between the poles of the nuclear debate. Most of all, Canada must put forward its strong case for worldwide nuclear disarmament at this moment, when it is thinking of joining in the U.S.-Russian Missile Defence program, which many experts hold will further destabilize the world.

The U.S. and other nuclear weapons states would have to take notice of these steps. And, in the process, the NPT could be saved in 2005. That would be no small contribution to the Martin government could make to both the U.S. and the U.N.

Sen. Douglas Roche, former Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament, is Chairman of the Middle Powers Initiative.

Before you get sucked again...

The Sierra Club of Canada held an Ottawa news conference to announce its 2005-06 study of household dust in Sydney, Cape Breton.

A national news organization, given “advance” details of the press release, ran scathing headlines like, “Toxic car pools put children at risk.”

The study tested household dust samples, collected by Sierra Club volunteers, for lead and arsenic. From these, it estimated potential lead levels in Sydney children. It speculated there was “a two to five per cent chance” children might carry lead above internationally accepted guidelines.

It sounded bad—unless you knew what the Sierra Club failed to tell reporters. Public Health workers already tested the blood of Sydney children, and not a single child elevated lead levels. Not one.

You can find that study at www.gov.ca/health.

The reporter who wrote the scariest story was dissuaded to learn the facts the Sierra Club omitted. But her news organization declined to run a correction, or even a follow-up story. Children at risk is news. Children are safe is not.

Sydney reporters know too much about the Tar Ponds—and the Sierra Club—to fall for such fearmongering. Their Parliamentary colleagues should be no less diligent.

All you ask is that you apply the same skepticism to our critics as you appropriately apply to us.

...call us for the facts.

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9