

## **Australia's role at the UN General Assembly's First Committee in 2015**

**A**ustralia has positioned itself as the de facto leader of a loose grouping of US-allied nations working to prevent the start of negotiations on a global treaty outlawing nuclear weapons. At this year's session of the UN General Assembly's disarmament and international security committee – known as the First Committee – Australia voted against, or abstained from voting on, all significant new proposals to advance nuclear disarmament. It also coordinated joint statements intended to thwart moves towards a ban on nuclear weapons in light of their catastrophic humanitarian impacts.

### **A leading opponent of a ban**

Over the past two years, Australia has been among the most vocal and active opponents of the fast-growing international movement to prohibit the use, production and stockpiling of nuclear weapons – the only weapons of mass destruction not yet explicitly and comprehensively banned. The government's stance flies in the face of public opinion: 84 per cent of Australians want it to get behind efforts to achieve a ban, according to a 2014 poll.<sup>1</sup>

Australia has refused to accept the view expressed by four-fifths of the UN membership that any use of nuclear weapons, no matter what the circumstances, would be unacceptable on humanitarian grounds.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it has sought to establish a counter-narrative: that humanitarian concerns must be balanced against the (supposed) security benefits derived from nuclear weapons.

Although Australia does not possess a nuclear arsenal of its own, it claims to be protected by the so-called “nuclear umbrella” of the United States. According to an Australian foreign ministry policy statement: “As long as nuclear weapons exist, Australia will continue to rely on US nuclear forces to deter nuclear attack on Australia.”<sup>3</sup>

Most other members of the Australian-led group, which consists of roughly two dozen nations (the number fluctuates),<sup>4</sup> similarly believe in the utility and necessity of nuclear weapons for their own security (without actually possessing them), and thus have resisted all recent moves towards a ban. This is despite being legally bound, under the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to pursue negotiations “in good faith” for nuclear disarmament. Their support for that treaty is increasingly in doubt.

At this year’s session of the First Committee, Australia outlined the group’s views in a statement on 21 October: “We have to accept that the hard practical work necessary to bring us closer to a world free of nuclear weapons must still be done, including a focus on not just humanitarian but also security considerations. There are no short cuts.”<sup>5</sup>

But the dichotomy between humanitarian and security concerns is false and misleading, as the two are not distinct. Indeed, enhanced *security* is the very objective of the humanitarian-focused movement for nuclear disarmament. The nations involved in it share a deep concern that, unless we succeed in dismantling the many thousands of nuclear warheads that exist in the world today, they will be used again, and the consequences will be catastrophic for all nations and peoples.

While the Australian-led group conceded in its statement that the prohibition of nuclear weapons would “probably” be necessary in order “to maintain a world without nuclear weapons”, it argued that such a treaty should not be pursued “now” or, indeed, at any point prior to elimination: nuclear weapons must be eliminated *and then* prohibited, not vice versa.

**Once a weapon is declared illegal, it quickly loses its political value – making it harder for nations to retain their stockpiles.**

But for other categories of inherently inhumane, indiscriminate weapons, the establishment of a clear global prohibition on their use and possession has been vital to advancing the goal of elimination. History shows that, once a weapon is declared illegal, it quickly loses its political value – making it harder for nations to retain their stockpiles. The great gains in abolishing chemical weapons and anti-personnel mines, for instance, could not have been made without the international conventions prohibiting those classes of weapons.

Australia has often asserted that a prohibition on nuclear weapons would be ineffective, as it could not “guarantee”

elimination. But this argument is disingenuous, for no other nuclear disarmament proposal is held to the same standard. Certainly none of Australia’s modest proposals for incremental steps, either alone or in combination, would *guarantee* elimination. This is a point made chiefly with the aim of deflecting attention from Australia’s true objection to a ban – namely, that it would put enormous pressure on the government to end its claimed reliance on the doctrine of “extended nuclear deterrence”.

## Australia’s voting record

RESOLUTION	YES VOTES	AUSTRALIA
Humanitarian pledge for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons	128	No
Humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons	136	Abstain
Ethical imperatives for a nuclear-weapon-free world	124	No
Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations*	135	Abstain

\* This resolution establishes an open-ended working group that will meet in Geneva in 2016.

Four important new resolutions relating to the humanitarian initiative for nuclear disarmament were introduced at this

year’s First Committee session. One, sponsored by Austria, contained the so-called Humanitarian Pledge – a major

political commitment “to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons”.<sup>6</sup> It attracted the support of 128 nations, with Australia among the 29 nations to vote no.<sup>7</sup> A similar resolution, on the “humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons”, also led by Austria, stressed “that it is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances”.<sup>8</sup> But this, too, was a step too far for Australia and most other members of its group. Their objection, specifically, was to the words “under any circumstances”, which prompted Sweden to ask: “When would it be in the interest of humanity that nuclear weapons are used? Under what circumstances?”<sup>9</sup>

A third resolution, led by South Africa, declared nuclear weapons to be “inherently immoral”<sup>10</sup> – a sentiment expressed a few weeks earlier in the General Assembly Hall by Pope Francis on his historic US tour. It underscored the “ethical responsibility” of all nations to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons. But Australia, again, balked: it could not accept the fundamental wrongness of using and possessing nuclear weapons.

In a defensively worded statement on behalf of 27 nations, Australia complained that the Austrian and South African humanitarian resolutions sought “to marginalize and delegitimize certain policy perspectives and positions”.<sup>11</sup> This, indeed, was their intention. Foremost, the resolutions challenged the dangerous, misguided theory of “nuclear deterrence” and questioned the so-called “step-by-step” approach to nuclear disarmament, which has failed to achieve any real results for close to two decades.

The Australian-led group also bemoaned the lack of “unity” in recent humanitarian disarmament debates – seemingly oblivious to their own role in creating and exacerbating divisions. They

heaped blame on those seeking to highlight the inhumane nature of nuclear weapons, rather than on those continuing defiantly to wield these heinous weapons.

But perhaps the most controversial of all the humanitarian-focused resolutions was one introduced by Mexico to set up a subsidiary body of the General Assembly – an “open-ended working group”, as it is known – with a mandate “to negotiate with a view to reaching agreement on concrete and effective legal measures to achieve nuclear disarmament, in particular new legal provisions and norms ...”.<sup>12</sup>

The Australian-led group, fearing that this new body would become a forum for starting work on a treaty banning nuclear weapons, strenuously resisted the inclusion of the word “negotiate” in the mandate. Speaking on behalf of 19 nations, Australia proposed a series of major edits designed to weaken the draft resolution – some of which Mexico grudgingly accepted.<sup>13</sup>

Most notably, the working group, rather than *negotiating* new legal measures, will now only “substantively address” them.

But even this significant compromise was not enough to secure Australia’s endorsement: it abstained from voting on the resolution, citing “unresolved and substantive differences with the mandate and rules of procedure”.<sup>14</sup> The Australian-led group had failed in its attempts to remove a reference to the creation of “norms”; to limit the involvement of civil society; and to compel the working group to operate strictly on the basis of consensus – a well-proven recipe for deadlock.

These nations, together with many of the nuclear-armed nations, had chosen to back a much weaker, competing proposal led by Iran to establish a separate open-ended working group on nuclear disarmament. It was to meet in New York over the next two to three

**Australia could not accept the fundamental wrongness of using and possessing nuclear weapons.**

years and discuss pathways forward, with everything done by consensus.<sup>15</sup>

Australia and others saw this as a safe option – and a good opportunity to put the brakes on the movement for a ban. But, much to their dismay, Iran withdrew its resolution in the final hour, and it never went to a vote.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the Mexican-sponsored resolution for an open-ended working group was the only one to be adopted by the First Committee – with the resounding support of 135 nations.<sup>17</sup> The body will meet in Geneva in 2016 for up

to three weeks and report back to the General Assembly. It is widely viewed as an ideal forum for starting discussions on the various elements to be included in a treaty banning nuclear weapons. While the body will not *negotiate* this treaty, it will engage in vital preparatory work to make it a reality in the near future. The events at this year's First Committee session should be seen as a significant victory for those nations genuinely committed to nuclear disarmament – and a defeat for those, including Australia, seeking to obstruct it.

#### – BY TIM WRIGHT

<sup>1</sup> April 2014 Nielsen poll: <http://www.icanw.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/NielsenPoll.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Statement delivered by Sebastian Kurz, foreign minister of Austria, on behalf of 159 nations at the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference, 28 April 2015: [http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2015/statements/28April\\_AustriaHumanitarian.pdf](http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2015/statements/28April_AustriaHumanitarian.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ben Doherty, 'Australia resists nuclear disarmament push because it relies on US deterrent', *The Guardian*, 16 September 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/16/australia-isolated-in-its-hesitation-to-sign-treaty-banning-nuclear-weapons>

<sup>4</sup> The following states have, at some point, been associated with the group: Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden (left from the group), Turkey and Ukraine. All are "non-nuclear-weapon states" under the NPT, but most claim to be "protected" by US nuclear weapons. Five also host US nuclear weapons on their territory.

<sup>5</sup> Statement delivered by Australia on behalf of a group of states during the nuclear weapons debate in the First Committee, 21 October 2015: [http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/statements/21October\\_Australia.pdf](http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/statements/21October_Australia.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Resolution L.38, 'Humanitarian pledge for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons', distributed on 21 October 2015: <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/resolutions/L38.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Voting result on L.38 in the First Committee on 2 November 2015: <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/votes/L38.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Resolution L.37, 'Humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons', distributed on 21 October 2015: <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/resolutions/L37.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Statement delivered by Sweden during the nuclear weapons debate in the First Committee, 21 October 2015: [http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/statements/21October\\_Sweden.pdf](http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/statements/21October_Sweden.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Resolution L.40, 'Ethical imperatives for a nuclear-weapon-free world', distributed on 21 October 2015: <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/resolutions/L40.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Statement delivered by Australia on behalf of 27 nations prior to voting on three resolutions on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, 2 November 2015: [http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/statements/2November\\_Australia-27.pdf](http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/statements/2November_Australia-27.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> The original version of Resolution L.13, 'Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations', distributed on 20 October 2015: <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/resolutions/L13.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> The revised version of Resolution L.13, distributed on 29 October 2015: <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/resolutions/L13Rev1.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Explanation of vote on L.13 delivered by Australia on 5 November 2015: [http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/eov/L13\\_Australia.pdf](http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/eov/L13_Australia.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Resolution L.28 (revised version), 'Effective measures on nuclear disarmament', distributed on 28 October 2015: <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/resolutions/L28Rev1.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Iran delivered a statement on 5 November 2015 explaining its decision to withdraw the resolution: [http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/eov/L28\\_Iran.pdf](http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/eov/L28_Iran.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Voting result on L.13 in the First Committee on 5 November 2015: <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com15/votes/L13Rev1.pdf>