

Hiroshima Event – Milton Keynes

August 2011

Thank you for the invitation to speak and to perform some songs.

We are here this evening to remember what happened at Hiroshima 66 years ago not because of the scale of the atrocity or whether the decision was right or wrong in the circumstances of the time.

We are here to witness to the fact that humanity chose to make and use a new weapon with massive destructive power – 2000 times greater than any bomb that had been used before – revealing a technology that may well destroy our species, all its past achievements and all its future prospects.

The best way to remember those that died on that day (as on any day in the history of war) is to abolish weapons of mass destruction.

It is true that we are becoming more aware of the fragility of our planet and the dangers posed by nuclear weapons; and do are some way along the road towards their elimination. A progressive spirit revealed by some of today's leaders inspires optimism. A new strategic arms control treaty between Russian and the United States was signed last year and President Obama has renewed America's commitment to seek the peace and security of the world without nuclear weapons, although he has added that nuclear zero is unlikely to be achieved in his lifetime. And there are other developments with respect to tactical nuclear weapons, nuclear-free zones and nuclear-weapons testing which offer some hope.

But it is well to remember that proponents of nuclear weapons persist in the US, Russia, France, Pakistan, Israel and elsewhere; and some continue to provoke rising powers such as Iran, Brazil and Turkey to resist non-proliferation rules.

And even if complete nuclear disarmament is technically feasible, some states will continue to find power and security in these weapons. Here is the ambivalence that we find with political leaders in nuclear weapon states. As Richard Rhodes puts it in his recent book, *The twilight of the bombs*: "We have feared nuclear weapons even as we have tried to convince ourselves that they protect us, and so we have found it possible neither to employ them or to break them and throw them away." Resolving this ambivalence requires co-operative action both of the old and new powers, north and south, east and west. We know how to do it; the question is whether we have the will.

I would finally like to pay tribute to one man who changed his mind and there are many others today who are doing the same thing. Joseph Rotblat, a nuclear physicist from Poland, worked on the Manhattan Project after convincing himself that the apparent danger of Hitler developing the bomb justified this. But as soon as the danger had disappeared, he left the project and returned to the UK, where his research focus turned to the application of nuclear physics to medicine. He also became devoted to peacemaking, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in conjunction with his creation, the Pugwash Conferences for their effort towards nuclear disarmament. Jo was also the founding president of the Movement for the Abolition of War.

Tony Kempster

