

Alberta Doctors' Digest

A conversation about nuclear war with Dame Joan Ruddock

I had the opportunity in October this year to talk with Dame Joan Ruddock who was visiting Calgary with her significant other, Professor John Kanis, endocrinologist and osteoporosis expert. They stayed with me for three days before departing for the Banff-Vancouver Rocky Mountaineer train. Joan was looking forward greatly to the trip and was well prepared to view the wonders and beauty of the Rockies. She was also re-visiting Vancouver for the first time since participating in an official capacity at the Vancouver city centennial in 1986.

Joan has had a distinguished parliamentary career in the Westminster Parliament – the House of Commons. I thought readers of *Alberta Doctors' Digest* might be interested in hearing some of her ideas on the current global threats and the current thinking of the centre left in Britain.

While staying in Calgary, Joan was often glued to the radio listening to the annual Labour Party conference in Liverpool, England. As many readers will be aware, the British Labour Party led by Sir Keir Starmer is well ahead in the polls for the next election (to be held no later than January 28, 2025) and is likely to lead the next British government.



How does the risk of nuclear war measure up against world risks such as climate change or future pandemics? (image credit: Mohamed Hassan, Pixabay.com)

The threat and fear of nuclear war – always lurking in the underwater weeds and consciousness of civilized peoples – is a worry liable to resurface at any time. And it has again resurfaced in the list of concerns of potential causes of massive human suffering, death and destruction, largely as a result of Putin's war on Ukraine and its inevitable evolution into an entrenched brutal fight with neither side making big enough gains to end the fighting. Putin has constantly hinted, insinuated and outright threatened to use "tactical" nuclear weaponry to bring the population of Ukraine under his boot.

The multitude of issues related to nuclear warfare and the desirable possibility of disarmament of national nuclear stockpiles has again risen as people ask themselves what is the global risk of a nuclear conflagration and is there a pathway to avoid it? How does the risk of nuclear war measure up against world risks such as climate change or future pandemics?

Dame Joan has thought a lot about nuclear weaponry and war, having been chair of the UK's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) from 1981-85. She was educated at Pontypool Girls' [Grammar School](#) in Wales and at [Imperial College London](#) where she studied botany and chemistry. Always interested in science and its implication for humanity, she was chair of the CND at the time that Greenham Common Air Base in the UK became the target of a nineteen-year anti-nuclear demonstration. After her stint as CND leader, she became a member of the British Parliament as Labour MP for Lewisham, Deptford in 1987. She was appointed Minister for Women in the Blair government in 1997. In the subsequent Gordon Brown government, she became Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in June 2007 and then Minister of State in the Department for Climate Change and Energy in Oct. 2008. She was responsible for energy policy (though not for oil and gas affairs.) Appointed a Privy Counsellor in 2010, she retired from Parliament in 2015. She now runs a variety of charities centred on music and theatre.

On a beautiful Calgary October Monday morning, we sat down to chat. Here is a reporting of some of the conversation.

AP: Joan, can you give me a brief history of your involvement in the nuclear disarmament campaign?

Dame Joan Ruddock: The CND began in 1958 mainly as a result of the fear of the radiation side-effects of nuclear weapons testing, particularly in the South Pacific but also in other sites around the world. Annual marches were held in a number of countries, and the British Labour Party adopted the policy of unilateral disarmament (reversed in 1989).

In the 1970s, the movement declined somewhat until December 1979, when NATO decided to deploy nuclear weapons to European countries as a result of the Soviet Union's deployment of SS20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles. NATO's whole rationale was based on the idea that you could "fight" a nuclear war. The Germans were to receive US-built Pershing missiles, and the British would receive US cruise missiles.

The focus of CND and peace movements throughout Europe then was to get US weapons withdrawn from Europe and for the Soviets to withdraw the SS20s. Success came in 1987 when Gorbachev and Reagan agreed to a treaty restricting the deployment of intermediate- and short-range missiles worldwide. (President Trump withdrew the US from this treaty in 2019.)

The huge peace campaigns largely disbanded, though some of us continued to take an interest, and in 2014, I was invited to participate in a conference on the humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons organized by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons or ICAN. Unknown to me, ICAN had a long gestation. In September 2006, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (that organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985) adopted a proposal at its biennial congress in Helsinki, Finland, to launch ICAN globally.

ICAN was launched publicly at two events, the first in April 2007 in Melbourne, Australia, where funds had been raised to establish the campaign, and the second in April 2007 in Vienna at a meeting of state parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. There are currently 93 signatories to the treaty, and it has been ratified by 69 states including Austria and Ireland in Europe and several in Latin and South America but no nuclear states. National campaigns have now been organized in dozens of countries in every region of the world.

AP: Joan, tell me how you got into politics.

JR: In 1979, I first ran for the parliamentary seat of Newbury but lost my deposit. In 1981, I was contacted by a group of women in Cardiff (angered by the decision to site guided nuclear missiles in Britain) who decided to walk to Newbury, Berkshire – the site of an RAF base. They thought this would have a huge impact, but it was barely reported in the news.

By then, I had set up a local group, Newbury Against Cruise Missiles, and I subsequently became Chair of CND having modified its focus mainly to opposing US missiles in the United Kingdom. I stepped down as an officer of the CND in 1985 and became Member of Parliament for Lewisham, Deptford – a deprived part of London – from 1987 to 2015. One of my bills was to ensure that local authorities establish doorstep re-cycling. I do hope you recycle plastics, paper and food, Sandy.

AP: Um, yes, I do, but sometimes recycling food is difficult ... to continue. Do you see the current threats for nuclear war as greater or less than that occurring for example in 1962 when President Kennedy faced off against Khrushchev over the Cuban missile crisis?

JR: The main threat I see today is the chance of a serious human error occurring rather than a leadership decision being made to use “tactical” or other types of nuclear weapons.

There is now a huge risk of mischance. A few years ago, a book called *Command and Control* was published detailing more than 1,000 nuclear accidents in the United States. Its author, Eric Schlosser, spent six years researching and submitting freedom of information requests.

Even more terrifying is the true story of Stanislav Petrov, now portrayed in a film called *The Man Who Saved the World*. Petrov was a colonel in charge of a Soviet nuclear early-warning centre when an alarm went off signifying that five American nuclear missiles were heading towards the USSR. Petrov took it on himself to refuse to follow protocol and did not send the signal for a retaliatory strike. He believed that the alarm had to be a malfunction, and he was right.

So, yes, there remains a threat, but the greatest threat is a miscalculation or miscommunication. As far as the Cuban crisis goes, the US had put weapons in Turkey. Khrushchev’s response was “You have put weapons in Turkey. We will have weapons in Cuba.” The Cuban crisis was resolved by the agreement of the USA to remove weapons from Turkey. As far as risk from world leaders making errors, it’s possible, but they are bound to think twice or much more than twice since the actual firing of nuclear weapons will certainly result in mutually assured reciprocation and destruction.

AP: You really see little to no value in a country having nuclear weapons?

JR: Yes. They have no practical utility, only assuring the user of reciprocal and mutual destruction.

AP: Has the possession of nuclear weapons in the nine countries (USA, Russia, China, UK, France, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea) actually deterred wars in the last decades? Does Britain still have the Trident program?

JR: Yes, the Trident program has just been renewed. As far as deterrence of wars is concerned, there has been none at all. If you include civil wars, there have been some 285 armed conflicts since 1945 (data from Uppsala University.)

In the UK's history, President Galtieri of Argentina was not in the least inhibited invading the Falkland Islands in 1982, realizing that there was no way the UK could usefully use nuclear weapons. I think there have been an increasing number of wars and proxy wars despite the presence of nuclear weapons. For example, it's hard to see how the Trident system would be used in the event of war breaking out between the UK and another country. Given the phenomenal costs, I believe that people have the right to understand how and whether this weapons system can be used. What are the real circumstances in which Trident would be used?

The one scenario in which there could be an instant attack without the build-up and norms of international discussions or whatever would be a terrorist nuclear attack, not state-sponsored but by some group like ISIS. In those circumstances, a nuclear weapons system has been useless and does not deter.

AP: I remember an organization here in Canada – Canadian Physicians against Nuclear War. Quite active back in the early eighties, their main message was that in the event of a nuclear war, there was little to nothing that could be done to help a population suffering in the event of a nuclear war.

JR.: Yes. They were right.

AP: Have you any ideas/solutions that might lower the current risks of a nuclear war?

JR: There is currently a movement to take nuclear weapons systems off "immediate alert." That might reduce the risk of a miscalculation.

AP: How does the threat to the world from a nuclear war compare to the threat from climate change?

JR: Speaking for the UK, the real threats to this country are cyber-warfare, terrorism, climate change and pandemics. We need all the resources we can muster to confront these threats, and we cannot afford to squander billions of pounds on a weapons system that by general consent can never be used.

There is the potential threat from new states acquiring nuclear weapons, and Iran is the country most frequently cited. Embroiled as it is in Middle East politics, with a nuclear-armed Israel on one side and a nuclear-armed Pakistan on the other, Iran's ambitions are regional. Condemnation of Iran might unite us all, but that is no reason for not asking why on earth Iran would uniquely target the UK.

Currently, nuclear war is not top of mind in Europe, but 80% of the population in UK do express concern about climate change – mostly the talk is a concern for the children and

grandchildren. There are also economic worries from southern European tourist locations who report a dearth of tourists in August because the weather is too hot or rainfall is too heavy.

All the other threats to the world now – for example cyber warfare and artificial intelligence, pandemics or massive migrations of peoples – are very difficult to control but we do know how nuclear weapons can be controlled.

AP: Thank you for this, Joan. Enjoy the Rocky Mountaineer train ride.

Post-script:

I have to say I enjoyed these discussions with Dame Joan Ruddock. It was refreshing to be able to look at different aspects of a question and openly discuss and debate them – notwithstanding that Joan was coming from a Welsh socialist, left-leaning tradition and I from a centre/right-leaning Scots background. This kind of open discussion has sadly become increasingly difficult in Canada and other Western countries, which does not bode well for the future.

In some ways, I was relieved that the horrible invasion of Israel by Hamas occurred later than we could bring it into any discussions, although we did touch on it on day one of the invasion.

Editor's note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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