

Hello, my name is Sebastian Brixey-Williams and I am a nuclear weapons policy specialist and conflict mediator, and the Co-Director of BASIC, a think tank in London that promotes meaningful dialogue to build international trust, reduce nuclear risks and advance disarmament. Thank you so much to the Konrad Adenaur Stiftung and Atomic Reporters for inviting me to speak today or for starting this fantastic initiative.

My day-to-day focus at BASIC is around trying to stimulate and support a global conversation about responsibilities in relation to nuclear weapons, as an approach to reduce distrust and nuclear risks, and my particular focus here is on nuclear conflict in Southern Asia.

But I am also passionately interested in widening public inclusion and engagement in nuclear weapons policy, and I have worked for a number of years on increasing cognitive and demographic diversity in the nuclear field, most recently as a lead founder of BASIC's Emerging Voices Network. My Co-Director Marion and I are both also relatively young and progressive Directors of a three-and-a-half decade old organisation, in a field that is famously male, grey-haired and often conservative in its thinking, and which we think is ripe for systemic transformation.

So, I have been asked to say a few words to you this afternoon about how I got involved in nuclear policy, and why I think it's an incredibly worthwhile and important issue that deserves your attention, at least just as much as other existential challenges such as the climate crisis.

I've been awed by nuclear weapons as far back as I can remember, and I can recall a number of moments where they featured in my childhood. The defining moment for me was reading – as an eight year old boy at school – a satirical graphic novel published in the UK in the 1980s called 'When the Wind Blows', a powerful story about an old couple who die slowly of the effects of radioactive fallout while never fully comprehending the situation they are in – clearly a teacher had thought it was a

children's book because it had pictures. This book had an important effect on me, as did other cultural products such as films like *Threads*.

My professional break into nuclear weapons policy happened during my Masters' degree at SOAS in London where I worked with Dr Dan Plesch on his project SCRAP Weapons, which was partly designed to create a vehicle for students to develop their knowledge of the area. With the small knowledge I had gained over the year I was invited to speak at a panel organised by SOAS at the United Nations and to attend a preparatory meeting of the Nuclear Ban Treaty negotiations in Geneva.

In parallel that year, I became a member of a professional and academic network in the UK called Student / Young Pugwash, who provided me a platform to present a paper on emerging technologies and nuclear weapons. In the audience was a member of BASIC staff, who invited me to apply for their internship programme, and I was then lucky enough to progress to a full-time role, and I have been at BASIC ever since.

In this competitive field, I have no doubt that those extra-curricular opportunities for experience, learning and training – and to echo Patrick, the fact that I picked something to go deep on, from amongst my much wider range of interests – were what set me apart from the other candidates for those positions, and it was by first getting my foot in the door that I have been able to progress to my position today.

So, if you are considering a career in nuclear policy, I couldn't recommend more highly taking part in the course that we are launching today, and applying to join networks such as the CTBTO Youth Group, a global network for younger people aiming to prevent nuclear testing, and BASIC's Emerging Voices Network, which seeks to provide a truly diverse network of young people – with a particular focus on the Global South – to influence key nuclear forums such as the NPT and the TPNW.

It was only much later in life that I realised that not all children had come across nuclear weapons in their youth like I had. For most people, they're completely off their radar, even as adults – most people didn't seem to have the instinctive

fascination and fear that I had, and many colleagues I have spoken to in the field have expressed a similar sentiment. Now, it's common for experts in most fields of research to find it strange that the rest of the world doesn't find their work as interesting as they do, but with nuclear weapons – whose threat to life and health hangs over everybody, every day – I've always found it odd that there isn't more of a general interest. After all, the world seems to care passionately about the climate crisis: another long term, existential threat that requires bottom-up politics and multilateral action to resolve.

Much of this can be explained by a negative feedback loop: the public has lost interest in nuclear threats, meaning that politicians don't act on them, meaning that there is little for journalists to report on, and when they do, editors often don't accept the pieces anyway. Why? because the public has lost interest – and so it goes on. The longer this goes on, the less expertise there is, and the harder it will be to change. We've got to break that negative loop at all of its stages. In my view, it is essential that a new generation of journalists become experts in and cover nuclear weapons policy, and lobby their editors to bring these issues to the public. We should be inspired that a similar reversal has recently occurred in climate policy, which has suddenly turned into a powerful feedback loop of activism, reporting and political action. We need the same to happen for nuclear weapons.

But to avoid this happening again, nuclear weapons journalism needs to evolve. The media should feel more emboldened to break out of the silos of defence reporting, and link nuclear weapons to the things that the public really care about. For instance, nuclear weapons and the climate crisis are intrinsically linked, because the choice to spend on nuclear weapons as one form of security (national security) is done at the expense of another (planetary security). And there are myriad opportunities to frame reporting about nuclear weapons in terms of a broader systems change narrative. Just as the Green New Deal is demonstrating that an alternative to neoliberal economics and planetary exploitation is achievable, so we need to consider how we can institute systems change in security, away from one based on threat to one based on dialogue.

Yet all of this has to start with a proper understanding of nuclear issues at the strategic, political and technological levels. Courses like this one launched by KAS and Atomic Reports offer an opportunity to train this new generation of thinkers and writers.

So, I'd like to recommend to you that you make nuclear weapons a part of your expertise portfolio – whether you want to become a journalist, a think tanker, an academic, a filmmaker, a writer or something else entirely – and become one of a relatively small number of people who can claim an understanding this area of knowledge. It is a forgotten global issue whose time for a resurgence in public political activity and for a new narrative has come.

Thank you for listening, and I look forward to your questions.