

Gareth Evans

Distinguished Honorary Professor Australian National University Australia

Gareth Evans is a Distinguished Honorary Professor at the Australian National University where he served as Chancellor from 2010-2019, after being President of the International Crisis Group from 2000-09 and Australia's Foreign Minister from 1988-96. He initiated the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, was a member of the Blix Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction, co-chaired with Yoriko Kawaguchi the Australia-Japan International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, and now chairs the Seoul-based Asia Pacific Leadership Network on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN). His international recognition includes the 2010 Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute Freedom from Fear Award for his pioneering work on the responsibility to protect (R2P) concept and his contributions to conflict prevention and resolution, arms control and disarmament.



1964 is the year of Tokyo Olympics. Olympics.org



Human Shadow Etched in Stone during the a-bombing. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum

What does the connection with Hiroshima mean for you personally and professionally?

I first came to Hiroshima in 1964, nearly six decades ago, as a twenty-year old student, and it was one of the most formative experiences of my life. Throughout my early years I had been vaguely conscious, like everyone else, of the shadow of nuclear war hanging over us all. But nothing had quite prepared me for the experience of standing at the epicentre of that first nuclear bomb strike, and being overwhelmed by the almost indescribable horror of what had occurred here just two decades earlier.

There is one particular exhibit in the Hiroshima peace park museum I saw then that I have never been able to get out of my memory: a granite block, part of the front steps of a bank building, against which someone had been sitting when the bomb exploded early that bright sunny August meeting. Starkly visible on that stone was – and still is, though perhaps rather more faded now – the shadow of that man or woman, or maybe teenager, indelibly etched there by the crystallisation of the granite around his or her body as it was, in an instant, incinerated by that terrible blast.

What does the presence of the GLH saplings in Australia mean here? What is your vision for these saplings in the future?

The survivor-tree ginkgo sapling I planted at the Australian National University Crawford School of Public Policy in 2016 will be a constant reminder to passers-by – and in our case, very appropriately, many successive generations of students of public policy at this great national university of ours – of the horror of what occurred in August 1945. But not only that, it will be a demonstration of the positive - of what can be regenerated, what can grow out of that horror. President Obama talked in Hiroshima of us choosing “a future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known not as the dawn of atomic warfare, but as the start of our own moral awakening.” And what is true of our little sapling is true of all those planted elsewhere. Properly tended, as they must be, and with their story clearly labelled for all to read and understand, they will long into the future carry a message that we must never forget.



Planting Ceremony at ANU in July 2016

Besides GLH's current activities, what is something else you think that can be done for the hibaku jumoku for a nuclear-free world and reverence of nature around the world?

Given the green, nature-focused dimension of its mission, GLH may be uniquely placed to spread the message that there are not just one, but three, existential threats to life on this planet as we know it: a nuclear holocaust, climate change and an out of control deadly global pandemic. They are broadly connected in the sense that meeting each of those challenges requires a total commitment to nurturing and protecting the living, as well as doing everything in our power to avoid catastrophic policy mistakes. The hibaku jumoku survival story is a powerful one, giving us a sense of optimism that those threats really can be overcome with the right spirit of commitment.

How can countries work together to achieve nuclear disarmament and secure our ecological survival, especially now in an era of pandemics? What gives you the deepest fears, and what gives you hope for a peaceful world?



Hibaku Jumoku plaque at ANU

Making progress on nuclear disarmament is a slow, grinding, frustrating, unrewarding process – and global zero currently seems as far away as it has ever been. But it is an effort that must continue, for the survival of humanity depends on it. The message in relation to all three of the existential threats the world faces is that they can only be overcome through serious, sustained international cooperation - that defensive, isolationist, inward-looking, go-it-alone nationalism is a recipe for disaster. The environment for good policymaking, both internationally and domestically, on nuclear disarmament and just about everything else, is about as desolate as we can all remember, and my greatest fear for the future is that this lesson will not be learned – with a critical test looming in the coming United States presidential election.

But it is important to keep things in perspective, and to stay optimistic. Pendulums do swing, wheels do turn, lessons are learned, and Presidents and Prime Ministers do change. Optimism is self-reinforcing in the same way that pessimism is self-defeating. Achieving anything of lasting value in public life is difficult enough, but it is almost impossible to do so without believing that what seems to be out of reach really is achievable. The crucial thing is to keep the flame of hope alight, not just in big diplomatic ways, but in a myriad of small ways. With nuclear weapons it is crucial to keep the memory of Hiroshima alive, and to keep alive the idea that out of the ashes of Hiroshima a better and more humane world can indeed grow. That is the mission of GLH, and – like our ginkgo survivor tree in Canberra – long may it flourish.



Hibaku Jumoku sapling at ANU in April 2019.