

Luncheon Keynote Address

**The Canberra Commission:
Lessons Learned for a Future Commission**

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The Ideas-Institutional Nexus

A Conference Co-Hosted by the University of Waterloo and United Nations University

Waterloo (Ontario), Canada
18 May 2002

Introduction

At a time when the United Nations itself has embarked on an intellectual history of the organization, the contribution by institutions of ideas that can influence the course of human history merits close study. I would like, therefore, to begin by congratulating the co-hosts of this conference -- Waterloo University and the United Nations University -- for coming up with the initiative of holding this conference.

I was a member of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons and my

remarks will be based on that experience.

Background

On 24 October 1995 -- amid a world-wide public uproar over France's decision to resume nuclear testing in the South Pacific just after the permanent extension of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) -- then-Prime Minister of Australia Paul Keating announced that his Government was going to assemble "a group of knowledgeable and imaginative individuals from around the world" to "examine the problems of security in a nuclear weapons-free world and suggest practical steps towards the goal, including the ways of dealing with stability and security in the transitional period." He stated that the weapons tests were only "a symptom of the problem -- the deeper and more troubling problem of nuclear weapons in the world." What was needed, he added, was a "concrete program to achieve a nuclear weapons free world."

He closed his speech with words that relate very much to the theme of this conference. "At the beginning of the United Nations' second fifty years," he said, "there could be no better way for us to show our commitment to the ideals which motivated the men and women who drew up the Charter than by working, like them, to turn a coalition of noble ideas into a concrete and enduring reality." A month later, the Government established the Canberra Commission -- which was composed of 17 eminent scientists, politicians, disarmament experts and military strategists from around the world. Its commissioners spanned a wide political spectrum ranging from the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. Joseph Rotblat and other long-time disarmament advocates, to former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and retired General Lee Butler, the former Commander in Chief of the US Strategic Command. The Australian Government provided both financial and administrative support for the work of the commission.

Following four meetings of the Commission -- two in Australia, one in the United States, and one in Austria -- and a change of Government in Australia, the new Foreign Minister Alexander Downer submitted the group's final report to the UN General Assembly in September 1996. In later presenting the report to the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in January 1997, Foreign Minister Downer stressed that "The international community needs to focus on developing ideas which are practical, constructive and realistic and which actually take us closer, step by step, to the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons." So literally from start to finish, the Canberra Commission was very much focused on ideas for practical action.

The Report and its Context

Throughout its deliberations and its final report, the Commission devoted considerable attention to the wider security environment, particularly verification issues. It sought to identify concrete actions that would maintain stability and security both during the transition period to global nuclear disarmament and after the goal is achieved. We were deeply conscious of the fact that the opponents of nuclear disarmament could not be taken for granted. They deserved our respect and we set out therefore to look at their arguments before we embarked on our

recommendations.

In brief, the report begins by identifying six "immediate steps" needed for progress in nuclear disarmament:

- taking nuclear forces off alert;
- removal of warheads from delivery vehicles;
- ending the deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons;
- ending nuclear testing;
- initiating negotiations to further reduce U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals; and
- an agreement amongst the nuclear-weapon states on reciprocal no-first-use undertakings, and of a non-use undertaking by them in relation to the non-nuclear weapon states.

The Commission also recommended three "reinforcing steps":

- action to prevent further horizontal proliferation;
- developing verification arrangements for a nuclear weapons free world; and
- the cessation of the production of fissile material for nuclear explosive purposes.

This represents a very brief introduction to the work of the Commission. I think that any fair assessment of the significance of its work would have to examine several issues.

The publication of the Report roughly coincided with three important events in the history of multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation efforts. The first was the decision in May 1995 of the States parties to the NPT to extend the treaty indefinitely, and its accompanying decisions on "Strengthening the Review Process of the Treaty" and on "Principles and Objectives for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament." The second event was the International Court of Justice's announcement in July 1996 of its historic Advisory Opinion on the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. The third key event was the opening for signature of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in September that same year. In some ways, 1996 could well have been an annus mirabilis for disarmament -- though unfortunately other events that occurred over the six succeeding years served to dash many of the hopes for near-term progress in this field.

With respect to the NPT, the Commission lent its weight to many of the fundamental ideas that led to the indefinite extension of that treaty. While not endorsing fixed timelines for disarmament, the Commission agreed on the need for "targets and guidelines" for the disarmament process, a goal that was very much consistent with the Decision on strengthening the NPT review process. In my own subsequent publications and speeches, I have used a term, "results-based disarmament," that draws upon precisely this type of thinking, and I am pleased that many of the

States parties in their most recent preparatory committee meeting for the 2005 NPT Review Conference voiced their support for concrete targets and guidelines for assessing progress on disarmament.

The Commission's report also echoed many of the items in the 1995 NPT "Principles and Objectives" decision -- in particular, the importance of universal adherence to the treaty, the need to strengthen non-proliferation efforts, a "programme of action" for nuclear disarmament that included completion of the CTBT by 1996, the early conclusion of a fissile material treaty, and the "determined pursuit by the nuclear-weapon States of systematic and progressive efforts" in the field of nuclear disarmament. The Commission also voiced its support for other principles and objectives in that Decision document, including the importance of nuclear-weapon-free zones, security assurances, safeguards, and other specific controls over the peaceful uses of nuclear technology. While the Commission clearly did not originate these ideas, it gave them some higher visibility and salience both inside and outside of government, while also contributing new insights on the security threats the world would face if disarmament did not succeed.

The Commission went beyond the NPT documents, however, in two significant areas. It devoted considerable attention to the problem of nuclear terrorism, and while this issue was indeed discussed in many public forums well before 1996, the Commission's repeated admonitions on this growing threat were not only perceptive, but prescient, especially in light of the new terrorist risks following the events of 11 September 2001. The Commission also expressly addressed the need to eliminate ballistic missiles as nuclear weapons delivery systems, a vitally important subject that is virtually never considered in the NPT review process, despite the presence of this goal in the NPT's preamble and the growing dangers of missile possession and proliferation.

As for the 1996 Advisory Opinion -- which came out just before the final meeting of the Commission -- while the ICJ stopped just short of concluding that the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons would in all instances be illegal, the Court found little merit in the various arguments on behalf of such weapons. The Court found unanimously that the obligation in Article VI of the NPT to "pursue in good faith" negotiations on nuclear disarmament included an obligation to bring such negotiations to a conclusion. In short, while the Canberra Commission offered the world an approach to achieve disarmament securely, the Court's Advisory Opinion strengthened the legal foundation of disarmament. Together, they helped to define the disarmament issue as both a legal necessity and a practical means of promoting international peace and security.

With respect to the other key event of 1996, the opening for signature of the CTBT, while the Canberra Commission cannot claim credit for that event, it did strongly support the treaty and the goal of maintaining a moratorium on nuclear tests until the treaty could enter into force. Nevertheless, the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in 1998 and the U.S. Senate's unfortunate decision a year later against ratification were horrible setbacks for the treaty -- setbacks, however, that only further underscore the need for greater progress on the Commission's main theme, namely the business of nuclear disarmament.

Legacy

Without doubt the best place to look to confirm the lasting legacy of the recommendations in the Canberra Commission Report is the text of the Final Document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference. The parallelism of the language used in both documents is striking.

To clarify this legacy, however, I will first need to address another significant milestone in the annals of multilateral disarmament diplomacy. On 9 June 1998, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Slovenia, South Africa and Sweden issued a joint declaration called, Towards a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World: The Need for a New Agenda. These countries, minus Slovenia, later came to be known as the "New Agenda Coalition." This geographically-diverse coalition quickly rallied substantial international support for this declaration -- including that of the UN Secretary-General -- which followed very closely many of the specific terms of the Canberra Report.

On 4 December 1998, the UN General Assembly adopted its first "new agenda" resolution by a vote of 114 to 18, with 38 abstentions¹, and adopted by a similar vote a similar resolution a year later². On 20 November 2000, the new agenda group introduced a modified version of this resolution, which the General Assembly adopted by a vote of 154 to 3 (with India, Israel, and Pakistan voting against), and only 8 abstentions³. The resolution adopted last year without a vote, however, was entirely procedural and non-substantive -- it only consisted of a single sentence placing the issue on the agenda of the next session of the General Assembly⁴. This indicated that despite strong international support for the new agenda resolution, there was no consensus for either strengthening that resolution or moving beyond it.

Despite the linkages between them, it would be wrong to view the New Agenda declaration and resolutions as simply passive reflections of the Canberra Commission report -- after all, the former were formal documents produced as a result of an inter-governmental consensus, while the latter contained the collective views of experts acting in their individual capacities. Even so, it is absolutely undeniable that together these documents have had a definite and an extraordinarily positive effect on the NPT review process, and in so doing, they have substantially elevated the level of public discourse of nuclear disarmament issues.

Let us now look for a moment at the "thirteen steps" for nuclear disarmament contained in the Final Document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference. They were, in effect, the very embodiment of the basic "targets and guidelines" approach recommended by the Canberra Commission. Even many of the specific words from the Commission's Report re-appeared in the thirteen steps.

Both documents laid out several "practical steps" for nuclear disarmament. Virtually each of the thirteen steps in the NPT document appeared in the report of the Canberra Commission, with the exception of a reference (only in the former) to "general and complete disarmament." Both called for an end to nuclear testing and entry into force of the CTBT. Both identified the need for

the Conference on Disarmament to take up both the nuclear disarmament issue and the need for a fissile material treaty. Both endorsed the principle of irreversibility of arms reductions. Both specifically called for an "unequivocal" undertaking by the nuclear-weapon states to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. Both favoured deeper cuts via the START process, while strongly endorsing the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Both supported the Trilateral Initiative to place under safeguards the fissile materials recovered as a result of US/Russian disarmament agreements. Both stressed that disarmament requires conditions of stability and security. Both supported unilateral reductions of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Both cited the need for enhanced transparency of the disarmament process. Both favoured de-alerting of nuclear arsenals and a reduction in the role of nuclear weapons in security policies. Both called for the engagement of other nuclear-weapon states in the disarmament process. Both recalled positively the ICJ's 1996 Advisory Opinion. And both stressed the need for further improvement of verification capabilities.

Outside the thirteen steps, there were some additional parallels between the Canberra Report and the 2000 NPT Final Document. Both described nuclear disarmament as the only effective way of preventing the use of nuclear weapons. Both underscored the importance of security assurances to non-nuclear-weapon states. Both also stressed the importance of compliance with the global nuclear non-proliferation regime and the NPT in particular. Both underscored the need for a universal regime. And both endorsed the condition of full-scope IAEA safeguards as an essential precondition for nuclear cooperation.

The Canberra Report did, however, address some issues not explicitly addressed in the NPT document that remain quite relevant today. The Report, for example, specifically rejected the utility or legitimacy of using nuclear weapons to deter the use of chemical or biological weapons -- this language is especially important to recall in light of leaks from the recent US Nuclear Posture Review, which suggests an intention to use nuclear weapons precisely for such a purpose and even to develop new nuclear weapons for use against underground bunkers. While the NPT Final Document did cite the need for enhanced physical protection of nuclear materials and transparency in export controls, it did not specifically address terrorism. The Canberra Report, by contrast, discussed this issue at length and this language remains highly relevant. The Report also specifically called for the nuclear-weapon states to adopt a no-first-use nuclear policy and a policy of not using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states.

Two crucial decisions had to be taken during the course of our discussions. The first was our rejection of a timetable for nuclear disarmament despite the urgings of some Commissioners. The second was our decision to call for the total elimination of all nuclear weapons in contrast to a contemporaneous US National Academy of Sciences Report [5](#)-- which called for reductions of the US and Russian nuclear arsenal "to about 1,000 total warheads each" -- and a similar report by the Stimson Center [6](#), which called for reductions to "tens of nuclear weapons" with their complete elimination as a "long-term objective."

The Road Ahead

While I am of course an enthusiastic supporter of its work, even the Canberra Commission is not exempt from possible improvements as a model for future work in disarmament.

I must admit that I think that the membership of the Commission could have been a bit more representative. Well over half of its members came from the OECD area (with two countries having two representatives each) and only four came from developing countries. Also, Maj Britt Theorin was the only woman on the commission -- surely a grave under-representation of half of humanity. I strongly support, however, the use of commissions to advance the norm of disarmament -- so much so, that I would like to offer today a proposal for the creation of a new one.

When I survey the world of disarmament today as it applies to weapons of mass destruction, I see glimmers of hope, but a glare of disappointments. In his Millennium Report, the Secretary-General proposed the convening of an international conference on eliminating nuclear dangers -- a proposal that was briefly noted in both the Millennium Declaration and the Final Document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference. The nuclear-weapon states, however, have not supported this proposal and it seems unlikely that the event will occur anytime soon. It is also unlikely that the General Assembly will soon agree to convene a fourth Special Session on Disarmament. Meanwhile the Conference on Disarmament is still -- despite many years of effort -- unable to agree on a programme of work. Even the United Nations Disarmament Commission was unable -- ostensibly because of a crowded calendar -- to schedule an annual meeting this year to address nuclear disarmament and small arms issues.

Paralleling all of these setbacks on the multilateral front, we see little interest among the nuclear-weapon states to reach the disarmament benchmarks (the "thirteen steps") outlined at the 2000 NPT Review Conference. While the world has welcomed the recent announcement that the two largest nuclear powers have agreed to reduce their operationally-deployed, strategic nuclear forces, the new treaty will reportedly not contain any requirement to destroy warheads, a goal once envisaged for START III. We therefore find ourselves once again at a familiar crossroads, confronting the same old choice between security based on deterrence and security through disarmament.

Unfortunately, there is at present not much evidence of significant domestic political pressure in any of the nuclear-weapon states to get the train of disarmament back on track. Recent trends seem to point in the opposite direction, to the advent of new dark age for disarmament, assiduously fuelled by fears of terrorism after 9/11:

- an age of continued reliance on nuclear weapons and deterrence concepts
- an age of new nuclear weapons, perhaps in the form of so-called "mini-nukes" or new warheads intended for use in missile defence interceptors
- an age of new biological weapons, genetically engineered to resist defences, to increase their lethality or durability, or to use even against inanimate objects such as asphalt, fuel, plastics, and other materials.

- an age of eroding nuclear security assurances, where nuclear weapons will increasingly be used as threats against non-nuclear-weapon states
- an age of significant increases in military spending (already at about 75 percent of the Cold War zenith of 1985) and expectations of a growing global arms market
- an age of new risks that terrorists will acquire and use weapons of mass destruction
- an age of an unfettered race of all countries to acquire long-range missiles
- an age of declining support from private foundations for NGOs working on disarmament

This new age, if it is in fact to come, is a veritable nightmare that could well end up destroying the world. Meeting these challenges will require great political will as well as many technical improvements in monitoring and verification. The political challenge will be to ensure support for enlightened policies -- based on the fundamental disarmament and non-proliferation obligations in the NPT, CWC, and BWC -- at the level of leaders of national governments, among the various "informed publics" in their countries, and among the public in general.

Based on the fine work of the Palme, Carnegie, and Canberra Commissions in the field of international peace and security, I believe that a commission approach to disarmament questions still offers interesting possibilities for progress in the years ahead. I think it is time for the international community to consider the establishment of a new International Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction.

The new commission should, first of all, have a mandate that covers nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons -- the three weapons of mass destruction that the NPT, BWC, and CWC have specifically targeted for total elimination. The mandate should explicitly extend to both non-proliferation and disarmament -- one cannot be sacrificed for the other without losing credibility. It would also cover possible terrorist uses of such weapons and specific multilateral, regional, plurilateral, or national strategies -- including unilateral initiatives -- to address such threats.

One approach would be to set up the commission as a special panel of the United Nations, much like the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, which led to the Brahimi Report -- without of course any hidden agenda of seeking more resources for the Department of Disarmament Affairs!

Another approach would be to follow the model created by Canada's International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, whose 12 commissioners developed the innovative theme of the "responsibility to protect." This commission had the advantage of having two co-chairs, one from the North and one from the South -- this would be an especially appropriate approach for addressing issues relating to the global threats from weapons of mass destruction. The commission was independent, though it submitted its report to the UN Secretary-General and the international community in December 2001. It also had an Advisory Board, the capacity

to undertake research, a secretariat for administrative support, and funding from the Government of Canada and several private foundations. The size of the commission could be limited to twelve, provided that it did not require the sacrificing of geographical or gender balance, or lead to an inadequate representation of commissioners with technical expertise on the respective weapons systems.

I believe a key focus of the work of this commission should be on institutional issues. Like the Canberra Commission, it should both develop new ideas and explore their practical means of implementation, focusing on specific institutions in both the public and private sectors. Writing in 1976, Alva Myrdal observed that "Disarmament interests have nowhere had strong organizational backing." Her point unfortunately remains true today. As I have noted before on other occasions, New Zealand remains the only government on Earth that has a minister of disarmament. We have countries that have elaborate institutional networks called nuclear-weapon complexes, yet we have no such equivalent disarmament complex. This is one new idea for the commission to ponder.

The new commission should also look at the institutional and political bases of sustainable disarmament -- a concept on which Ramesh Thakur and I have both written. It should look closely on the technologies currently available or needed to eliminate verifiably all weapons of mass destruction and to prevent new such weapons from being developed -- a task that amounts to a blueprint for a "revolution in disarmament affairs." These are two additional ideas worthy of the commission's consideration.

Both the Canberra Commission and in the NPT review process made some substantial progress in identifying concrete benchmarks for gauging progress in achieving agreed disarmament goals. Just as the UN Development Programme has succeeded in including "human development indices" in its annual Human Development Report, the commission may wish to consider the possibilities for the development of some "disarmament indices" that can be used for comparable purposes of sustaining the process of "results-based disarmament."

The commission may also wish to explore how the world can bridge the "disarmament divide" -- a condition in which the world sets a high standard for gauging compliance with non-proliferation, yet fails to apply similarly high standards for gauging progress in disarmament. This concept parallels one found in the literature on globalization, which refers to a "digital divide" and is best illustrated by the statistic that half of the world has not yet made or received even a basic telephone call. If present trends continue in the non-proliferation regimes -- and the regimes fall short of universal membership and continue with their have/have-not discriminatory results -- we may face a similar global divide in the field of disarmament.

The Commission's report could serve as both a call to action and a useful and authoritative instrument for governments and NGOs alike to use in advocating greater progress on disarmament. It would come out in time to help ensure that the NPT Review Conference of 2005 would not result in a failure that would jeopardize the treaty itself. If launched this fall, the report

could be out in time for the opening of the 58th Session of the General Assembly. It could also develop some ideas on how to move forward in developing new international approaches to verify compliance with the BWC. It could explore new approaches to expedite the entry into force of the CTBT. It could provide a roadmap on how to deal with the threats of WMD terrorism without yielding to over-reaction or panic. And it could identify other ways and means to ensure a future for the human species in a WMD-free environment.

The challenge of alleviating security threats from weapons of mass destruction is surely a challenge that unites all regions, all countries, indeed all human beings everywhere. The more that international organizations, regional organizations, national governments, non-governmental organizations, and individual citizens examine this challenge, the more they will come to agree that the only reliable and effective solution to this grave problem will come in the global elimination of all such weapons.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by drawing some final lessons learned from past commissions - and especially from my experience as a Canberra Commissioner - that can serve us well as we contemplate the establishment of another Commission in the area of multilateral disarmament.

First and foremost is the importance of good timing. Just as Shakespeare said, "There is a tide in the affairs of men,/ Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune." So also with the tide of international affairs, which must justify the creation of an international commission and the dedicated efforts of a group of eminent men and women before the world can judge the fruits of their labour.

Next is the mandate of the Commission, which should ideally be both specific and general. In other words, the mandate should not lead to a report containing a broad-brush portrayal of an ideal world devoid of any practical recommendations. Nor should the recommendations be so detailed and situation-specific that the report will become dated even before it is published.

The composition of the Commission is also crucial. Not only must the Commission consist of world-renowned and respected experts, but it must also satisfy the standard of political correctness by ensuring an adequate balance of genders, geographical representation, and political viewpoints. Too much consideration for the latter could result in gridlocked discussions and, heaven forbid, a fatal dissent of some of the Commission members from the main report.

An efficient Secretariat is of course a *sine qua non*, because we all know that a good research team, excellent writing skills and a good editorial pen are vital. Additionally, papers commissioned by outstanding experts in the field - both academic scholars and experienced practitioners - would considerably assist the deliberations among the Commissioners before coming to conclusions. The Commission could publish these papers (as did the Canberra Commission) as a companion volume to the Report itself and be an important contribution to the

academic literature on a specific subject, quite apart from its policy impact.

Another vital consideration is the support of a Government that the world community would regard as acceptable -- Australia, in the case of the Canberra Commission, or Canada, with the Pearson Commission and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. That does not mean that the Report should fall within the parameters of that Government's foreign policy. Rather it should be a genuine exploratory exercise in which the sponsoring Government itself can take an independent view of the outcome.

The model of the Brahimi report is one that began within the context of the UN, so that its consideration within the UN system was assured even though the acceptance of its recommendations depended on member states. A Commission begun outside the UN should at some stage consult with the UN system through seminars or conferences to sound out UN reactions, and to maintain "reality checks" and visibility. Certainly the Commission should bring its conclusions within the UN context in the form of a General Assembly document, and ensure that its work is the subject of discussions and speeches in relevant UN fora.

Finally, follow-through is vital. This depends not only on the energy that the sponsoring Government is willing to invest in the Commission Report. The Canberra Commission Report received lukewarm support from the Government that inherited it after Keating's party suffered an election defeat and did not do more than absolutely necessary. By contrast, the Brahimi Report - partly because two large UN departments (Peacekeeping Operations and to some extent Political Affairs) stood to benefit from a huge infusion of resources - received assiduous support from the UN bureaucracy, which lobbied member states to accept its recommendations.

There are numerous derogatory remarks about Committees that can equally apply to Commissions, but they need not all be -- as someone once said -- "cul-de-sacs down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled." They could in fact -- like the Brundtland Commission, with its focus on "sustainable development" -- lead to a breakthrough in conceptual thinking with practical policy implications. Let us likewise look to a Commission on WMD to launch a movement for sustainable disarmament, which will sweep aside outmoded concepts and paradigms and energize public opinion to move forward to a world free of WMD.

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1. [UN General Assembly, Resolution 53/77 Y, 4 December 1998.](#)
 2. [UN General Assembly, Resolution 54/54G, 1 December 1999.](#)
 3. [UN General Assembly, Resolution 55/33C, 20 November 2000.](#)
 4. [UN General Assembly, Resolution 56/411, 29 November 2001.](#)
 5. National Academy of Sciences, Committee on International Security and Arms Control, *The Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy* (1997).
 6. Second Report of the Steering Committee Project on Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction, "An Evolving US Nuclear Posture," Report No. 19, December 1995.

