

Lessons from William Wilberforce

Priorities for Nuclear Weapons Abolition

By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

Chairman, Middle Powers Initiative

**Address to European Parliament International
Conference on Nuclear Disarmament**

April 19, 2007, Brussels

The current film, *Amazing Grace*, the story of British parliamentarian William Wilberforce's successful fight to abolish the slave trade, has important lessons for nuclear weapons abolitionists. Although the end of the legalized slave trade occurred a century and a half before the atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the parallels between the campaigns to abolish both evils are striking.

Both slavery and nuclear weapons were and are paramount moral issues of their day. Wilberforce prevailed because, despite repeated failures to get politicians to move, he finally penetrated the moral consciences of the parliamentarians at Westminster.

Slavery was said to be necessary to maintain plantations, which meant wealth. It was claimed that slavery was built into the human order. Those uncomfortable with the social system were afraid to challenge it. But Wilberforce never gave up.

So too, today it is held by the powerful that nuclear weapons are necessary for security. They have been invented and cannot be "dis-invented." Although most people do not want nuclear weapons, the political system rebuffs nuclear abolitionists. Like Wilberforce, we must never give up.

Nuclear weapons are the slavery of the 21st century. With their threat of Armageddon, they enslave all of humanity. They are the “ultimate evil.” As this century progresses, the political structure must learn that nuclear weapons and humanity cannot coexist, just as slavery and human rights cannot co-exist. Nuclear weapons are a denial of the range of human rights opened up by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We cannot only deal with nuclear weapons by making the conditions of their acceptance more palatable any more than Wilberforce could accept merely a lessening of pressure of the chains around slaves’ necks; the total abolition of slavery was required. So too, it will not be enough to have full ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty or successful negotiations to ban the production of fissile material; nuclear weapons in their entirety must be done away with. The only hope for peace in the 21st century is the total abolition of nuclear weapons. This can be achieved when the social, economic and political structures turn against these weapons of mass murder.

Those who understand all too well the grave danger to the world posed by nuclear weapons dare not be detoured from our goal by the ill-informed, the cynical, the doubters. If we settle for less than abolition, that is all we will get.

The political value of nuclear weapons must be reduced. Otherwise, the world will develop into a permanent two-class society of nuclear haves and have-nots. It will be the powerful against the weak, the rich against the poor, the warriors against the peace-makers. Such divisions and contentions are unsustainable.

Like the slavery abolitionists, nuclear weapons abolitionists have history on our side. Despite the seemingly impregnable hold of the powerful, new counter-forces are developing and need but the concerted action of enlightened parliamentarians aided by an energized civil society to prevail.

* * *

I contend that there are grounds for optimism for three reasons: the historical tide, an existing near consensus on key points, and political developments.

In historical terms, the tide is turning against nuclear weapons. The moral, legal and military case against them is now better understood than ever before. The intellectual argument – that nuclear weapons are needed for security – is now largely rejected by most states as baseless. Only a small coterie of defenders of nuclear weapons can be found today. We know that this coterie still possess immense political power, as the fight over

the retention of the Trident in the U.K. revealed. But the U.K. government's willful and blind determination to modernize its nuclear arsenal ran up against unprecedented opposition. The opponents of nuclear weapons are gathering strength. That itself is a new reason for hope.

A roadmap to the future has been superbly drawn by the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, headed by the Swedish diplomat Hans Blix. The Commission's 60 recommendations provide the architecture for global security without nuclear weapons

Though it failed because of the recalcitrance of a small number of states, the 2005 NPT Review Conference identified a near consensus on key elements. In fact, the Working Paper of the Chairman of Main Committee I and the Working Paper of the subsidiary body on nuclear disarmament and assurances were supported by strong majorities. These documents said that nuclear weapons states must stop nuclear sharing for military purposes; the most effective way to prevent nuclear terrorism is the total elimination of nuclear weapons; international action to stop proliferation is essential; building upon the decisions taken at the 1995 and 2000 NPT Review Conferences, including the "unequivocal undertaking" for total nuclear disarmament, no new nuclear weapons should be developed. The fact that

these elements did not command complete consensus was a reflection of the obstinacy of the few, not the fissures of the many.

In 2006, all but four states in the U.N. voted for the holdout states to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, negotiate a ban on the production of fissile materials, diminish the role of nuclear weapons in security policies, reduce the operational status of nuclear forces, and take other practical steps. This is a significant expression of a world view.

On January 4, 2007, four distinguished American figures – two Republicans and two Democrats – who had never before been identified with nuclear weapons abolition, called for action to reduce nuclear dangers. In a remarkable op-ed article published by the *Wall Street Journal*, George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, both former Secretaries of State under Republican Presidents, and former Democratic Senator Sam Nunn and William J. Perry, former Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration, warned, “The world is now on the precipice of a new and dangerous nuclear era.” They set out a number of urgent steps to achieve “the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.” Initiating a bipartisan process with the U.S. Senate, they said, could achieve, among other gains, U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Their article lays the groundwork for new efforts in the U.S. to have the American government become a participant in, not an obstacle to, concrete nuclear disarmament steps.

* * *

For the past 18 month, the Middle Powers Initiative has convened four meetings of the Article VI Forum, which has identified specific areas where progress can be made on a consensus basis. The Article VI Forum, inaugurated by MPI following the breakdown of the 2005 NPT Review Conference, seeks to stimulate and shape effective responses to the crisis of the non-proliferation/disarmament regime and to examine the political, technical and legal elements of a nuclear weapons-free world. Thirty invited states participated in one or more of the four meetings held: 1) at the United Nations in New York in October 2005; 2) at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague in March 2006; 3) at the Foreign Affairs Building in Ottawa in September 2006; 4) at the Vienna International Centre in March 2007.

Out of these meetings, MPI has identified seven priorities for action:

- Verified reduction of nuclear forces
- Standing down of nuclear forces (de-alerting)
- Negotiation of a Fissile Materials Cut-off Treaty
- Bringing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force

- Strengthened negative security assurances
- Regulation of nuclear fuel production
- Improved NPT governance

Full details are contained in the new MPI Paper, “Towards 2010: Priorities for NPT Consensus,” which MPI will present at the NPT Preparatory Committee meeting April 30-May 11, 2007 in Vienna. The implementation of these measures prior to or at the 2010 NPT Review Conference would propel the non-proliferation /disarmament regime in the right direction, toward universal elimination of nuclear weapons.

The above-outlined measures are valuable in and of themselves. They decrease risks of use, diminish the access of terrorists to catastrophic weapons and materials to build them, raise barriers to acquisition by additional states, and generate support for strengthening the regime and resolving regional crises. Moreover, the measures pass key tests: they do not diminish the security of any state; they reinforce the NPT and enhance the rule of law; they make the world safer now; they move the world towards elimination of nuclear weapons.

* * *

Here in the European Parliament, there is much work to do to advance the nuclear disarmament agenda. A good start has been made in the

adoption of the recent resolution setting out steps to facilitate a positive outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. The only way to ensure progress is for parliamentarians to ratchet up the pressure on governments to move.

Speaking up takes courage and leadership. Parliamentarians possess both these attributes. You also have access to the decision-making processes of your governments. I appeal to you to make your voices heard in your parliaments and committee meetings with questions, motions, resolutions and the other tools in your hands.

Ask your ministers and officials precisely why concrete steps to save the NPT in 2010 cannot be taken. Probe why NATO continues to insist in its strategic concept that nuclear weapons are “essential” and why the U.S. continues to station tactical nuclear weapons on the soil of European countries. Challenge governments whether their loyalty to their nuclear friends is greater than their dedication to sparing humanity from a nuclear catastrophe.

I know what parliamentarians can do when you mobilize your strength. Governments dare not ignore you when you speak clearly and forcefully. The new Parliamentary Network for Nuclear Disarmament

www.gsinsitute.org/pnnd , a network of more than 483 parliamentarians in 64 parliaments, is at your disposal with helpful information.

Steady movement forward will bring us to our goal: a Nuclear Weapons Convention, prohibiting the production, deployment and use of all nuclear weapons. William Wilberforce, a magnificent parliamentarian, would be with us in this abolition campaign.