

The UK, IPU and prospects for a nuclear weapons convention

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In March this year I asked that the British delegation to the 2008 IPU General Assembly would submit a motion for the 2008 General Assembly on the need for a nuclear convention. Our delegates agreed to do so, although there is limited understanding of the difference between progressing the NPT and related issues and a Nuclear Convention.

Other countries including Australia and Zambia felt it was their priority too for IPU Standing Committee on Peace and International Security reports to a plenary body, with MPs from the 150 national parliaments of the IPU. It was selected, but only just. As always the situation in the Middle East seems more pressing. The fact that our motion was selected does signify a change in awareness of the situation with regard to nuclear issues.

The motion will look at the issue of advancing nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, and securing the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty: The role of parliaments. There are two rapporteurs, The Honorable Roger Price of Australia and The Honorable Jack Mwiimbu of Zambia, will be working to prepare a draft report for the consideration of the 120th IPU Assembly when it meets next year (5-10 April 2008, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia). The preparation of the draft and the discussion around that is the moment to seize. It is that which offers the opportunity, with the subject firmly on the table, to define just what a Convention would mean and why it is the goal to work towards.

The IPU is an important body for raising awareness amongst parliamentarians for whom this subject is not a primary concern – or not a concern at all. The Parliamentarians who attend the IPU General Assembly are often those for whom nuclear disarmament is a top priority. They may be more concerned with health, education, food prices or trade. It is an opportunity to make them feel as we do that this is a top priority.

According to proponents of a realist theory of international relations, such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, states are after *power* and once they have it they are unlikely to give it up. A liberal interpretation sees more hope in international institutions, like the NPT, for building trust between nations. This viewpoint was made famous by scholars like Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye. It is often to these two paradigms of international relations that scholars and policymakers turn when we try to understand why there are still nuclear weapons in the world.

Very often, though, these theories forget about the *national* debates that underpin international relations. They forget that states' foreign policy interests are not just fixed by the international balance of power or international socio-economic conditions; they can also be influenced by the work of politicians and civil society at the national level. It is in these domestic debates that Parliamentarians can move the disarmament agenda forward.

Impressive political efforts from certain committed Parliamentarians are not backed up by political will for disarmament from national assemblies, either in the weapons states or in most of the non-weapon states. Support from the national democratic assemblies is the missing link in the disarmament effort.

The work of PNND and the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) can help to supply that missing link. The purpose of the IPU is to underpin the *intergovernmental* work in the international arena with *inter-parliamentary* work. IPU is not about the ministers, diplomats and ambassadors who make up government delegations to high-level conferences. IPU is about broadening the democratic input into foreign policy to involve a much wider spectrum of Parliamentarians in open debate, rather than relying on the closed-door diplomacy still typical of some international negotiations. IPU was founded in 1889 by two backbenchers, one from France and one from the UK, and that tradition of broad Parliamentary involvement has continued and grown.

I am sure everyone here today agrees that in order for us to keep up the momentum of NPT, we must move beyond conventional channels of negotiation between governments and involve Parliamentarians across the world. That is why we have the PNND. So far, however, Parliamentarians are mainly involving themselves in the disarmament debate by commenting on the multilateral negotiations. Government ministers and individual Parliamentarians make important political statements in forums such as the UN, NATO and the NPT conferences.

I believe it is vital that now the international high level debate is mirrored by vibrant national debate. National Parliamentary debate give negotiators credibility when they discuss disarmament and it can move their agenda forward.

My research suggests that this national debate is hardly taking place in the national assemblies.

As I mentioned, individual Parliamentarians are making great contributions by commenting on the international situation. From the UK my own party's Baroness Williams of Crosby has been asked by the Government to play a particularly active role. And at the end of last month, four former foreign and defence secretaries issued an appeal to the nuclear states to reduce their stockpiles of weapons. Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP, Lord Owen, Lord Hurd of Westwell and Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, spoke of the risk of terrorists getting hold of nuclear weapons. They said "we can't lecture to non-nuclear states if we don't fulfil our obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to cut back our weapons". This call for international agreement was inspired by the recent Wall Street Journal articles and op-ed pieces on disarmament by Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, William Perry and Sam Nunn. Even the four former UK ministers, however, are not suggesting that Britain should undertake unilateral cuts. Nor has their political statement yet led to renewed consideration of disarmament by Parliament. Indeed as you know Britain is currently committed to renewal of Trident with cross party consensus.

Unfortunately, when the immediate question of funding is not on the table, the national assemblies seem to be neglecting the non-proliferation agenda. This may be a reflection of the short-term political cycle in many democratic legislatures. Parliamentarians are busy with the immediate "hot topics" and can spare little time for long term agendas such as nuclear disarmament. However, this lack of national democratic debate is holding back the international debate so this is a problem we must overcome.

In the UK, we have had a few debates about disarmament. On 04 December 2006 and 14 March 2007 there were major debates in the House of Commons about the future of our trident missile system. Apart from that, though, the number of debates in the House of

Commons that discussed nuclear disarmament in the last 2 years could be counted on one hand. This is a poor record. Yet in December 2006 in a Special Report on nuclear disarmament, the BBC reported that “the only nuclear-weapon state in which there is even debate is the UK”. This suggests that the prospect of debate in the assemblies of other weapons states is even more remote. This is borne out by an examination of the debate in the other weapons countries.

As a member of the EU I am delighted that on July 1st, a cross-party group of Members of the European Parliament (including my colleague Baroness Ludford) launched a Parliamentary declaration in support of the Nuclear Weapons Convention.

I think our national parliamentary debates have been coloured by an ambivalent attitude amongst parliamentarians. Nuclear weapons are both seen as a potent security solution and as a potential security threat. The danger of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of radical terrorist groups presents one of the most significant risks of our generation. The debate on terrorism has focused more attention on the need to first verify nuclear material and work towards removal of our nuclear weapons. However, the difficulty of achieving disarmament in an difficult international system has led to deadlock.

The key to unlocking the disarmament problem is to achieve support for disarmament at every political level. Debate about nuclear disarmament has for too long remained a matter for “high politics”. Negotiations for the NPT are undertaken by diplomats and technocrats. National policies are formulated by Ministers and security analysts. Most ordinary politicians leave the question of disarmament well alone, as shown by the dearth of debates on this subject in the national assemblies. Those that do speak out do so through extra-parliamentary pressure groups, such as CND, or in international groups like PNND, but they do so as individuals, not with the democratic support of their parliaments behind them.

The media and opposition parties often use any Government moves towards disarmament as a sign of weakness. That is why parliamentary pressure and backing for the moves at a national level is so critical. As a new President of the United States decides what to do on this crucial issue we must, as national parliaments, as George Schultz put it so well when he visited the UK Parliament recently “be ready to step behind him and applaud when he makes the right moves”.

The IPU offers an excellent forum to inform Parliamentarians of the current position, to allow them to share difficulties and fears and, very importantly, to take the issue back to their national parliaments for debate.

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