

*Setsuko Thurlow*  
*The Case for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*

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*In Honour of Setsuko Thurlow*

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It is such a pleasure to be here at the University of British Columbia to celebrate you, Setsuko, and to congratulate you on your well-deserved Honorary Degree from the University of British Columbia.

You first came into my orbit in 2001 when I was Director of the Simons Centre for Disarmament Research, here at the Liu Institute, and I learned of the James and Setsuko Thurlow Graduate Scholarship in Peace and Disarmament Studies offered to a student pursuing studies in peace and disarmament or weapons of mass destruction. We didn't meet for many years but your name, your life-long commitment, and work, as you bear witness to the horrific atomic devastation wreaked on Hiroshima, has been an inspiration to us all.

Vancouver is a fitting city to honour you. Vancouver has a long history of pride as a Peace City with a dynamic social agenda. In 1983, City Council voted to designate Vancouver a nuclear-weapon free zone. The City was in the global vanguard as a member of the six hundred and eighty-eight (688) Peace Messenger Cities. And Larry Campbell, Vancouver's Mayor from 2002 to 2005, was one of the one thousand and thirty-six (1036) International Mayors for Peace.

Vancouver is also an endangered city in the event of nuclear war. Not only is it a focal point because it is a port city, Vancouver is only 80 miles as the crow flies from a US Trident submarine base; and the US and Russia still have their weapons targeted and on high alert status. In the event of an accidental launch or nuclear war, citizens in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland would be subjected to death-dealing fallout.

If any of you were here in the late 1970s and early 1980s, you will remember that we, in Vancouver, were living in a climate of nuclear fear. The United States, despite large local civil society protests, established a nuclear weapons base at Comox. As well, there was the above-mentioned US nuclear submarine base on the Olympic Peninsula - 80 miles as the crow flies – from Vancouver.

The local newspaper published a map of the city of Vancouver as a target with circles defining the devastating effects. I was a University student at the time, marching in the streets protesting this situation.

I was horrified because my young daughter was having nightmares about nuclear war. I wondered if fear of nuclear weapons had become part of the psyche of young people in North America and began to research on the subject. I found two psychological studies - one of kindergarten-age children and one of college students. In their discussions with the psychologists none of these young people mentioned nuclear war as a conscious concern but in reporting their dreams, nuclear war featured in **every one** of these young peoples' dreams.

I established The Simons Foundation in 1985, when I was in Graduate School because of my concern for my daughter. The first grant I made from the Foundation was to endow a doctoral fellowship for women in physics, imagining – naively and chauvinistically, perhaps – that a woman researching in physics would be a Madame Curie – seeking medical applications - rather than an Edward Teller – whose lifelong focus was in advancing thermonuclear weapons and the hydrogen bomb.

In the early 1980s during the Reagan build-up of nuclear weapons, I marched with students and professors from my university. Even without Twitter and Facebook as mobilization motivators, over one hundred thousand participated in our first march in Vancouver. These marches, which took place in many parts of the world – one million in New York, one million at The Hague, three million in other parts of Europe – were effective forms of protest and played a large part in the desire of Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan to eliminate nuclear weapons.

The world has changed dramatically since then. And the general lack of interest and of concern on the part of the general public is truly worrying because the risk of use of nuclear weapons – either by accident, inadvertent or deliberate is higher than during the Cold War.

Eric Schossler, investigative journalist and author of *Command and Control*" said in a 2015 interview that – and I quote him - “The odds of a major city, somewhere in the world, being destroyed by a nuclear weapon are probably greater today than ever before. Unlike global warming, that sort of catastrophe will occur instantaneously and won’t be reversible.”<sup>1</sup>

The concern about the nuclear threat was still *somewhat* alive in Vancouver in 2019. Following the United Nations vote in favour of a Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, City Councillor, Pete Fry, presented a motion to Vancouver City Council to endorse the Treaty and calling on the Government of Canada to sign and ratify the United Nations Treaty, though I can find no evidence that the motion passed.

The Simons Foundation Canada and the Hiroshima Day Coalition, in 2021, retained Nanos Research to conduct a Canada-wide poll on nuclear disarmament. *Eighty percent of Canadians* polled stated that the world should work to eliminate nuclear weapons. *Seventy-four percent supported Canada signing and ratifying the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.*

However, Canada is adamantly opposed. Canada “supports the retention and potential use [by NATO] of nuclear weapons on its behalf”<sup>2</sup> and has ignored calls by former prime ministers, foreign ministers and defence ministers to join the Treaty. Since 2018, Canada has consistently voted against an annual UN General Assembly resolution to welcome the adoption of the TPNW. And citing NATO commitments, declined to participate, even as an Observer, at the First Meeting

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Hertsgaard, “3 Minutes Until We All Die”, *The Nation*, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015

<sup>2</sup> [www.icanw.org/canada](http://www.icanw.org/canada)

of the States Parties to the Treaty, despite the fact that five other NATO member states and NATO applicant, Sweden attended the meeting.

A small group of Canadian parliamentarians, deeply concerned about nuclear weapon proliferation and escalating threats, and are committed to working with intergenerational leadership from civil society, education and philanthropy, launched the first Youth-Parliament « No Nukes » Summit in the Parliament Senate building in Ottawa earlier this week.

The Simons Foundation Canada was a co-host and I was a participant, as was Setsuko.

The other co-hosts were – and I will read the list to demonstrate that Canadian NGOs are actively engaged in the issue of nuclear disarmament: the Canadian Chapter of Reverse The Trend: Save our People, Save Our Planet; Mines Action Canada; Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention; Canadian Voice of Women for Peace; Project Ploughshares; the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation – actually a U.S. organization, but I am a former Board Member and an Associate.

The Summit provided young people with the opportunity to engage with a variety of actors on effective strategies promoting nuclear disarmament, climate justice and peace; and was held during the week preceding the second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Its major focus was the young people's voices calling on Canada to support the TPNW and to participate as an Observer at the Second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty.

It is difficult to understand why the Prime Minister and his cabinet - beyond rhetorical statements - have little interest in nuclear disarmament and that when pushed cite Canada's NATO commitment.

Many of us work hard to encourage the Liberal government of Canada to return to its early concern about this issue. Since 1968, when Pierre Trudeau took over the party leadership the Liberal Party, Canada has endorsed and acted on nuclear disarmament issues, including signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty which came into effect in 1970.

Twenty-five years ago, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, introduced Human Security as Canada's new foreign policy agenda - the transformation from a state-focused security approach with “war as a legitimate and inevitable instrument of national policy”<sup>3</sup> to a human-centred agenda – a moral, ethical, human security political paradigm, shaped and strengthened by International Law.

While this is no longer Canada's foreign policy, the Human Security policy paradigm was responsible for the Canada's key role in the establishment the International Criminal Court; for the Mine Ban Treaty; for the Convention on Cluster Munitions; and the UN mandated

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Robertson, “Crimes Against Humanity, 199

Responsibility to Protect for the prevention genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity - all issues so relevant to the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and served as a template for the Treaty.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the danger of nuclear war has magnified. And it is in Canada's specific interest to promote nuclear disarmament given the increasing nuclearization of the Arctic domain – Canada's region.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has jeopardized the traditional zone of peace environment in the Arctic. The Russian Northern Nuclear Fleet, based in the Kola Peninsula, intensified its military presence in the Arctic in 2017. And since Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased military activity.

The expansion of the NATO nuclear umbrella to include Arctic states, Sweden and previously neutral Finland, further nuclearizes the Arctic and creates a security threat to the region and, particularly to Canada, because Russia and the United States - its two closest neighbours – are enemies, and have the largest nuclear arsenals.

Historically, Canada has been uneasy with NATO presence in the Arctic. Security measures have been predominantly non-military – governed under the auspices of the Arctic Council which was suspended at the time of Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. If and when, the eight-member Arctic Council resumes, Russia will be facing seven NATO states – an unlikely scenario.

As Ernie Regehr, my colleague and Simons Foundation Fellow says the “Political neglect of the existential nuclear crisis is not benign - it is dangerous and irresponsible, and it should be regarded as inadmissible.”<sup>4</sup>

Setsuko, we support you and work with you in the hopes that Canada and all states sign the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Thank you!

**Jennifer Allen Simons, C.M., Ph.D., LL.D.  
Founder and President,  
The Simons Foundation Canada**

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<sup>4</sup> [www.cips-cepi.ca/2023/11/10/inevitable-or-inadmissible-threatening-nuclear-weapons-use](http://www.cips-cepi.ca/2023/11/10/inevitable-or-inadmissible-threatening-nuclear-weapons-use)