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Michel Rocard, Nuclear Abolition and the Referendum

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The death on July 2 of former PM Michel Rocard is a heavy loss for those who think that conflicts should be resolved by diplomacy rather than war, by cooperation rather than threat, by consulting peoples rather than by authoritarian decisions and for all those who view the abolition of nuclear weapons as a categorical imperative of our times.

Michel Rocard first proved in 1988, when he was Prime Minister, that he was committed to diplomacy rather than strong-arm tactics. Diplomacy was his way of calming the conflict in New Caledonia between Kanaks and Caldoches, through the Matignon accords of 26 June, which spared us the prospect of an umpteenth decolonisation war. Those accords were approved in a national referendum on 6 November 1988, which granted a provisional status to New Caledonia. Its provisions were to be put to New Caledonia's population after ten years - which occurred in 1998 - and now there is a self-determination referendum scheduled for 2018.

On the subject of nuclear weapons, Michel Rocard's positions varied. First he opposed them, then he accepted them, then he distanced himself from them from 1990 onwards to the point of desiring complete elimination. He convinced President Mitterrand to make France a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which De Gaulle had rejected. "France was an observer in 1990 and a full member in 1992."

He said also that he persuaded Mitterrand to reduce the number of French nuclear tests per year (and yet Mitterrand was France's top testing president, up till the moratorium of April 1992.)

When the Soviet Bloc fell apart, Michel Rocard drew three obvious conclusions:

1. "The major risk is proliferation, of the weapons themselves or of radioactive materials."
2. "The struggle against proliferation is beyond the scope of one nation... the entire international community needs to take part."
3. "The Security Council will never agree to sanction any nation for possessing nuclear arms as long as one nation claims the right to keep its own." "Consequently it is highly important to have public involvement in eradication, irrespective of the time that might take to achieve."

In 1996, Michel Rocard took part in the « Canberra Commission », which concluded that comprehensive nuclear disarmament is necessary, and he co-signed that Declaration on Abolishing Nuclear Weapons published in February 1998 by US General Lee Butler, former head of strategic nuclear forces.

« It was in 1996 during the work of the Canberra Commission, in which I was honoured to participate, that I took this position for the first time », he said in January 2010 at the Global Zero conference in Paris.

"I must admit that since that declaration (...), I have remained for 13 years tragically the only one to take this line consistently in all France's political, administrative and military establishment. The reigning PC discourse on national independence via deterrence had become the most solid cement in all the nation's unity. Even the parties of the left kept silence, the Socialists (my own) and the Communists. Nobody dared commit blasphemy against it."

In 2007, as a Member of the European Parliament, when a large new conflict was threatening in the Middle East, Michel Rocard agreed to co-sign an "Appeal to Europeans: Prevent War against Iran". The other co-signatories were Yehuda Atai, co-founder of the Israeli Committee for a Middle East free from weapons of mass destruction, and myself as President of ACDN - it was published in *Libération* on 16 November. Appel aux Européens : Empêchons la guerre contre l'Iran

"We see warning signs everywhere: the USA is on a war footing, ready to bomb Iran. All that needs is a presidential order. At the start of October 2007, dozens of American personalities - political, religious, military, intellectual, artistic - called on the military leaders, officers and soldiers to refuse any order to attack Iran. This unprecedented appeal underlines how real the risk is of war breaking out in the coming days, weeks or months, and the necessity of preventing this risk. That is why we support this appeal launched in the USA and wish to develop it in Europe.

"The invasion of Iraq by a US-led coalition in breach of the UN Charter has proved catastrophic. Aggression against Iran would be just as illegal and even more disastrous. (...)

"These remarks are true also for the rulers, soldiers and citizens of the European states in the UN, whether or not they are US allies within NATO. We call on them to refuse in advance all cooperation, all political, economic or military aid or all logistic support if war breaks out. (...)

So that 2007 Appeal was made to European governments, but also to citizens, inviting them to undertake civil resistance if need be, civil and military disobedience, no less. It continued thus:

"While the nuclear-armed states continue to flout Article VI of the NPT, they cannot demand anything of the other signatory states, of which Iran is one. Nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament go together. It is urgent that this be acknowledged.

"Indeed it is only by going down the path of negotiated nuclear disarmament, as planned by Article VI, that the international community has any chance of gaining from the Iranians all the concrete and verifiable guarantees, if they exist, that they will not obtain nuclear weapons. This virtuous spiral should simultaneously dissuade other states in the region from 'proliferating', and lead the de facto nuclear states like Israel, Pakistan and India to choose the path of a world freed from nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction, in the Middle East as elsewhere.

"To refuse war today does not mean accepting the status quo or postponing war till tomorrow. It means giving diplomacy the time and chance and imperative to reach an overall solution to bring peace and security to all the states and peoples of the Middle East, and the whole planet. It means avoiding new shedding of blood, permitting reason to prevail, enabling our children and grandchildren to live in a less violent world, a world that is more just and more human, with no war, with no nuclear weapons or nuclear threats.

"Europe can contribute. The Europeans need to stand up against the approaching war."

It is hard to say what the impact of that Appeal was. It quickly received support from numerous French and international personalities, and it continues to receive thousands of visits on the ACDN website, both in English and in French. One thing is sure: the path it indicated was the right one, since it led finally to the agreement with Iran on 14 July 2015.

In December 2009, when the risk of war against Iran had lessened (though not disappeared) with the departure of George W. Bush and the arrival of Barack Obama, Michel Rocard, Yehuda Atai and I published the op-ed « pour un Moyen-Orient sans armes de destruction massive », this time in the daily *Ouest France*. When the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Obama, we recalled that his 'grand design' of abolishing nuclear weapons can be realised only if the Middle East becomes a zone free from all weapons of mass destruction that would both imply and permit an overall solution to the motives of regional conflicts.

Michel Rocard was until this year one of the rare French leaders to draw this conclusion: "It is indispensable for

France to play her role in starting the diplomatic movement of the five official nuclear states in the direction of eradication". He said that in January 2010.

"I was delighted to be able to publish in autumn 2009 a declaration signed by four personalities who had eventually overcome their hesitation: besides myself they were my colleague Alain Juppé, former PM and an heir to Gaullism, the former defense minister Alain Richard and the prestigious General Bernard Norlain, who had commanded our air forces." That op-ed, published in *le Monde* on 14 October 2009, was entitled: "For global nuclear disarmament, the only answer to anarchic proliferation".

To that limited list we can add the names of Paul Quilès and Hervé Morin, which (with Alain Richard) does make three former defense ministers wanting to get rid of nuclear weapons in the context of general disarmament, plus the name of Jacques Attali. (*)

Should we cross out the name of Alain Juppé ? Maybe. When he became minister of defense a year after co-signing the opinions that so delighted Michel Rocard, he didn't act on them. On November 26, speaking in the Senate about the defense budget bill, Juppé said: "I dream of a world without nuclear arms, of course, but I have never said that France should set the example before all others! As long as progress is not made on an international level, France must not lower her guard."

Michel Rocard, perhaps was disappointed by this step backwards. He was not himself altogether immune from such change (he suggested that savings could be made from the costly 'deterrence force' budget, but was so hardly criticized for these words, that he said quickly he only had 'joked' about). He will now not know the delight of learning that today over 50 MPs and senators are proposing to their colleagues to co-sign a referendum bill on France's participation in the abolition of nuclear weapons. (**)

Recently, not knowing Michel Rocard's state of health and hospitalisation, I wrote to him on 28 June announcing that good news and inviting him to support this parliamentary initiative. Although one cannot speak for the dead, I believe that he would have agreed if he had been able. That is an additional reason to regret the passing of this great statesman, who was also a simple and congenial man.

Perhaps Hervé Morin, now an MP, and Alain Juppé, a possible candidate for the presidency, might be willing to co-sign in his place, in memory of their shared ideas, at least on this matter? That would be very desirable.

And one would naturally hope that at least 185 parliamentarians, of all parties, (20% of 925), will agree to back a referendum on this question: "Do you want France to negotiate and ratify, with all the States concerned, a treaty to ban and eliminate nuclear weapons completely, under mutual and international control that is strict and effective?" This referendum, if held, will enable the French people to decide themselves on their own destiny, and will enable the French Republic at last to respect international law... and its own Constitution.

That would undeniably be the best homage we could pay to Michel Rocard.

4 July 2016

Jean-Marie Matagne