

## **Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) and Geneva Centre for Security Policy.**

### **The role of Parliament in shaping policy on Weapons of Mass Destruction, disarmament and non-proliferation : Geneva : 31 March**

When President Obama made his famous speech in Prague, now two years ago, about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation and set out the objective of a world free of nuclear weapons, he did an enormous service to all those of us in parliaments around the world who had been struggling, often for many years, to raise the profile of debate on these issues and to lift them up the order of national and international priorities. A similar debt of gratitude is owed to the four distinguished American statesmen - George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Bill Perry and Sam Nunn - who a year or two earlier launched a review of the conventional wisdom about the value of nuclear weapons and about the risks from further proliferation. This demonstrates, I believe, that, important though grass-roots activity on these issues is and essential though the efforts of individual parliamentarians and of groups of parliamentarians are, they are no substitute for leadership at the highest level of national policy-making. The converse can be demonstrated by the eight years of President George W Bush's presidency, when measures of arms control and disarmament were derided, when existing treaties were de-constructed and when the 2005 Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference could not even adopt its own agenda let alone make any progress towards the objectives which had been agreed at the previous review conference in 2000. So leadership does matter, most particularly the leadership in countries which possess a nuclear weapons capability.

For a number of decades the debate in Britain, which is one of those countries, was an exercise in futility. It was dominated by two relatively small groups of people. The first consisted of the government of the day, whether Conservative or Labour, which was determined to hang on to what was called "Britain's nuclear deterrent" and to ensure that the necessary procurement decisions to achieve that objective were taken as far away as possible from the public view and with as little parliamentary debate as could be managed. To some extent these tactics reflected the fact, particularly on the Labour side, that these decisions were deeply divisive in party terms. The second group was made up

of those who wanted Britain to give up its nuclear weapons unilaterally, irrespective of what was happening in the rest of the world. This second group tended to be deeply hostile to general US and NATO foreign policy objectives even outside the nuclear field and that did not help them gain wider support. I have labelled the debate between these two groups as futile not out of disrespect for the views of either but because the outcome was always predictable - the victory of the first group - and because a black and white debate of that sort crowded out any calm, deliberative consideration of wider issues of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Anyway that phase of our history seems now to be behind us. Nothing illustrates that better than the recent establishment of a number of all party groupings - the Top Level Group, of which one of our keynote speakers, Des Browne, is the Convenor, and the Trident Commission set up to look into the future of Britain's nuclear weapons. The lesson I would draw from that experience is the need to avoid too black and white an approach to these issues if one wants to achieve a serious debate and consideration of the policy choices. We are, after all, talking about politics and not religion. In non-nuclear weapons states it is not difficult to achieve a wide consensus that nuclear weapons must be abolished and are, effectively, evil; but those are not particularly useful conclusions to reach in terms of negotiating potential in a world where there are far too many nuclear weapons already and where those who have them tend to have broad national support for their retention.

So what can parliamentarians do who want to make progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons but who recognise that the road towards that objective is a long one, strewn with obstacles and possibly setbacks? What should they be working for? Well first of all it really is important to move these subjects away, at least in debating terms, from negotiations dominated by abstruse and difficult to explain or to understand technical issues, away from the alphabet soup of acronyms which have no meaning for ordinary people or even for your average parliamentarian. Obviously arms control and disarmament negotiations and issues of verification, need to be handled by people who are technically qualified. But these people and their political masters need to be subjected to rigorous parliamentary scrutiny, and they need to be required to explain themselves in broad political terms to audiences which cannot simply be baffled by science and technical expertise.

Secondly there needs to be a determined effort to raise the priority given to disarmament and proliferation issues in each country's foreign policy and to describe and to understand better how these issues relate to wider foreign policy questions. The case of Iran's and of North Korea's nuclear programmes illustrate this need perfectly. Preventing these two countries from breaking out successfully from the non-proliferation regime clearly requires an approach that looks beyond the narrow limits of nuclear policy and involves wider considerations of security and the future role that these two countries might expect to play in their respective regions of the world. Similarly the idea of a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East cannot sensibly be separated from the state of negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbours. I will say a bit more about these issues in a moment.

Raising the priority of all these issues and widening the perspective in which they are considered are clearly objectives to which parliamentary activity can contribute. That, for example, is what the All Party Parliamentary Group on Global Security and Non-proliferation in the British parliament, of which I am the joint Convenor, along with Tony Lloyd, the Chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party, seeks to achieve. We have in the recent past had speakers from a wide range of countries - from the US, Russia, China, France, as well as from non-nuclear weapons states. That too is what general, topical debates in both Houses of Parliament seek to achieve. In recent years I have managed to secure two such debates in the House of Lords and there has been similar activity in the House of Commons.

Looking out beyond those activities in national parliaments there clearly is both the scope and the need for greater collective activity by parliamentarians in support of what I will describe for shorthand purposes as the Obama agenda - further reductions in strategic nuclear weapons beyond the New Start Treaty and bringing in the other three recognised nuclear weapons states, the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, the reduction in the prominence of nuclear weapons in the defence doctrines of all those states who possess them, strengthened measures against further proliferation, the beginning of a sustainable negotiating process at the 2012 conference on a Middle East nuclear weapons free zone. But such collective activity if it is to be genuinely effective and useful needs to be more than just gatherings

of true believers. It needs to reach out to and to include former military leaders and diplomats; it needs to look beyond the confines of fully democratic countries with properly functioning parliamentary systems; it needs to include representatives from the three countries which never signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty but which possess nuclear weapons - India, Israel and Pakistan. And it needs to listen to, even if it does not share, the views of those with contrary opinions.

Now a word or two more about those three key issues I mentioned earlier, a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East and the hard cases of Iran's and North Korea's departures from the disciplines of the NPT. The continuing turmoil in the countries of the Middle East, and that turmoil is not set to subside any time soon, will certainly complicate the task of carrying out the mandate agreed unanimously at last year's NPT review conference of holding a MENFWZ conference in 2012. The risk is that an Israel, which seems to be turning in on itself in horrified alarm at what is going on in its Arab neighbours and reacting purely defensively, and new governments in those neighbours more sensitive than their predecessors were to public opinion's hostile attitude to Israel and to Israeli possession of nuclear weapons, will singly slide into a confrontation, a high level shouting match which will raise the temperature in a region already near to boiling point and just add one more to the range of issues which appear to be insoluble. So, avoiding that worst case scenario must be an important objective; and it is high time that a UN facilitator was given the task of doing just that. More positively there is a need to make of the 2012 conference the first step in a process whose end-date it will probably be impossible to predict but whose end objective, a MENWFZ, needs to be kept alive however unpromising the short term political background.

As to Iran and North Korea I find it hard to be optimistic in the short term but necessary to avoid a degree of pessimism which overwhelms rational calculation. In both cases the use of military force surely remains a worst case scenario, and which risks unleashing a whole range of unintended consequences. But it would be unwise to discount it totally as a possibility even if it ought to be ruled out as an objective of policy. Nor do I find siren songs calling for a revision of existing policies towards Iran and North Korea very convincing. Sanctions are in both cases putting pressure on the transgressors and the possibility of more sanctions is almost certainly inhibiting their actions. The continued

offer of a diplomatic, negotiated way out of the impasses - through the six party process for North Korea, through the 3 + 3 approach for Iran - remain an essential part of any twin track policy, which needs to be sustained and refreshed from time to time. Meanwhile strategic patience is essential. We should never forget that it was changes in South Africa's domestic politics and completely unforeseen changes in the international context which resulted in that country's reversal of its well developed and far-advanced policy of acquiring nuclear weapons.

So there is a big agenda out there and I have not even mentioned the project for an Arms Trade Treaty; and much work for parliamentarians to do. We are, I believe, at an important stage, perhaps a turning point, in the international debate about weapons of mass destruction. Things could go disastrously wrong with a wider break out from the disciplines of the NPT and the foundering of efforts to achieve new measures of arms control and disarmament. Or we could see further progress on the more hopeful direction of travel set out by President Obama. And all this at a moment when we need too to grapple with a new global challenge in the field of cyber security, to explore the possibility of some rules or guidelines which will facilitate dealing with the threats from intra-state cyber attacks, from cyber crime, from cyber terrorism without resorting to the sorts of policies which, in the nuclear field, led to the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. It will not be easy to make progress on such a broad and complex agenda; but it does need to be done; and parliamentarians do need to take their part in promoting it.