

[The Bishop of Chelmsford](#) Bishop 9:08 pm, 20th February 2018 (House of Lords)

My Lords, I too thank the noble Baroness, Lady Miller, for bringing this timely and important debate. One of my predecessors, H A Wilson, Bishop of Chelmsford from 1929 to 1950, only ever made one speech in the [House of Lords](#). Prelates nowadays tend to have more to say. This may or may not be a good development.

Shortly after the [Second World War](#) a Motion was before this House on the subject of nuclear weapons. Drawing on Christian just war theory, he rose and spoke about how the use of nuclear weapons broke one of the few conventions that civilisation had succeeded in setting up to mitigate the brutalities of war. In his memoirs he recalls how the speech was received:

“Nobody took the slightest notice. I sat down in dead silence and I was conscious that all the noble Lords considered that I had made an ass of myself. Well, probably I had, but the ass’s burden no longer included an uneasy conscience”.

I speak with a similar conviction and perhaps a similar dread. I want to say simply that nuclear weapons are immoral, that they are a lethal extravagance, and that we must find another way. The noble Lord, [Lord Patten](#), spoke about sin and that we cannot go back to Eden. He is quite right—but, my dear brother, there is also repentance. What he said about nuclear weapons could also be said of chemical weapons, yet we have succeeded in ridding the world of those to a certain extent. I am sure that rogue people will always do rogue things, but we have made progress, and similar progress can be made with nuclear weapons.

The truth is that these weapons of mass destruction are also weapons of mass deception. They provide the illusion of security while actually making the world less secure than ever. [North Korea](#) now joins the nuclear club. Who will be next, and do we really feel safe with [Donald Trump](#)’s finger upon the button? Will we ever be told the truth about their cost, their unusability, their increasing detectability, their vulnerability to cyberattack, and the near misses and accidents that have happened over the years? The fact is that there are military people today who acknowledge their redundancy in the face of the security threats and military needs of a much changed world—or simply that, if we do have all these billions to spend on something we claim we will never use, how about a few more hospitals instead?

The world needs to find another way and to do this the world needs to work together. Obviously, nuclear disarmament cannot be left just to nuclear states, but we do not join in the conversation. The impact of nuclear weapons—their threat, their cost and, God forbid, their use—affects everyone. The most hopeful sign of this happening is the United Nations [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#). It confirms that the long-standing obligation to negotiate disarmament is an obligation under international law, and it is because of the failure of nuclear armed states to make multilateral progress that the United Nations is now rightly taking on a more substantive role.

The very first [UN General Assembly](#) took place in 1946 just across the green from here in [Central Hall, Westminster](#). Its first resolution focused on,

*“the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction”.*

As I have said, since then some progress has been made. [The UK](#) has signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Chemical and biological weapons have been banned, and so have cluster bombs. A few years ago we all patted ourselves on the back when we banned them. The moral arguments about nuclear weapons are just as compelling, if not more so, for to use a nuclear weapon is suicide as well as genocide.

In the coming years, this conversation is going to take place on a wider stage, but our Government, along with other nuclear states, have met the call for wider involvement with the United Nations in disarmament with obstruction, veto and boycott. As supporters of international law, how can this be right? Even if the noble Lord, Lord Patten, is correct and people like me are well intentioned and naive, that does not stop us sitting down to talk with people about it. Yet we do not do that.

The question before us is simple: when a [majority](#) of the world’s countries are working within the UN framework to achieve non-proliferation and the ultimate goal of multilateral disarmament, why will we not even engage with the process? If we are so convinced that nuclear weapons are so helpful to keeping peace in the world, what have we to fear from discussion with those who think differently? Why cannot we even, as the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, said, send an observer? Or is it the case, as I suspect, that in our hearts we know that we can never use these bombs and therefore to own them and to perpetuate the myth of deterrence is a moral failure?

If it is right to say that cluster bombs should not be manufactured or used and that they are immoral, but nuclear weapons could, in certain circumstances, be used, then, in my predecessor’s words, we are breaking the conventions which have, through our understanding of just war that teaches that any force must be proportionate, discriminate, able to achieve its aims of peace and a last resort, mitigated the terrible brutalities of war, then he is also right that we put ourselves in a very weak position to lecture others. But our presence at the table is requested. There is to be a United Nations high-level conference on disarmament in May. My simple question to the [Minister](#) is: will we be there and, if not, why not?

[Mark Twain](#) famously said that it was not the bits of the Bible that he did not understand that caused him a problem but the bits that he did. Here is a saying of Jesus that is easy to understand: “Peace I give you, but not as the world gives peace”. I speak for many churches and many people of faith in this nation when I ask our Government simply to take part in the process.