

Nuclear threat calls for leadership CHURCH TIMES 29 JANUARY 2021

The Government should sign the UN Prohibition Treaty, argues *Christopher Cocksworth*

Activists in Detroit demand that the United States sign the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, last Friday. The UK has also not yet signed the Treaty

IN NOVEMBER, I joined others to urge the UK Government to withdraw its proposals to cut our foreign-aid budget. We appealed to basic principles of Christian compassion and humanitarian concern, and made the point that our assistance to economically disadvantaged countries, gripped as they were by the same coronavirus, would be mutually beneficial.



Only a few days later — together with the Archbishop of York and the Bishop of Liverpool, and supported by 30 bishops, including, courageously, the Archbishop of Canterbury — I found myself working with the same toolkit of ideas and practical concerns to urge the Government to sign the United Nations' Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Observing the Government's response, I was struck by glaring instances of doublethink.

The first was the Government's claim to aspire to a "long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons", which sat uncomfortably with their assertion, almost in the same breath, that Trident should not be scrapped in the face of budgetary pressures, since "the safety and security of the United Kingdom is a long-term issue and immediate economic pressures are not sufficient rationale for taking risks with the security of the nation."

The Government had decided, only days previously, that the aid budget that keeps people alive and builds foundational infrastructure in developing countries was not a sufficiently long-term concern to be safeguarded. What, I wonder, is meant by "long-term"? The Government did not seem to have thought it all through.

The "nuclear deterrent" — a technical euphemism to distract us from the reality of nuclear weapons, which are already causing suffering — is another idea with an inbuilt contradiction. Deterrence policy expects us to be resolutely prepared to use weapons that would have such catastrophic consequences that we cannot think of them as any more than a deterrent.

THE TPNW, built on the foundations of the 2013 Humanitarian Initiative under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), brings us back to reality and forces us to confront the suffering caused by the use, development, and possession of nuclear weapons, and the fact that the marginalised are disproportionately affected. A certain Christian Realism of the 20th century sought to justify the view that deterrence was necessary in the face of real threats. Today, post-Cold War, there is a new reality, in the form of this treaty and 122 countries that support it.

In the House of Lords on Thursday of last week, the Government refused to acknowledge this reality. I pressed the Government to engage constructively with the TPNW, and to consider sending observers to the first meeting of states party to the treaty later this year, thereby giving us a seat in the room as states develop the treaty's institutional and legal framework. The response

gave scant evidence that the Government was ready even to hear the concerns of the countries which support it, let alone explain how they will seriously respond to this new reality in international law.

I have suggested some of the contradictions in the Government's thinking, and yet we are told that we are the ones contradicting ourselves. We are told that the TPNW is incompatible with the NPT, to which the UK is a party. On the contrary: the TPNW provides a powerful legal reinforcement to the NPT, which itself has been progressing slowly, much to the frustration of the world beyond nuclear-armed states.

Indeed, the UN secretary-general has described the TPNW as a "further pillar of the disarmament regime". The TPNW will, therefore, loom large over the NPT Review Conference (scheduled for August), whose success the UK, as a signatory, has a duty to ensure. We are also told that supporting the TPNW is incompatible with our NATO membership — and yet a recent study from Harvard showed this not to be the case.

THE Government could, perhaps, be forgiven for not having the time to give this issue due consideration. Of course, there are threats that are ostensibly more immediate, and political concerns that seem insurmountable.

And yet, this year, Britain is boldly reimagining itself after its exit from the European Union, and seeking to lead the way in reimagining the world through COP26 and the G7. The public has rarely been so globally aware, and, as vaccine nationalism collides with the reality of vastly exacerbated global inequalities, people are thinking about our crises in ever more overtly moral terms.

It is time now for Global Britain to show leadership, intellectual energy, and moral seriousness by engaging with the concerns of the 122 nations that support the TPNW, including their impatience with us (under, it should be said, successive governments: Labour, Coalition, Conservative) and other nuclear-weapon countries to deliver on our promises to rid the world of these weapons of mass — near-total — destruction.

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