

Opinion

McPhedran, May, McPherson, Davies defy government, attend UN meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Senator Marilou McPhedran will use her experience to engage her Senate colleagues in special dialogues. Green Leader Elizabeth May says she's 'more committed than ever to advocate for nuclear disarmament as the only way to a secure world.' NDP MP Heather McPherson wants to develop a nuclear disarmament caucus in Parliament.

Douglas Roche

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Non-affiliated Senator Marilou McPhedran, left, Jennifer Simons, president of The Simons Foundation, NDP MP Don Davies, Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, and NDP MP Heather McPherson at the UN in New York City last week. Photograph courtesy of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons

EDMONTON—Three women parliamentarians, responding to an International Red Cross call for the world to display “the dictates of public conscience” against nuclear weapons, have become the conscience of the Canadian Parliament. Non-affiliated Senator Marilou McPhedran, Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, and NDP MP Heather McPherson defied the Government of Canada by attending a meeting of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons held last week at the United Nations in New York.

The government refused to attend, even as an observer, because it feared the wrath of the United States and NATO headquarters. Both the U.S. and NATO have taken a hostile position against the treaty—which has so far been ratified by 69 states—because it outlaws the possession of nuclear weapons.

Three NATO states—Germany, Norway and Belgium—did attend as observers at the weeklong meeting, which the top UN disarmament official, Izumi

Nakamitsu, called “more important than ever” because of growing geopolitical tensions. These three states showed more courage than Canada, which calculated that the cost of attending would be greater in incurring the displeasure of NATO than the cost of not attending and incurring merely the disappointment of the domestic nuclear disarmament movement.

The Canadian women told me they attended out of a sense of obligation not only to protest Canada’s absence, but to better equip themselves to push this government to live up to its promises and obligations. McPhedran is a non-affiliated Senator from Manitoba; May represents Saanich-Gulf Islands, B.C.; and McPherson represents Edmonton-Strathcona, Alta., and is the NDP’s foreign affairs critic. The three parliamentarians have previously staked out leadership stances against nuclear weapons and are trying to rally their colleagues. This time, NDP MP Don Davies, who represents Vancouver-Kingsway, B.C., joined them at the New York meeting. As May put it to me: “We went to press for Canada to be on the right side of

history in signing and ratifying the Prohibition Treaty.”

The right side of history: that’s an interesting perspective. Where is nuclear disarmament going in today’s world? With both the U.S. and Russia shredding previous agreements and treaties, the nuclear disarmament architecture is collapsing. It’s true that the number of nuclear weapons, currently about 12,500 held by nine states, is considerably down from the high of 70,000 in the 1980s. But all the nuclear states are modernizing their arsenals, and intend to keep them for the rest of this century.

The U.S. Congressional Strategic Posture Commission recently recommended that the U.S. increase its number of deployed warheads, as well as increase its production of bombers, air-launched cruise missiles, ballistic missile submarines, non-strategic nuclear forces, and warhead production capacity. The Federation of American Scientists excoriated the report for ignoring the consequences of a new nuclear arms race with Russia and China. Both countries are now enlarging their nuclear weapons capacity

to counter what they see as a constant U.S. build-up.

A new nuclear arms race is under way. Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, appealed to the Prohibition Treaty meeting not to let the world “lose sight of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that any use of nuclear weapons—be it strategic or tactical, offensive, or defensive—would have.”

The leaders of the Prohibition Treaty are trying to stem the new nuclear surge, but they can hardly be heard in today’s warring atmosphere. Nonetheless, they are persevering and deepening scientific work showing how the world would totally collapse in the event of nuclear war.

So where is the technological build-up of nuclear warfare capacity really taking the world? Towards doomsday or to a new age of humanitarian enlightenment? One would think that Canada would want to make an impact on the development of nuclear history. But no, our country dodges its responsibilities in the misguided notion that

its NATO obligations constrain it from joining the new march of history.

In New York, McPhedran, May and McPherson signed a statement issued by 23 parliamentarians from 14 countries promising to take this fight to the policy-makers of the nuclear states. At home, they pledged themselves to shake up the Canadian establishment. They are brave politicians. They have stuck out their necks.

McPhedran intends to use her experience to brief and engage her Senate colleagues in special dialogues. May says she is “more committed than ever to advocate for nuclear disarmament as the only way to a secure world.” McPherson wants to develop a nuclear disarmament caucus in Parliament.

Will they actually get Canada to move to the right side of history? Who knows, but, as McPherson said, they “felt compelled to be present.”

Former Senator Douglas Roche’s latest book is *Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World* (Amazon).

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