

Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee



WATCHING BRIEF 22-2: NUCLEAR WEAPONS BAN TREATY UPDATE

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government, we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

July 2022

QPLC issued a Watching Brief (18-6) about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons adopted by the UN General Assembly in July 2017. In 2021 (WB 21-3) QPLC gave a list of those MPs and Senators who were part of a 'Parliamentary Friends of the Treaty' group. This Brief updates the situation in relation to the recent Conference of the Parties held in Vienna, Austria.

Background

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) began in Australia in 2007, and gained support from non-nuclear weapons states and NGOs because of its focus on the humanitarian implications of the use of nuclear weapons, and the failure of the nuclear weapons states to take steps towards disarmament as required under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The Treaty was adopted by a vote of 122 countries in favour. Australia opposed it. The Treaty (a) sought comprehensive bans on nuclear weapons and related activity, (b) created a path for nuclear states to eliminate weapons and stockpiles, (c) set up a verification process and safeguards, and (d) required victim assistance and environmental remediation. The number of signatories to the Treaty is 86, and the number of ratifications has now reached 65.

First Meeting of States Parties

From 21 to 23 June 2022 the meeting was held in Vienna. In opening the meeting, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that more than 13,000 nuclear weapons are being held in arsenals across the globe, and this is a recipe for annihilation. Russia was condemned

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for its actions against Ukraine, and testimony was heard from survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in Japan. Representatives of youth groups emphasised the need to engage young people in universalising and implementing the Treaty. A delegation of parliamentarians from 16 countries highlighted their role in building support. The outcome was an action plan of 50 items.

The results of the meeting are summarised below:

1. The Vienna Declaration was adopted. It expressed alarm at threats to use nuclear weapons, affirmed the importance of the Treaty as a way to de-legitimise nuclear weapons, reiterated the humanitarian basis of the Treaty, reaffirmed its compatibility with other disarmament agreements, and resolved to work hard for all states to join.
2. Universalisation. Committed to diplomatic outreach to countries that have not yet joined the UNGA resolutions supporting the Treaty.
3. Elimination. Set a deadline of 10 years to eliminate nuclear weapons.
4. Helping those harmed. Agree to steps to consult affected communities and create an international trust fund for victims.
5. Civil Society. Cooperate with ICAN, the Red Cross, academia and NGOs to ensure inclusive and transparent remedies.
6. Gender. Develop guidelines for age- and gender-sensitive assistance for those harmed by nuclear weapons testing and use.
7. Sustaining the Work. Establish informal working groups to advance these actions.
8. Working with Scientists. Create a scientific advisory group.
9. Liaise with Nuclear Disarmament Regime. Appoint a coordinator to develop cooperation between the Treaty and the NPT.

It is worth noting that several youth representatives from the Pacific attended the meeting, to make clear the significance of the Treaty to Pacific communities affected adversely by more than 315 nuclear tests over the years. They link climate issues with the nuclear weapons threat. Ten members of the Pacific Islands Forum have ratified the Treaty already, along with New Zealand.

In a letter to the conference delegates, Quakers (including QPLC) joined 139 other faith organisations in welcoming the meeting. The statement (issued on 22 June 2022) was coordinated by the World Council of Churches and Soka Gakkai International. It emphasised the historic occasion and celebrated the milestone that “moves us closer to a world without nuclear weapons”. It said that “the resources currently spent on the development and maintenance of these weapons should be directed towards supporting the most vulnerable people and protecting the planet through investing in food, education, health care and climate justice”. States parties to the treaty were urged to work for the universalisation of the treaty. See www.fwcc.world

Beatrice Fihn, ICAN Executive Director, welcomed the outcome of the meeting and said “this is the strongest condemnation of nuclear threats by a multilateral UN conference, and shows and unprecedented commitment by a global alliance of states, survivors of nuclear detonations, international organisations and civil society to prevent nuclear war and eliminate nuclear weapons”. She commended the practical approach of the meeting, saying “this is how we are building a powerful norm against nuclear weapons: not through lofty statements or

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empty promises, but through hands-on focused action involving a truly global community of governments and civil society”.

See www.icanw.org/vienna_declaration_action_plan_overview

Australia and the Treaty

Despite Australia’s initial refusal to support the Treaty, a Parliamentary Friends of the Treaty group was formed on a non-partisan basis in June 2020 to help lay the groundwork for a change of the decision. NGOs including Friends lobbied MPs and Senators as part of ICAN’s campaign to build momentum for this change. Prior to the 2022 federal election, several major figures in the Labor Party indicated their support for a change. Immediately after the election brought the Labor government to power, it was announced that Susan Templeman MP would be Australia’s observer at the Vienna meeting. QPLC prepared (and the Presiding Clerk sent) a letter to the Prime Minister Anthony Albanese as follows:

Congratulations on your election to government and appointment as Prime Minister. Australian Quakers wish you well in your endeavours for peace and welcome your intention to add Australia to the list of those countries committed to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

The threat of nuclear weapons being used has been heightened recently during the war in Ukraine. For many years, since the formation of the United Nations, Australia has used its good offices internationally to help build a framework of treaties and conventions that reduce the risk of war involving nuclear weapons. However in recent years that work has been undermined by a failure to join the growing efforts to ban these weapons of mass destruction. This is despite significant public concern for Australia to be more active in promoting disarmament.

We applaud the move by the ALP to accept the treaty, and acknowledge the letter of endorsement from former diplomats who have served Australia well in the cause of peace. We hope the necessary steps to sign and then ratify the treaty will occur as soon as possible.

Action

Friends are encouraged to approach their MP and/or Senator for an indication of whether they will support Australia’s signing and ratifying the Treaty. The co-chairs of the previous Parliamentary Friends Group could be approached directly to urge that that group continue in the current Parliament:

Ged Kearney MP (Labor, Vic) Ged.Kearney.MP@aph.gov.au

Ken O’Dowd MP (Liberal-National, Qld) Ken.Odowd.MP@aph.gov.au

Senator Jordan Steele-John (Greens, WA) senator.steele-john@aph.gov.au

Canberra, July 2022

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