

Nuclear Weapons and the Language of “Power”

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Or should that be the language of ‘assumed’ power? The United Kingdom has been swamped by examples of sneering, belittling statements issuing from the Westminster bubble over the last few months, many of the insults being directed at Scotland during the Independence Referendum and the General Election, making the Scots justifiably angry and an increasing number of the English equally embarrassed. That these comments came from all the main parties was an illustration of how low our political system has sunk.

One assumption made by Prime Minister David Cameron and his cronies is that they speak for the English, which they don’t; because [they ‘won’ the election](#), questionable given that only 25 percent of the electorate voted for them; because they have a ‘majority’, which is not that major; because, being in ‘power’ they can ignore the people, which they will find they can’t. Those who were despairing at the election results are now turning that despair into anger. And that also includes some of their own MPs.

But while all this was going on, delegates from the UK were in New York attending the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference (NPT RevCon). Along with delegates from the other states that have nuclear weapons they spent four weeks insulting, belittling, sneering at and finally ignoring all the other states taking part. Sound familiar?

Just to lay out the battle lines:

188 states, members of the UN, have signed up to the NPT, as have the Holy See and Palestine (both UN ‘observer’ states). The United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China are recognised in the Treaty as being ‘nuclear weapon states’ and are also permanent members of the UN Security Council, the ‘P5’. Four other states have nuclear weapons – Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea, none of which are signed up to the NPT and therefore cannot (legitimately) take part in the Review Conferences.

This was the ninth RevCon since the first was held in 1975. It also marked the 20-year anniversary of the NPT’s indefinite extension agreed in 1995, and that should tell you something. The P5 will do what they can to delay fully implementing the Treaty; they call it a ‘step by step’ process, though in which direction is unclear. Article VI of the Treaty states:

“Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”

In other words, the Treaty is not just about preventing the spread of these dreadful weapons. Its end aim is total disarmament, not something the P5 want, for while the US,

backed by Nato is busy trying to create a new Cold War with Russia, and fomenting another with China, when it comes to hanging on to their nuclear weapons, they are all allies, used to bullying the less powerful states. Only this time it didn't work.

Non-nuclear states were no longer going to be dismissed by the P5 and their few allies. Austria, having prepared the Humanitarian Pledge which calls on states "to identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons" [spoke on their behalf](#), and indeed for all of humanity, in recognising the appalling humanitarian consequences that even the detonation of one nuclear weapon would cause.

The Humanitarian Pledge (the thorny obstacle the P5 wants to push aside) was the result of the [Vienna Conference](#) on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (HINW) last December, with 45 states initially endorsing the Pledge.

By the start of the 2015 RevCon 159 non-nuclear states had signed up to the Pledge and the endorsing states had increased to 76.

A further 26 non-nuclear states were [represented by Australia](#) and while supporting the basis of the Pledge, carefully gave a nod towards the P5:

"At the same time, eliminating nuclear weapons is only possible through substantive and constructive engagement with those states which possess nuclear weapons."

In other words, we can't make these things illegal and can only get rid of them by the 'step by step' process that has produced nothing concrete – and, if the P5 have their way, never will. They had, for instance, [done little](#) to implement the commitments given at the last RevCon in 2010. Their Joint Statement appeared to say that the best way to protect the security of the world was to hang on to weapons that threatened the world's security.

They spoke a lot about maintaining *their* 'security'. "If," [asked the South African delegate](#), "for security reasons the five feel that they must be armed with nuclear weapons, what about other countries, in similar situations? Do we think that the global situation is such that no other country would ever aspire to nuclear weapons to provide security for themselves, when the five tell us that it is absolutely correct to possess nuclear weapons for their security? ...if the five are saying that for the rest of us, you will never need nuclear weapons for your security, what is so unique about their security situation that makes it imperative for them to be the only countries that have the right to have nuclear weapons for their security?"

The P5 did, for what it is worth, produce a multi-lingual glossary of nuclear terms at the start of the RevCon. Delegates and civil society representatives were not impressed – one comment was: "The product of five years of work by the P5 is the much-ridiculed Glossary, which explains that an underground nuclear test is one which takes place beneath the surface of the earth..."

May 18 – 84 states have now endorsed the Humanitarian Pledge.

It must have been irritating for the P5, the persistence of the non-nuclear states, their constant mentioning of the Pledge, their determination to get it written into any final summary of the 2015 Review. The language used by the P5, the words they employed,

became a battleground. They reiterated their long-held belief that, because the NPT described them as states holding nuclear weapons, it 'legalised' their position. They constantly conflated 'reduction' with 'disarmament'. 'Conflagration', the inevitable result of using such weapons became the simple 'detonation'. It sounds so much cleaner. Costa Rica [suggested](#) the Conference should stop "patting the P5 on the back."

It became clear to delegates, during many attempts to draft the final report on the Conference that the wording did not, and would never, reflect the feelings of the majority. [Thailand](#) made it plain:

Austria's statement on behalf of 159 states "clearly underlines that we are dealing with an issue that enjoys the support of an overwhelming number of States Parties that simply cannot be pushed aside... we are a little disappointed, Mr. Chair, that the most important points we and the majority of NPT States Parties intervened upon, are not reflected in the document. Yet issues that were raised by one or two delegations enjoy their place in the merged document we have before us."

The one draft [that was clear in its demands](#) for complete disarmament was scrapped, on the demand of the P5. Early drafts ignored the Humanitarian Pledge initiative. The [final draft](#) devoted one whole sentence to it (point 139) despite the fact that state after state had pushed it into debates. Such treatment of the non-nuclear states had an inevitable result. They were getting angry.

May 20 - over 90 states have now endorsed the Humanitarian Pledge.

The UK [argued](#) that those seeking a ban on these weapons are 'misguided', and that to follow such a course would undermine the NPT. Beatrice Fihn of ICAN [says](#) that a ban would strengthen the NPT. The difficulty for the P5 is that they cannot stop the Humanitarian Pledge from developing into a Convention to ban nuclear weapons. Such a ban would make it clear how little the P5 have done over the last 40 years regarding the NPT. They point proudly to 'reduction' of their arsenals, but as [Ireland](#) and others pointed out, getting rid of old weapons and replacing them with fewer but more powerful ones cannot be called 'disarmament'.

May 22 - 99 states have now endorsed the Humanitarian Pledge.

The UK had said it "[supports the 1995 Resolution](#) on the Middle East and the goal of a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction. And we deeply regret that a conference on the establishment of such a zone has not yet taken place." That did not stop it from backing Israel's [backroom request](#) to have any mention of such a Middle East zone removed from the final draft report. Israel, remember, is not a member of the NPT and has no legal say in the proceedings. It was for some states the last straw. They were outraged.

The 2015 NPT RevCon [ended in failure](#), with no final outcome report agreed. As Ray Acheson of Reaching Critical Will [wrote](#):

"If the month-long review of the Treaty's implementation and attempts to develop actions for moving forward had not already sufficiently underscored the depth of the Treaty's discriminatory orientation privileging nuclear-armed states, the Conference's conclusion certainly did."

On the other hand, by the end of the Conference 107 states had endorsed the Humanitarian Pledge.

The Humanitarian Pledge was the [real outcome](#) of the Review. Further, it is clear the P5 believe that the NPT belongs solely to them, for them to do with as they would.

The rest of the world is walking away. Just as the arrogant and nasty language used by Westminster over Scotland will only serve to make that nation's people more inclined to independence, regardless of their own political bias so, where nuclear weapons are concerned, the rest of the world now feels free to ignore the P5 and act on behalf of their people.

The P5 will of course go on bullying behind the scenes. It is the only way they know how to behave. Humility was never part of the game, and diplomacy disappeared years ago. But the language of power is losing its potency. The nastier it gets, the more people and states understand the desperation of the language, how frightened the big boys are of losing their influence.

Now is the time for non-nuclear states to act, to start negotiations on a Convention on nuclear weapons. They have stood together and refused to allow the P5 its way. They must be feeling a sense of true comradeship with their fellow nations. That energy must not be wasted but put into drafting the much needed law. The best date to start such action? The 70th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - August this year. They can do it; they really can make them illegal.

What would this mean for the UK, in particular for Scotland which is being forced to house these unwanted monstrosities? With all the backing of international law Scotland could and should claim the moral high ground. As upholders of that law they simply could not allow their precious land to be used for such illegality. Nor, come to that, could the rest of the UK.

For a day by day account of the 2015 RevCon, with links to some brilliant speeches by the delegates, read Ray Acheson on Reaching Critical Will's [News Review](#).

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