



FILMS

"Talking about nuclear disarmament"

Shirley Williams

TRANSCRIPT

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Baroness Williams is a prominent British politician and Harvard academic who advises the British Prime Minister on nuclear proliferation issues. She was formerly Liberal Democrat Leader of the House of Lords. She is a member of the Australian & Japanese Governments' International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), and the UK Top Level Group for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (TLG)

"I think we're living through something of a new era in the whole field of nuclear knowledge, nuclear understanding, both civil and military, partly because of the extremely large, looming danger of climate change. More and more people are concentrating on the question of how one can get energy which is carbon-neutral, or at the very least doesn't throw large emissions of carbon-related material into the air. And that by itself, plus the rising price of oil and the fact that oil is running out, has driven a lot of countries into thinking again about nuclear energy.

Now, a lot of these countries have very little knowledge of nuclear energy: they don't have any, as it were, reserve of awareness of it, and therefore often they are not fully aware of just how dangerous it can be, and just how easily civil nuclear energy can be converted into military nuclear energy, from electricity into weapons, without a very powerful international structure to stop that happening.

We know there are about 60 countries which are thinking about introducing nuclear power or building new power stations. They are not almost any of them members of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which is the existing regulatory structure for the world, which has actually worked astonishingly well, the fact that there are only nine nuclear powers, recognised or unrecognised, is pretty staggering when you consider that Hiroshima is now, what, nearly 60 years ago.

So, what I think is the most important single thing, - and it's a short period of opportunity, it's got to happen in the next year or two, - is to build on the reasonableness of President Obama, his willingness to look again at multilateralism, to put that awful period of American unilateralism behind him; to work with other countries, particularly with Russia, but also with big countries like India, Indonesia and so forth, to try to build a new structure to succeed the existing nuclear non-proliferation treaty, NPT. Incidentally, all our safety as human beings rests upon the capacity of the NPT and its agent, the International Atomic Energy Authority, to run a world of law and order in the nuclear area.

The very first thing we need to do to move towards a world of zero nuclear weapons is to get the momentum going in the right direction. The momentum has been in the wrong direction now for eight years: we've moved towards more intense forms of nuclear rearmament, new kinds of nuclear weapons, worse and worse relations - the United States walking out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, things like that. So we're in a pretty tense time.

On the other hand, President Obama and his team are quite clear that what they want to do is to try to produce less tension with Russia, try and create a new treaty structure in which we see a serious reduction in nuclear arsenals; an attempt to get nuclear weapons off alert status, which far too many are still on; and above all, and most importantly, an attempt to try to create a controlled fuel cycle: what does that mean? That means international control of the sources of nuclear energy, of uranium and of plutonium, the two main sources, both of which can be used to make weapons.

It means secondly that we need an attempt to deal with the waste from nuclear weapons so that it does not become the source of yet more nuclear weapons of the future, and above all we need to get above that, a strengthened international atomic energy authority that can inspect and watch and monitor everything that's going on. Now that needs the united effort of the whole world. It means bringing in non-nuclear weapon countries like Indonesia, huge countries, whose support for peace is absolutely essential in order to make it work.

I think, and that's the view also of the International Commission on which I serve, that we have to do it in stages. We can't leap the whole way all at once, because countries are too nervous: they look at their traditional enemy and say, "Will my traditional enemy show the restraint that is necessary if I get rid of my nuclear weapons?" So you move to a first stage, what we sometimes call the ground camp, the base camp. That first stage is where you have acted on all the things I mentioned: you've reduced the arsenals, you've got weapons off alert, you've strengthened the IAEA, you've begun to build a new NPT, and then you begin to build the trust you need to take the next step, which is in some ways much harder, towards a nuclear-free world. You've got to do it in two steps. A child learns to trust its mother over a long period of time, before the child is willing to trust its mother to catch it when it jumps out of a.... off a wall, whatever it may be. It's the same process. And we're living in a world with very little trust.

So we have to rebuild trust. And that's what I am above all involved in, the rebuilding of trust by a step-by-step process which people learn: that they've got to work together, that they then get results, that they've got to bring the nuclear and the non-nuclear countries together, and then the final huge but crucial step of internationalizing the whole of the fuel cycle for civil nuclear energy, which is the first step to getting rid of all nuclear weapons.

It's something we've got to do. I believe it is as important as climate change: it is the major threat facing the world. If we don't manage to do it in the course of the next twenty years, then I would have to say, God help the planet."

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