

Labor's Nuclear Record

Tim Wright

Labor's collapsing commitment to disarmament under Rudd and Gillard

In June 2008, seven months after being elected prime minister, Kevin Rudd became the first serving Western leader to visit Hiroshima since the atomic bombing in the Second World War. After laying a wreath in honour of the dead, he commented to journalists: 'It's impossible to visit Hiroshima and not be moved by what you see'. In the visitors book at the peace memorial park, he pledged his support 'for a world where nuclear weapons are no more', signalling a shift in approach from that of his immediate predecessor, John Howard, who had shown little interest in advancing nuclear disarmament during his eleven years in office. Mr Rudd's exhortations, indeed his very presence in Hiroshima, generated hope and expectation that the new Labor government would champion the anti-nuclear cause. But the optimism of that moment soon evaporated, the memory of Hiroshima giving way to the dictates of *realpolitik*.

During its two terms in government, from 2007 to 2013, the Labor Party not only failed to promote the abolition of nuclear weapons in any meaningful sense, it actively undermined that goal. It resisted the efforts of progressive nations to negotiate a global treaty banning nuclear weapons, encouraged the United States to bolster its nuclear war-fighting capability, and opened up uranium trade with nuclear-armed Russia and India. This is the record of a party whose national platform declares 'unequivocal commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons'.

Julia Gillard, who succeeded Kevin Rudd as Labor leader and prime minister, has cited the strengthening of Australia's relations with the United States and India as among her top foreign policy accomplishments in office. But these came at a price. Australia's increased military entanglement with the United States—it possesses some 7400 nuclear weapons—further diminished Australia's credibility as a disarmament advocate. Gillard's pursuit of uranium trade with India—engaged in a nuclear arms race with neighbour Pakistan—further eroded the already fragile global nuclear non-proliferation regime.

For all their rhetoric in favour of a nuclear weapons-free world, the Rudd and Gillard governments demonstrated a remarkable lack of commitment to that goal. When the Labor Party returns to power, it must be ready to embark on a genuine effort to realise the vision that Kevin Rudd articulated eloquently in Hiroshima but failed to realise. From the opposition benches, Labor has an opportunity to set out a new agenda, which should include leading international negotiations for a ban on nuclear weapons, ending Australia's support for US nuclear

weapons in its defence, and phasing out uranium exports.

A Ban on Nuclear Weapons

A year before Prime Minister Rudd's trip to Hiroshima, there was every indication that the Labor Party, if successful at the November 2007 ballot, would make nuclear disarmament a top priority. Robert McClelland, shadow foreign affairs spokesperson, promised to drive 'the international agenda for a nuclear weapons convention'. He described the proposal for such a treaty as 'timely' and 'responsible': 'Ultimately, the question ... is not why there should be a nuclear weapons convention, but why the international community has not yet agreed to start negotiating one'. However, appointed attorney-general, McClelland never became foreign minister, and the Labor government never embraced the idea of a global ban on nuclear weapons.

On many occasions during its two terms in office, Labor was encouraged to take a more progressive stand on a possible ban, including by Australian Red Cross, which ran a public campaign on the issue, and by its own semi-independent International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, set up in 2008 and co-chaired by former Labor Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. The commission's final, November 2009, report advised governments to commence work immediately 'on further refining and developing the concepts' that would underpin a future treaty.

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Earlier in 2009, the parliament’s cross-party Joint Standing Committee on Treaties had published a review of Australia’s role in relation to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, recommending that Australia ‘make clear in international fora its support for the adoption of a nuclear weapons convention’. But despite this unambiguous advice, and that of Evans’ commission, Rudd remained silent. His government merely ‘noted’ the parliamentary committee’s recommendation, and continued to abstain from all votes on UN General Assembly resolutions calling for negotiations (which was marginally better than the Howard government’s record of consistently voting ‘no’).

Prime Minister Gillard was similarly unsupportive of a global ban on nuclear weapons. On Australia Day 2012, more than 700 recipients of the Order of Australia, including past prime ministers, governors-general, foreign ministers, defence ministers and chiefs of the armed forces, called on her to show ‘initiative and leadership’ on a ban. She declined to accept their appeal in person, sending a brief, standard-form reply, but two months later did introduce a motion into parliament affirming Australia’s commitment to ‘the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons’. In a rare display of bipartisanship, opposition leader Tony Abbott lent his support to the statement. The Australian Greens had pushed for stronger language on a ban, but politicians from the major parties rejected it. Any near-term prohibition treaty was out of the question.

In early 2013, Gillard promised that Australia would make nuclear disarmament a top priority during its two-year term on the UN Security Council. But there was never any evidence of this. The Gillard government remained resistant to the idea of a ban on nuclear weapons to the end. It claimed that pursuing a ban would divert attention away from more ‘practical’ initiatives aimed at reducing nuclear dangers. But its true objection, as revealed in documents obtained by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons under freedom of information, was that a treaty outlawing nuclear weapons would ‘rub up against’ Australia’s reliance on US ‘extended nuclear deterrence’.

After Australia attended (but did not speak at) the first-ever intergovernmental conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, hosted by the Norwegian government in Oslo in March 2013, Australia’s Geneva-based diplomats reported to officials in Canberra: ‘The nuclear-weapon states had concerns, which we shared, that the [conference] would be used as a platform to advocate a convention banning nuclear

weapons’. Indeed, many of the 128 participating states, as well as the Red Cross, did argue that a ban was needed. The following month, at a meeting of parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Australia refused to join 80 nations in endorsing a joint statement about the catastrophic humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, fearing the underlying objective was to bolster support for a ban.

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Gareth Evans urged the government to ‘stand on the right side of history’. Instead it sided with its nuclear-armed allies, stating that its objection to the joint statement was a reference to a Red Cross resolution on nuclear weapons adopted in 2011, which Australia saw as part of a troubling new campaign to ‘delegitimise’ the use and possession of nuclear weapons by all states. When Australian Red Cross CEO Robert Tickner questioned Foreign Minister Bob Carr about this, Canberra bureaucrats hastily devised an alternative excuse to avoid giving the issue too much oxygen. In Fairfax reports on the incident, Evans lambasted the government for its ‘complete abdication of principle’. Reflecting on the NPT meeting, Australia’s diplomats resolved that the government would in future engage more actively in humanitarian disarmament initiatives—not to lend its support, but to work from the inside to steer other governments away from the idea of a ban.

Preparations for Nuclear War

During its six years in government, Labor released two defence white papers, each of which expressed support for the use of US nuclear weapons in Australia’s defence. The 2013 white paper declared: ‘As long as nuclear weapons exist, we rely on the nuclear forces of the United States to deter nuclear attack on Australia’. As well as subscribing to the idea of extended nuclear deterrence, Australia contributes to US preparations for nuclear war by hosting joint intelligence and military facilities. The most crucial of the US nuclear war-fighting apparatus is the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap, eighteen kilometres southwest of Alice Springs, which assists with missile early warning, defence and nuclear targeting.

Under Labor, Australia’s military enmeshment with the United States escalated dramatically as part of

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the broader US ‘pivot to Asia’, essentially a policy to contain China, which risks another cold war and ratchets up the dangers of nuclear conflict. When President Barack Obama visited Australia in 2011, he announced that up to 2500 US marines would be stationed in Darwin on ‘permanent rotation’. Responding to public concerns about a lack of independence in Australian government policy, Defence Minister Stephen Smith insisted ‘there are no US bases in this country’, a gross misrepresentation of reality (see Malcolm Fraser, *Arena Magazine* no. 120 and Richard Tanter in *Arena Journal* no. 39/40).

All of this has significant implications for Australia’s disarmament diplomacy. Under Rudd, Australia’s foreign and defence departments made a secret joint submission to the 2009 US Nuclear Posture Review, noting that Australia’s disarmament obligations under the NPT, and its support for the international commission led by Gareth Evans, ‘must be balanced against our strategic interest in ensuring stability through ensuring a credible US extended deterrence’. They claimed the US guarantee to use nuclear weapons in Australia’s defence (for which, incidentally, there is no public evidence) provides ‘a stable and reliable sense of assurance’.

During a closed session of the Congressional Commission on Strategic Posture, Australian Ambassador to the United States, Dennis Richardson, encouraged the United States to maintain a strong and effective nuclear arsenal, and boasted of Australia’s ‘vital’ and ‘enduring’ contribution to the US nuclear force posture through joint facilities such as Pine Gap. He urged the United States ‘to make clear that it would respond in kind to nations that employ nuclear weapons against friends and allies of the US, even where there is no existential threat to the US itself’.

At the same time Prime Minister Rudd was promoting nuclear disarmament on the international stage, and Gareth Evans was preparing his report, Australian officials were conveying, behind closed doors, Australia’s unyielding support for US nuclear weapons. As it turned out, rather than examining Australia’s own substantial role in exacerbating nuclear dangers globally, or the even greater role of our nuclear-armed allies, Labor focused on the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea.

In June 2013, Australian Greens senator Scott Ludlam asked a senior foreign ministry official how the government reconciled support for the elimination of nuclear weapons with its white paper, ‘which rather embarrassingly continues Australia’s support for the use of nuclear weapons in our security policy’. The response: ‘As long as nuclear weapons continue to exist, the government will rely on the nuclear force of the United States to deter nuclear attack on Australia. Of course, our goal is a world without nuclear weapons—but we are not at that point’. When Ludlam suggested that ‘we will never be at that point while we continue to support deterrence theory and the benefits of Australia remaining under a nuclear weapons umbrella’, Foreign Minister Bob Carr intervened with: ‘The logic of that position, Senator, would be that Australia withdraw from the US treaty relationship’.

A discussion ensued on how Australia might go about achieving a nuclear weapons-free defence policy, with Senator Ludlam arguing that Australia need not abandon the US alliance to realise this objective. Nothing in the ANZUS treaty would prevent Australia from advising its ally that it no longer required the ‘protection’ of nuclear weapons. In fact, this would be a logical course of action, given that Article I of the treaty obliges parties to refrain from ‘the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations’.

By taking the long overdue step of renouncing nuclear weapons, Australia would be in a position to advocate with greater authority and less restraint for nuclear disarmament.

Diplomatic fallout of the kind experienced by New Zealand, following its 1984 decision barring nuclear warships from visiting its ports, would be unlikely to be encountered by Australia if it chose to adopt a nuclear-free posture. The Cold War is long over, and nuclear weapons (to our knowledge) no longer venture into Australian waters: since 1992, US surface ships and attack submarines have not carried them. While the task of ending the nuclear role of joint facilities like Pine Gap would no doubt be contentious, it is hard to imagine it would put an end to the alliance. It is worth noting that the military rapprochement between New Zealand and the United States in recent years has occurred despite New Zealand’s firm anti-nuclear stance. Why should Australia, one of the most geographically secure nations in the world, continue to place such high value on the very worst weapons of mass destruction?

Fuelling and Funding the Bomb

Another significant way in which Australia contributes to global nuclear dangers is through the export of uranium. Labor’s national platform itself ‘recognises that the production of uranium and its use in the nuclear fuel cycle present unique and unprecedented hazards and risks, including ... the generation of products that are usable as the raw materials for nuclear weapons manufacture’. Historically, large quantities of Australian uranium were used to fabricate US and British nuclear bombs, many of which were tested in the atmosphere, underground and underwater, endangering the lives of test site workers and nearby communities, and rendering vast swathes of land permanently uninhabitable.

Today, Australia has twenty-two bilateral ‘nuclear cooperation’ agreements in place, covering thirty-nine nations, including all five ‘nuclear-weapon states’ recognised under the NPT: the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China. Although the government now formally opposes the use of Australian uranium in nuclear weapons, the unavoidable limitations of nuclear ‘safeguards’ mean it is

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impossible to ensure that Australian uranium is never used for military purposes. Moreover, the manufacture of nuclear weapons is not the only danger associated with uranium exports. In March 2011, Australian uranium helped fuel the second worst nuclear disaster in history at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan, which continues to release large volumes of radioactive water into the ocean. Dr Robert Floyd, director-general of the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office, confirmed this in October 2011: ‘Australian-obligated nuclear material was at the Fukushima Daiichi site and in each of the reactors—maybe five out of six, or it could have been all of them; almost all of them.’

Floyd’s frank admission might have prompted the Labor Party to question its continued support for uranium mining. Instead, little more than a month after his statement, Labor passed a resolution supporting the addition of a new nation—the most controversial yet—to Australia’s ever-expanding list of uranium recipients: India. Several senior Labor parliamentarians voiced deep concerns, and almost half the party’s national conference delegates voted against the proposal. Kevin Rudd, foreign minister at the time, was reportedly furious about the decision. He had previously cautioned against a deal being struck with India on the basis that it had failed to accede to the 1968 NPT and 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). As opposition leader, he had vowed to tear up any agreement that the then Coalition government might seal with India.

Prime Minister Gillard appears not to have harboured any such concerns. She assured the Australian people that strong safeguards would guarantee Australian uranium did not find its way into Indian nuclear bombs. But India’s military nuclear facilities would almost certainly remain off-limits to inspectors. K. Subrahmanyam, who chaired India’s National Security Advisory Board, had candidly explained in the *Times of India* in 2005:

Given India’s uranium ore crunch and the need to build up our minimum credible nuclear deterrent arsenal as fast as possible, it is to India’s advantage to categorise as many power reactors as possible as civilian ones to be refuelled by imported uranium and conserve our native uranium fuel for weapons-grade plutonium production.

Today, India continues to produce both highly enriched uranium and separated plutonium for weapons. It is building up the number of warheads in its nuclear arsenal, and investing heavily in nuclear-capable missiles and submarines. It has made no legally binding undertakings to disarm, or even to refrain from conducting further nuclear test explosions.

And India is by no means the only country of concern. Under Labor, shipments of Australian uranium made their way for the first time to China in 2008, and Russia in 2012. And in 2013, the Gillard government struck a nuclear agreement with the United Arab Emirates, the first country in the Middle East, aside from Iran, building a nuclear power plant.

Whereas the Chinese export deal had come into force during the final year of the Howard government, it was up to Prime Minister Rudd to decide whether to give approval to the equally contentious agreement with Russia, which Howard had signed but not ratified. In 2008, the parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, which reviews all international agreements entered into by Australia, recommended against ratification of the Russian deal because of several proliferation-related concerns. In its submission to the committee, the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office promised that ‘strict’ export conditions would ‘ensure’ non-diversion of Australian uranium for military purposes. But, inconveniently for the government, Friends of the Earth Australia pointed out that no inspections by the international nuclear watchdog had occurred in Russia since 2001. The deal went ahead without alteration.

Labor’s commitment to a nuclear weapon-free world was also tested in May 2011, when Fairfax media reported that the government-owned Future Fund had invested \$135.4 million in fifteen foreign-owned companies involved in the manufacture of nuclear weapons. One such company, Larsen & Toubro, is building India’s fleet of nuclear-armed submarines, while the others are heavily involved in the modernisation of US, British and French nuclear forces. ‘We’ve got no plans to divest those holdings’, the Future Fund’s spokesperson informed *The Age*. Yet, only a few months earlier, the fund had resolved, on ethical grounds, to sell off its equities in ten companies that produce anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions, including US defence giants Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics.

Why the distinction? The Future Fund claims that there is nothing untoward about investing in nuclear weapons companies because the NPT permits certain nations to possess nuclear weapons. However, Article VI of the treaty in fact obliges all parties to pursue negotiations for nuclear disarmament. Modernising and upgrading a nation’s arsenal, with the intention

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of keeping it for many decades to come, is anathema to this provision. Finance Minister Penny Wong, whose ministerial duties included oversight of the Future Fund, chose not to take a stand, noting ‘the importance of the fund operating its investment strategy without government interference’, although the government was to adopt a very hands-on approach to Future Fund investments in tobacco companies. After receiving a letter from Attorney-General Nicola Roxon, the Future Fund promptly dumped its tobacco stocks in February 2013.

Learning to Stop Loving the Bomb

Whenever Labor ministers came under fire for the government’s nuclear policies, they were quick to stress their party’s fundamental position—support for a world without nuclear weapons. The party’s national platform, adopted in 2011, claims that in its first term, Labor ‘renewed Australia’s efforts towards ridding the world of nuclear weapons’. But where is the evidence? Even the Rudd-initiated International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament did not manage to present a clear road map to zero nuclear weapons. In the world of ‘practical’ politics, elimination was seen as a bridge too far, while challenging the validity of extended nuclear deterrence is far beyond both Labor’s and the Coalition’s ardent defence of it.

Another of Labor’s major diplomatic initiatives was the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI), a cross-regional grouping of foreign ministers established by Australia and Japan in September 2010. But the initiative’s biannual statements have been lacklustre, focusing more on curbing the spread of nuclear weapons than doing away with the many thousands that already exist. Some have criticised NPDI for its pro-US bias, arguing that the group’s composition prevents it from being taken seriously by nuclear-armed Russia and China. Seven of the Initiative’s twelve member nations formally rely on US nuclear weapons in their defence doctrines, and three of them (Germany, the Netherlands and Turkey) host US nuclear bombs on their territory.

Like most NPDI nations, Australia advocates a ‘step-by-step approach’ to nuclear disarmament involving, first of all, the entry into force of the CTBT, followed by the negotiation of a treaty banning the production of fissile materials. Both are worthy, indeed necessary, objectives, and there is nothing wrong with the proposition that reaching a nuclear weapons-free world will take multiple steps over a number of years. The problem is that the Australian approach is designed not to accelerate the process but to slow it down, by claiming that certain steps cannot be taken until others have first been achieved. Australia’s position more or less mirrors that of the United States, which is eager to prolong global inaction on disarmament, while it continues to invest heavily in the augmentation of its nuclear forces.

Despite Australia’s rhetorical support for disarmament, the Rudd and Gillard governments attached great value to nuclear weapons. They viewed them not as inherently inhumane and unacceptable weapons, but as legitimate, necessary and highly effective instruments for maintaining peace and security. A foreign ministry briefing paper, issued in May 2013, claimed that US nuclear weapons have ‘provided security and stability in our region for more than 60 years and underpinned regional prosperity’. A year earlier, the government produced a series of talking points for Defence Minister Stephen Smith to allay public concerns about the expanding US military presence in Australia. Among the anticipated questions from reporters was: ‘Is Australia considering hosting US nuclear weapons?’ to which the minister was advised to answer: ‘No—the US has not asked us to host nuclear weapons’. But what if Australia *had* been asked? How confident can we be that Labor would have said, categorically, ‘no’?

The Labor Party must now decide whether to continue its hazardous defence of nuclear weapons, or reject them fully by calling for an end to Australia’s reliance on extended nuclear deterrence, supporting the phase-out of uranium exports, and embracing the idea of a new global treaty banning the bomb. To borrow Gareth Evans’ phrase, it is time for Labor to ‘stand on the right side of history’.

As foreign minister in the mid-1990s, Senator Evans himself stood on the *wrong* side of history in relation to a ban on land mines. Responding to a *Canberra Times* editorial in 1995, he wrote:

You may regard landmines as ‘patently inhumane’. But they are no more or less inhumane than other conventional weapons of war. Certainly, it would be nice to ban all weapons of war, but governments have a fundamental responsibility to provide for their nations’ security and defence. That is why most governments will simply not accept a total landmines ban.

But within two years, the international community had reached agreement on a global treaty to prohibit landmines and provide for the total destruction of stockpiles. One hundred and sixty-one nations, including Australia, are parties to the accord, and researchers have recorded a 60 per cent decline in the number of landmine-related fatalities and injuries since.

Labor had been worried about losing favour with the United States, which opposed the landmine treaty, and still does. Today, for the same reasons, Labor puts forth spurious arguments against a global ban on nuclear weapons. Echoing Evans’ words from two decades ago, it claims that such a treaty is contrary to our national security. What will it take for the Labor Party—the ‘party of purpose’, according to Gillard—to end its disarmament doublespeak and muster the political will to advance nuclear abolition in a meaningful way? For humanity’s sake, let it not be another Hiroshima or Nagasaki, or a calamity of even greater proportions. **A**