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“TALKING ABOUT NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT”

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Rt Hon Margaret Beckett, MP

TRANSCRIPT

(interview recorded at the Royal Society of London, 26 January 2010)

Margaret Beckett is a Member of Parliament of the United Kingdom. She has held a number of high positions in the government, including Foreign Secretary (2006-2007) and President of the Board of Trade. She was Leader of the House of Commons from 1998 to 2001. As Foreign Secretary, she gave a celebrated speech at the Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference in 2007 that pledged the United Kingdom's commitment to the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons.

“I think that a number of events have come together to create what is potentially – not yet, but could be – a turning point, and a very important turning point for all sorts of issues across the world.

The British government realised a year or so ago that we had to make a decision as to whether or not we modernised or abandoned our own existing nuclear deterrent. And in a sense we kind of started from first principles, and produced the most thorough publication of what lay behind all those issues that there has ever been. Because in the past, there was one famous occasion when a previous government took a decision to upgrade, in a sense, our nuclear deterrent, and most of the cabinet didn't even know, never mind the British public.

So we decided to publish a White Paper setting out all these issues, and the conclusion that the work led to was that we ought to maintain our capacity, to have our nuclear capacity; that it ought to be the minimum that was needed to say that that capacity was being maintained; we ought to look to see whether we could cut back from what we had had before; and that we ought to look to see what was the timeline and the best basis on which to maintain such a capacity.

And we took those decisions and put them into the public domain. But a very, very important part of the White Paper that was produced, that I think most people either never heard about or overlooked, was that we said that it was really important both to reduce what we had, to the minimum that could conceivably be thought to be necessary on any grounds, and secondly to do more to promote the cause of nuclear disarmament.

And various people have said to me: “Well of course, we didn't think that you meant it! And if we thought about it at all, we thought, oh well, you felt you had to say that to keep the Labour Party quiet!” Nobody thought that anyone was going to do any serious thought or work towards it, but of course that wasn't true. We did have every intention of taking it forward, and it's one of the things that I did as Foreign Secretary, that Des Browne did as Defence Secretary, all on behalf of the government, and it's continued to be taken forward

There had been a gradual creeping expansion of countries that had a nuclear capacity, and as a matter of fact, although I personally very much regret the course that Iran seems at the moment to be treading, they had a very fair point in saying, when the Non-Proliferation Treaty bargain was made, (and of course Iran was a signatory), one of the things that the existing nuclear powers committed to was moves towards nuclear disarmament.

Now actually there have been substantial moves, between America and Russia, a treaty which as it happens is expiring – has just expired – was due to be renewed quite soon. The French have reduced their capacity, we have substantially reduced ours, right down to just one vehicle, so to speak, and reduced the numbers, and we're looking to see if we can reduce even that still further. So a lot has happened fairly quietly, but also, as I say, there has been this gradual spread of nuclear capacity to other places.

And of course the other huge issue which is so important, - and I have heard people in the military say perhaps even more important than this important matter to the future of the human race, - is climate change. And again many people will regret it, but it is very clear that in a lot of countries, whether we like it or not, more and more people will seek civil nuclear power. And that, whatever you think of that in itself, it does mean greater availability, perhaps, of fissile material. It means, potentially, greater dangers of an easier spread, again, of nuclear weapons.

So in a sense all of these things are coming together, and coming together at a point when the Non-Proliferation Treaty itself naturally comes up for review as it does every few years. It's also a time of real potential opportunity when people across the world, - and there was a famous initiative taken in the United States by people like Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn and so on, -people, not just people who have come in their own minds and after their own thinking to a conclusion that these are dangers we ought not to contemplate, there are many such people across the world, very honourable people, but not so many people who have had, in fact there are obviously a lot fewer people who have had that kind of responsibility in government, who have actually been the person who had to contribute to taking those decisions. And as this dialogue has more recently begun, some of those people have begun to tell of some of the experiences they have had of how close we have come, in what seemed to be these intervening years of calm, to a potential nuclear exchange, of which at the time the public was often completely unaware. We're talking of people who have themselves looked into the abyss and recognised the decision that they might have had to actually take and are saying on the basis of our experience, not just our thinking, we say: "This is a time for the world to take many more steps – first for the world to commit itself to the removal of nuclear weapons

There will inevitably be, there is always, there are already signs of a bit of a backlash from people who do not want this comfortable habit of thinking that they have got into to be disturbed, or who, in fairness, genuinely believe that we would be making a gross error to try to, people who say: "Oh you can't undo what has been done." Well people have. There are a number of countries now across the world, some less surprising than others, who have decided to abandon their nuclear weapon capacity. So it can be done. And what we want to do is push forward to try and see that it is done on a scale that will really make a difference

The really important thing is if we can we get a major move going in the right direction. I think a lot of people in the general public have begun to kind of think of this as a controversy that's over, it's not seen as a problem anymore. And I think few people have grasped that actually the scale, the extent to which it could be a problem again, in the future, has been being overlooked. People have rather stopped thinking about the degree of risk we might be running with nuclear weapons and nuclear capacity, and I think it's time we started to think about that again. But there will be difficult issues and judgements to make. Some countries will be less willing than others, more fearful than others, and there will be a lot of – I am sure – misplaced and not misplaced suspicion.

But I do think there is scope for really doing something which could have a tremendous impact on the potential for greater peace and security in the world. It's amazing how fast things can move, actually, when suddenly people agree that a turning point is needed! But the thing is, even if we don't quite see where we could finish, it's time to start again."

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