



Illustration: Guy Shield

85-year-old Setsuko Thurlow gets a checkup at the atomic bomb hospital every time she visits Hiroshima. She knows she's not 25 anymore, but, speaking to me from her home in Canada, she tells me she does sometimes wonder if the exhaustion she's prone to now – yesterday's trip to the shops, for example, required an afternoon's rest to recover – is more than just age.

Radiation, she tells me, works in mysterious ways.

On the morning of August 6, 1945 in Hiroshima, Thurlow awoke amid the rubble of what had been the building she was in. One of about 30 grade eight students at army headquarters (as part of the student mobilisation program), she was one of the very few students in that group to survive the bomb. She can still hear the voices of those who didn't.

Thurlow tries not to overthink things, but when her granddaughter recently had serious health problems, she didn't hesitate phoning the hospital for assurance it wasn't the residual effects of the radiation.

'I don't even call them nuclear weapons,' says Thurlow. 'It's not a weapon. It's a device of mass murder.'

Currently, 130 countries are convening at the United Nations headquarters in New York to negotiate a treaty banning the use of nuclear weapons.

United by a deep concern about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would eventuate from any use of nuclear weapons, the assembled delegates are highly cognisant of the need for a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons and lead to their elimination.

Although the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (also known as the Non-Proliferation Treaty or NPT) is recognised for significantly stunting the proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear-weapon states in the last 50 years, its critics are frustrated by its floundering progress on nuclear disarmament. This new ban treaty is intended to complement the NPT as a parallel mechanism to help expedite disarmament.

But there is a deep division surrounding the merits of the treaty. Nuclear weapons states and many 'umbrella states' who depend on American extended nuclear deterrence – Australia included – oppose the treaty on the grounds that it is the inhumane nature of nuclear weapons that make them so effective in deterring attacks and thus bolstering a nation's security. Non-nuclear states who support the treaty argue the other side of the coin; the treaty is vital because it is prohibitive to the grave threat nuclear weapons pose to humanity.

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There is a degree of division in Australian's domestic political climate too, with Australia's longstanding bipartisan commitment to nuclear disarmament showing signs of fraying at the prospect of the new treaty. The Australia Labor Party and the Greens support the negotiations as a valuable step on the road to nuclear disarmament, but the Liberal-National Coalition rejects diminishing US nuclear deterrence in the current geopolitical climate, citing its commitment to the US and the ANZUS treaty alliance.

As a spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade tells me:

Australia's consistent, considered position on a nuclear weapons ban treaty is well known. Proceeding with ban treaty negotiations without the participation of states possessing nuclear weapons, or without due regard for the international security environment, will not help to create the conditions for further major reductions in nuclear arsenals.

Australia is committed to the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, pursued in an effective, determined and pragmatic way.

The department spokesperson indicates Australia's faith is largely invested in maximising the potential of the NPT and promoting adherence to the 2010 NPT Action Plan as the consensus-based roadmap to nuclear weapons elimination.

The Opposition, however, does see merit in the ban treaty, according to a spokesperson for shadow foreign affairs minister Penny Wong.

The ALP's national platform envisions the ban treaty as another complementary measure in a framework for disarmament. It also supports improving the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency and consolidating compliance with other existing nuclear weapons-related treaties including the NPT and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty:

Given the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, Labor firmly supports the negotiation of a global treaty banning such weapons and welcomes the growing global movement of nations that is supporting this objective.

From opposition we do not have access to DFAT expertise and advice on specific resolutions, texts or pathways to negotiating the treaty but our principled position is clear – we support a ban treaty.

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It's early March, and the Australian arm of civil society group the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) is hosting a roundtable at the Australian Conservation Foundation in preparation for the first round of nuclear ban treaty negotiations scheduled to take place at the end of the month.

Tim Wright, Asia-Pacific director of ICAN, is at one end of a meeting room table, flanked by a few dozen disarmament advocates from a range of ICAN Australia's 60 partner organisations including the Medical Association for Prevention of War, SafeGround, Peace Boat Japan, the Uniting Church Victoria/Tasmania Synod, the Australian Red Cross and Friends of the Earth.

Nuclear disarmament brochures, pamphlets and stickers are neatly stacked for campaigners concerned with topics including how to respond to the Australian Government's decision to boycott the negotiations, how to advance the movement for a ban in Australia and how to rebut the common argument that opposition to the treaty from the nuclear weapon states means it will be ineffective.

'We've had some media coverage and we have had some parliamentary debate,' Wright tells the room, 'but nowhere near what we need to be having.'



Tim Wright. Image: © Frode Ersfjord,
ICAN (via [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/30835738@N03/33550771852/)
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Wright, who has been campaigning with ICAN for a nuclear weapons ban for the last decade, spends every day thinking, reading, writing and speaking about nuclear weapons.

He's hardened to the resistance ICAN encounters from the most powerful nations in the world, but also heartened by his work with advocates and survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings and of nuclear tests in Australia, the Marshall Islands and Kazakhstan.

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According to Wright, the emergence of a treaty that unequivocally prohibits nuclear weapons will serve to expose the complicity of countries such as Australia in the perpetuation of a nuclear order that shows no signs of abating.

'That's why countries like Australia have been able to get away with their complicity in nuclear war preparations,' says Wright. 'Because the NPT doesn't prohibit nuclear weapons and it doesn't effectively prevent them from engaging in all of these activities related to US nuclear war preparations.'

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Dr William Perry is professor emeritus at Stanford University and the former US secretary of defense under president Bill Clinton. He is also behind the massive open online course [Living at the Nuclear Brink: Yesterday and Today](https://lagunita.stanford.edu/courses/course-v1:Engineering+NuclearBrink+Fall2016/about) (<https://lagunita.stanford.edu/courses/course-v1:Engineering+NuclearBrink+Fall2016/about>), a Stanford University-sponsored course focusing on topics such as new nuclear dangers, including nuclear terrorism and South Asia proliferation, dilemmas of nuclear policy and the history of nuclear proliferation.

It's highlighted in the course, which is intended to improve public engagement in the past, present and future dangers of nuclear weapons, that even considering the recent bombastic rhetoric from Pyongyang, the majority of the public – and many

policymakers – are unaware that the risks of nuclear terrorism, regional nuclear war or nuclear conflict by accident are greater today than during the Cold War.

Perry, who is also the creator of an online advocacy space devoted to education about nuclear weapons, relays in an introductory video about the decades he spent living with the threat of nuclear holocaust looming over his head “like a dark cloud”.

‘The Cold War is etched indelibly in my mind,’ Perry says. ‘I understand how close we came to bringing civilisation to an end.

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As revealed in Perry’s memoir, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink* (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/07/14/a-stark-nuclear-warning/>), the eight days he spent analysing intelligence data about the deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba for daily reporting to President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis was a window into the limits of deterrence in preventing nuclear war.

Today, the North Korean crisis, disputes between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, the US–Russia standoff over international order and competing territorial claims in the South China Sea all signify a volatile geopolitical climate susceptible to dangerous conflict escalation between nuclear powers.



According to Perry, the likelihood of a future nuclear catastrophe needs to be conceived of with a long view.

‘Getting the public to understand an event that has a very, very low probability of occurring but has a very, very high level of consequence is very difficult,’ he says over the phone from California.

‘A disastrous earthquake, for example, which happens once a century, is hard for people to think about.

‘Anything in which it probably won’t happen this day, this week, this year, is very hard for people to get concerned about. And the fact that the consequences are immense doesn’t really change that the way that it ought to.’

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Throughout the history of the nuclear age, many world leaders have voiced their recognition of the grave threat nuclear weapons pose to humanity – stating the bleeding obvious at the most simplistic level. Presidents Obama and Reagan, for example, both skilled orators, deployed compelling rhetoric to articulate the dangers of nuclear weapons and the goodwill to rid the world of them. But the unilateral, bilateral and multilateral action states have undertaken has not been commensurate to the gravity of the problem, and the political divisions on the road out of the problem means progress is arduous.

Rod Lyon, a senior fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute who says morality ‘is a weak determinant of outcomes’ concerning all matters of international relations, doesn’t anticipate the nuclear weapon states having a change of heart about the ban treaty any time soon.

‘Logically, you can’t abolish nuclear weapons without simultaneously solving conventional imbalances,’ Lyon says. ‘Pakistan won’t consider nuclear disarmament while India remains conventionally stronger; ditto India against China and Russia against the US.’

Joseph Siracusa, professor of human security and international diplomacy in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies at RMIT, is a prominent expert and author on the subject of nuclear history.

He's marvelled at the balance of foreign policy on the issue of nuclear disarmament for four decades.

'Half the international community wants to get rid of nuclear weapons and bring them down to manageable levels and the other half enjoys America's extended nuclear deterrence.

'And you know what? You can't have both. I think the Australian position on this – and you can quote me on this – is just pure bullshit.

'You're either with the nuclear weapons states or you're not.

'All that stuff that goes on in this country about getting rid of nuclear weapons, it begins with Australia.'

'The Australian position on this is just pure bullshit. You're either with the nuclear weapons states or you're not.'

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Outside the UN General Assembly in New York, as the first round of negotiations get under way, US Ambassador Nikki Haley leads a press conference, flanked by a dozen or so representatives from other member nations, including Australia, to oppose the ban treaty negotiations.

Haley, like pretty much everybody else, says she abhors nuclear weapons.

'There is nothing I want more for my family than a world with no nuclear weapons,' she announces at the press conference. 'But we have to be realistic. Is there anyone who thinks North Korea would ban nuclear weapons?'

At the same time, a group of about 30 protesters gather on the emerald lawns outside Parliament House in Canberra to oppose Australia's decision to boycott the negotiations.

The protesters display banners with messages such as ‘Ban Nuclear Weapons’ and ‘Love + understanding: Not war, hatred and fear’ and chant, ‘72 years too long! Australia, ban the bomb!’



ICAN campaigners visit the Australian parliament in February 2017 to urge the government to participate in the UN negotiations to outlaw nuclear weapons. Image: © Tim Wright/ICAN (via Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/30835738@N03/32112390283/>))

Amongst the speakers at the protest are Senator Scott Ludlam from the Australian Greens and Senator Lisa Singh from the ALP.

Singh speaks to the audience as a handful of protesters from the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom hold up a purple banner behind her.

‘We are not there,’ says Singh. ‘You are not represented. No one in this parliament is represented.’

‘No one in Australia is represented because our government has chosen to not turn up.’

It’s been argued that state parties to the NPT who abstain from the ban treaty negotiations are potentially in violation of their legal obligations to pursue ‘good faith’ negotiations on effective nuclear disarmament (under article VI of the treaty).

I contacted Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to enquire about the legal advice it had received to be satisfied Australia wasn’t violating international law by boycotting the treaty, and what the implications would have been had the department been advised otherwise. The department declined to respond to these questions in favour of a general email statement about its stance on nuclear weapons.

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Someone who was happy to answer questions, however, was John Carlson, a counsellor to Washington’s Nuclear Threat Initiative and nonresident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

A former director-general of the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office for two decades, he says the contention concerning the legality of Australia’s boycott – and the overwhelmingly fraught and costly prospect of challenging the decision in the International Court of Justice – favours the Australian Government.

‘I think this is such a fuzzy issue that they could always find a lawyer who will tell them they’re not in breach,’ says Carlson.

‘Personally, I thought it was not good that they wouldn’t give reasons – to simply say they’ve spoken to their lawyers is hardly an explanation.’

Carlson believes there’s a persuasive argument to be made (<http://www.nti.org/analysis/atomic-pulse/are-states-boycotting-nuclear-weapon-ban-negotiations-violating-their-npt-commitments/>) that it’s not possible for the weapons states and their supporters to say, when negotiations have only just started, that a ban treaty is unrealistic:

Because they don't know what it's going to say.... When negotiations haven't yet produced a proposed treaty text, you can't say that the idea of a ban is unrealistic because the NPT actually envisages that there will be a ban ultimately. It's just a question of, 'How do we get there?'

I think the weapons states and their supporters, like Australia, should engage in the negotiations to try to influence the negotiations in ways that could be acceptable to them, and they can't repudiate the negotiations unless they get to a point where the majority puts up a text where the minority says, 'No, no, we can't accept that.'

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Inside ICAN Australia's small Melbourne office, a museum-like experience awaits. Storage boxes, bookshelves and artefacts abound; the old walls are energetically decorated with everything from framed photos – such as one featuring protesters marching with a 'No Nukes, No Wars' banner – to a laminated poster detailing the positions of all the countries that support a ban on nuclear weapons, to a mural made from thousands of multi-coloured paper cranes around the letters 'BAN'.

It's a few weeks after the first round of ban treaty negotiations, and Tim Wright, who has been central to ICAN since it launched in 2007, has just returned from a period of intense campaigning.

He says the negotiations were productive but there are various issues that need to be resolved before the final draft of the treaty is complete – one of a range of examples concerns whether nuclear states seeking to become a signatory to the treaty need to eliminate their arsenals before signing the treaty, sign the treaty with a feasible plan for elimination or negotiate a plan for elimination upon signing.

Wright, who has carefully reviewed all the statements given from every session that took place in the negotiations, feels confident that the points of contention in the details of the treaty can be resolved.

'I don't think there are any problems that are insurmountable,' says Wright. 'There's such a strong commitment to getting this done by 7 July that I think there's a very good chance the negotiations will succeed.'

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Setsuko Thurlow, an active ICAN campaigner and a nuclear weapons conference veteran, has played a valuable role in the negotiations through her testimony. Attending the March negotiations, she says, was the most gratifying disarmament experience she’s had in 72 years.

‘The survivor has been working for the total abolition for all these years,’ she tells me, ‘and 72 years is a long time.’

‘But we kept pushing for it and finally the time has come. I think the world has come to its senses and finally heard survivors’ pleas.’

‘You have no idea how happy this makes me.’

Thurlow flits between moments of triumph and nightmare as I speak to her. She still trembles when she remembers the horrors she encountered in the aftermath of Hiroshima, but continues to tell her story to new audiences to emphasise that the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons need be apportioned their deserved attention in the debate about how to abolish them.

On the day the US dropped the atomic bomb, Thurlow was 1.8 kilometres from 15-kiloton blast. Medical records show that windows smashed in buildings as far as 20km from the blast and traditional wooden buildings within 2.4 kilometres collapsed completely. Those trapped in the debris were burned to death by the fires that started up. The heat rays of the explosion peeled off skin and burned the tissue below. The effects of the radiation included hair loss, bleeding gums and fatally damaged organs.

The fullness of the atrocity is still incomprehensible to Thurlow.

‘I think lead melts at about 300 degrees Celsius, and I understand it was about 4,000 degrees Celsius on the ground level,’ says Thurlow. ‘My goodness.’



Setsuko Thurlow. Image: Tim Wright/ICAN, [Flickr](#)

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Thurlow and her surviving classmates joined the zombie-like procession of survivors navigating around the dead and dying to get to the foot of the hills. The army training ground there held several football fields' worth of dead and injured, pleading for water.

That night, from the hillside, Thurlow sat in a daze watching the flames light the dead city below.

Her own loved ones 'simply melted away'. An aunt and two cousins were skeletons when located; her uncle and his wife died 10 days later, organs seemingly liquefied. Her sister-in-law is believed to have been vaporised.

Thurlow did get to see her sister and nephew before they died. She remembers her nephew Eiji as a 'sweet boy' she used to horse around with. Eiji and his mother were both unrecognisable from the burns.

Sometimes, she says, she can't talk about her nephew without sobbing. As she remembers him more during our conversation, she begins quietly crying between pregnant pauses.

'Even at the last moments, he would say, "Grandpa, tell Grandma to give Eiji water."'

Thurlow says the last thing her sister said as she suffered from her burns, was that she felt guilty for breaking the promise she made to her husband.

'He (Eiji) was her only child and her husband was away to war,' says Thurlow, 'and she promised her husband she would protect that child with all her might... We asked her why she felt so guilty, and she said because she failed to protect her child. That broke our heart.'

By the end of 1945, the atomic bomb had claimed 140,000 lives in Hiroshima, and the hydrogen bomb had claimed 70,000 in Nagasaki.

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Castlemaine-based photomedia artist Jessie Boylan is Australia's only member of the Atomic Photographers Guild, an international collective of artists devoted to making all aspects of the nuclear age visible – from nuclear weapons mass-production, atomic and proliferation, to nuclear power, reactor accidents, radioactive waste management, irradiated landscapes and radiation affected populations.

As part of *Black Mist Burnt Country* (<http://blackmistburntcountry.com.au>), a current national touring exhibition of art commemorating the British atomic tests in Australia in the 1950s (in Maralinga and Emu Junction in South Australia, and the Montebello Islands off north-west WA), she collaborated with Sydney artist Linda Dement on *Shift* (<https://vimeo.com/190494971>), a visual media installation that addresses the effects atomic testing has had on Australians.

Boylan's work in *Shift* reckons with the covert and insidious characteristics of the nuclear industry and the fraught road to disarmament.

'I am interested in ways in which we can break down concepts of the middle of nowhere and attempting to show exactly what is happening out there, so the issues are no longer out-of-sight, out-of-mind,' she says.

Maralinga is a niche atomic tourist site today. Before the gated entry to the test site, there's a sign that alerts visitors to the artefacts of the nuclear test era that await behind the gates. Elsewhere, another sign warns of radioactive materials. The parched outback earth is the site of a radioactive graveyard for an assortment of tanks, planes and trucks.



1985's report of the *Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia* highlights that the atomic testing authorities neglected to consider residing Indigenous populations, and their failure to record contamination of the mainland means it's unknown how hazardous the tests were to Aboriginal Australians.

The report also found that air and ground service workers were exposed to radiation, but the dose levels can't be verified.

The Federal Government went some way to appeasing the sick and the families of the sick in this year's Budget, by announcing veterans' Gold Cards to cover healthcare for survivors of the British atomic tests in Australia (although many survivors and loved ones of the sick and the dead say it's too little too late).

Boylan points out that the remoteness of Maralinga is conducive to low public awareness of the issues that continue out of the site today.

‘It (radiation) continues in people’s bodies and memories, and in plants and in the landscape,’ says Boylan, who was awestruck by the eerie experience of exploring the dilapidated tennis court, swimming pool, cinema and mess hall that thousands of Australian and British service people occupied.

[Radiation] continues in people’s bodies and memories, and in plants and in the landscape.’

‘Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the only places where nuclear weapons have been used against civilians in that way, but there are so many examples of nuclear tests all around the world.

‘There are people over the world who have experiences of being physically impacted or relocated.’

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The *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*’ symbolic Doomsday Clock is currently set at two and a half minutes to midnight, the closest it’s been to midnight (“doomsday”) since 1953.

China, France and the UK purport that the onus is on Russia and the US to disarm before it reciprocates; Russia says the onus is on the US; and the US says Russia isn’t cooperative enough for meaningful disarmament.

Rod Lyon has described the position Australia has on disarmament as ‘centrist’ and ‘sensible,’ but Tim Wright says it’s a matter of perspective.

‘Globally, the disarmers are in the vast majority,’ says Wright. ‘That’s the sensible centrist position in our view.

‘It’s really this large majority of countries that have clearly said nuclear weapons are unacceptable and this smaller group of countries saying these are necessary for their security.

‘You could say Australia is in the middle in the sense it doesn’t have nuclear weapons but it’s very much a part of the perpetuation of the whole nuclear problem.’

Last year, Setsuko Thurlow was awarded the Arms Control Association's Arms Control Person of the Year Award. When she met with then-President Barack Obama's speechwriter, she gave him a letter for the president concerning her experiences surviving Hiroshima and her views on disarmament. Thurlow never heard back, but she's not dissuaded.

'I'm determined to do this til my last breath,' says Thurlow. 'This is my mission as a survivor. To tell the world how terrible it was.'

The UN Conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons is scheduled to conclude official talks by 7 July. Instead of joining the negotiations, the Australian government is following on the official webcast (<http://webtv.un.org/#>). It's the first time Australia has failed to participate in multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations.

Read the Australian government's full response to the nuclear disarmament negotiations, in a declassified document obtained by ICAN Australia under Freedom of Information here (<https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/content/uploads/2017/07/DFAT-DECLASSIFIED-ICAN-FOI.pdf>).

For extended interviews with sources in this story and other material, visit [joshkjennings.com](http://joshkjennings.com/new-blog) (<http://joshkjennings.com/new-blog>).

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