

# ICAN's origins



*ICAN Australia board and staff celebrating the morning after the Nobel Peace Prize announcement, Melbourne 7 Oct 2017. Credit: Chris Hopkins/Fairfax Media via Getty*

## ICAN's Origins - From little things, big things grow...

*By Dimity Hawkins, Dave Sweeney, Tilman Ruff*

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**The ICAN story is one of humble beginnings. A small group of people crystallised thinking and action that was the right idea at the right time and has led to big outcomes.**

**This article, written by three of the original ICAN co-founders, explains how the campaign grew from Australia to be embraced across the world.**

In 2005 disarmament diplomacy was at a crisis point. The Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference had failed dismally in the United Nations. The subsequent World Summit of heads of state failed to deliver any progress on nuclear disarmament. The war on terror, including a war declared on the spurious grounds of supposed nuclear weapons in Iraq, was occupying our minds and the streets of the Middle East.

ICAN was sparked in Australia through collaborations led by the Medical Association for Prevention of War (MAPW) and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).

Distinguished Malaysian obstetrician Datuk Dr Ron McCoy first proposed the establishment of ICAN in 2005, modelled on the successful International Campaign to Ban Landmines. He put out a call to colleagues in 2005 through IPPNW advocating “lateral thinking and a new approach to nuclear disarmament”, an idea he called ICAN.



*Past IPPNW co-president Datuk Dr Ron McCoy from Malaysia, who proposed a new campaign called ICAN in 2005*

The idea struck a deep chord in Melbourne among colleagues active in the medical, peace and nuclear-free movements, who launched the global campaign from

Australia. Key among them were Dr Bill Williams, Assoc Prof Tilman Ruff, Dr Sue Wareham, Dimity Hawkins and Dave Sweeney.

Working collaboratively with nuclear free campaigners in Australia and around the world, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons had begun.

At IPPNW's world congress in Helsinki in mid-2006, its International Council unanimously endorsed ICAN as the campaigning vehicle for the federation's core work to eradicate nuclear weapons.



*First ICAN t-shirt (front and back) produced for the IPPNW World Congress in Helsinki, 2006.  
Design Dimity Hawkins/Felicity Ruby*

All involved in the genesis of ICAN were long term advocates of a nuclear free world, working on issues of nuclear disarmament, nuclear free futures and environmental and human rights responsibilities. It was not a new conversation but one that was informed by and built on decades of thinking and action from around the world. Their experience over many years made them aware of how hard it would be to begin a new approach and build enthusiasm for nuclear disarmament. ICAN began with a clear purpose - to re-engage with a vision for a nuclear weapons free world.

ICAN was fortunate to secure funding for the campaign through the Poola Foundation (Tom Kantor Fund). This enabled the first office of ICAN to be opened in Carlton, Melbourne in mid-2006 and to coordinate the materials and events that launched the campaign. The first committee meeting in 2006 opened with this quote by Franklin D Roosevelt:



“Do something. If it works, do more of it. If it doesn’t, try something else.”

This was the reality of how ICAN began. We did not know if our idea would work, but we knew we would. We wanted to reignite a global conversation and passionate action around a simple idea – can you imagine a world free of nuclear weapons? I can.



*L-R: Mark Wootton, Anne Kantor, Milan Kantor and Eve Kantor whose initial and ongoing generous support have been pivotal to ICAN’s success, Government House Melbourne May 2018. Credit: Jessie Boylan*

ICAN engaged Felicity Ruby as our first staff member in 2006. A key part of her work was to help establish the campaign strategy and organise the launch of the campaign in April 2007. Felicity was a close colleague, well known internationally for her outstanding work on nuclear disarmament, particularly through her role as Director of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) UN Office in New York over many years, including instigating the Reaching Critical Will project in 1999. Dimity had worked with Felicity on this in its earliest years.

Felicity helped to connect the fledgling ICAN initiative to broad and well established international networks, and helped ensure that from the start ICAN was both global in

scope and collaborative in approach. Felicity helped identify and test the founding principles of our campaign, consulting broadly on the development of strategy.

Co-founder [Bill Williams](#), who sadly passed away in 2016, and his partner Gisela Gardener undertook a speaking and listening tour in Europe in 2006, testing support for a new campaign coalition for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Many people they spoke with – officials and diplomats, activists, academics – called for the same thing – “a ground swell of public opinion.” Bill took what he called “GOPO” to heart, saying:

**We need a determined worldwide movement to outlaw and abolish nukes. To get there in this generation, we need to build the wave of public opinion into a mighty crescendo: a massive, surging, irresistible force which carries us all the way to absolutely zero nukes. Without it, even the most inspirational of leaders will falter on the way.**



*L-R Dr Bill Williams, Gisela Gardener, Dave Sweeney, Felicity Ruby, Palm Sunday Nuclear Fools Day Rally, Melbourne 1 April 2007. Credit: Tilman Ruff*

The principles crafted at the outset have stood the campaign in good stead:

- Build a broad, diverse, open, accessible and inclusive campaign coalition, keeping administration and governance lean and flexible; respect and add value to the many organisations who have campaigned long and hard for nuclear disarmament;
- A clear goal – a treaty-based process to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons;
- Base ICAN's work on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, the real and growing existential danger of nuclear war, and the impossibility of an effective response to even a single nuclear explosion in a city;
- Prominently include the survivors of nuclear weapons use and testing and their compelling testimony;
- Utilise and balance horror, humour and hope, underpinned by humanity, to stigmatise nuclear weapons and help overcome the denial and psychic numbing associated with the enormity of the nuclear threat and motivate action;
- Build a global campaign with prominent involvement of young people and intergenerational engagement;
- Work both to mobilise citizens and be a credible and effective partner with governments determined to wind back nuclear dangers.

ICAN's approach was based on the experience of what has worked to progress the control and elimination of other major kinds of unacceptable weapons. In each case, irrefutable evidence established that the weapons would have indiscriminate and inhumane consequences. Their rejection, providing a consistent standard for all nations, was codified in a treaty, which provides the basis and motivation for the progressive efforts to eliminate them.

Ban treaties have been key to work to control biological and chemical weapons, landmines and cluster munitions. Indeed, no type of weapon has been controlled or eliminated without being banned. It was a massive gap in international law that the worst weapons of mass destruction of all, the only ones posing an existential threat, nuclear weapons, had not been categorically prohibited.

The ICAN logo was developed through collaboration between Bill Williams and Australian designer Neil Campbell in early 2007. It linked to the UK Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and artist Peter Kennard, whose iconic artwork informed a generation before, with a new twist of a trapped and broken missile.

Voices of survivors of the nuclear bombings in Japan and of nuclear testing worldwide have been fundamental to the work of ICAN. They are the most compelling advocates for the human story of the impact of these weapons; what happened to them must not happen to anyone, anywhere, ever again. The grim realities of nuclear weapons consequences can be hard to grasp and difficult to confront. We too often turn away, get on with our lives. The painful and courageous

testimony of survivors can connect with human hearts and make nuclear weapons real. These are not abstract instruments of security and power in a grand international chess game, but inflict indiscriminate nuclear violence on civilians and poison ecosystems; unleashing death, disease, suffering, displacement and loss across generations.

The lived experience of survivors provides the essential base for our understanding of the humanitarian impacts of these weapons. Alongside the health facts and humanitarian evidence, their testimony cannot be ignored or explained away. The great injustice, enduring wounds and unfinished business of the nuclear bombing of colonised people and lands in Australia, the Pacific region and worldwide, with the leadership of survivors, have been vital to ICAN's genesis and work.



*L-R Rose Lester, Dimity Hawkins and Karina Lester, Nobel Prize celebrations at Melbourne Town Hall. The Lester sisters are Indigenous second generation nuclear test survivors and ICAN Australia ambassadors. Nobel Peace Prize celebration Melbourne. Credit: Cath Keaney*





*Auntie Sue Coleman-Haseldine, Indigenous nuclear test survivor, Kokotha elder and ICAN Australia ambassador, Negotiating Conference for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, United Nations New York, 28 March 2017. Credit: ICAN*

ICAN's founders recognised that a game-changing breakthrough needed to come from the countries without the weapons.

For too long the nuclear armed nations had held the world hostage to their own agendas. Many nuclear weapons free nations – by far the majority - were despairing and frustrated about being indefinitely held in mortal danger by governments that over decades refused to fulfil their legally binding commitment to disarm.

From the outset, we were up against the harsh reality that none of the nuclear-armed countries were serious about disarming. In fact, they were doing the opposite, arguing endlessly in bad faith that conditions were not right to disarm, and investing massively in modernising their nuclear arsenals for the indefinite future, making them more accurate, deadly and “usable”.

While governments without nuclear weapons cannot eliminate them, they can bring democracy to disarmament, assert the needs of global humanity by prohibiting them, and change the political dynamic in a fundamental way.



With or without nuclear-armed and dependent countries, they could ban nuclear weapons under international law.

At the time of the formal launch of ICAN in the Victorian Parliament House on 23 April 2007, we had been joined by numerous partners across Australia, and a growing number worldwide. The first international partner, in mid 2006, was Mayors for Peace.



*Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser at the launch of ICAN, Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne, 23 April 2007. Credit: Adam Dempsey*

The Melbourne launch featured former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, who became founding patron and remained a strong advocate for ICAN until his passing in 2015, retired Judge Christopher Weeramantry, Prof Fred Mendelsohn, Dr Tilman Ruff and Prof Joseph Camilleri.

An international launch took place at the NPT PrepCom meeting in Vienna a few weeks later.

A risk with campaign coalitions is that joining organisations may be reluctant to take on responsibility for carrying the nuts and bolts needed on an ongoing daily basis – fundraising, establishing an office, bank accounts, employing staff, fulfilling organisational and financial requirements.



*L-R Dr Sue Wareham, Dr Tilman Ruff, Jessica Morrison and Dimity Hawkins on an early lobbying trip, Parliament House Canberra, 2007*

MAPW and IPPNW kickstarted the campaign, drawing in partners and working collaboratively across the world. They effectively managed the transition from ICAN beginning as an outreach project to an international campaign in which IPPNW is one of ten organisations comprising ICAN's International Steering Group.

By 2010, ICAN strategy had sharpened around a nuclear weapons ban treaty as the next best feasible step the world could take on the road to abolition.

A treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons creates a new international norm. It stigmatises, it marginalises, and it compels new thinking around security. The treaties banning

landmines and cluster munitions had shown that prohibition treaties could be achieved despite the opposition of the major users and producers and large states, and that these states would be influenced even by treaties they didn't join.

Towards the end of 2010, a new ICAN office was established in Oslo. A Norwegian government grant supporting international outreach work enabled staff to be engaged through an international campaign office established in Geneva, initially hosted by WILPF.

ICAN being invited to coordinate the civil society involvement in the landmark intergovernmental conferences on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons in Norway, Mexico and Austria in 2013-14 was important recognition of the campaign's potential and capacity to become the logical lead civil society partner with governments in the process leading to the negotiation and adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

ICAN Australia now has 83 partner organisations, including all the major national environment organisations, faith organisations, the peak national trade union body and many individual unions, human rights, health, indigenous, social justice and development organisations.



*Tim Wright and Aunty Sue Coleman-Haseldine, Making Waves Tour, Melbourne, 2017. Credit: Kristian Laemmle-Ruff*

Tim Wright, who was ICAN's very first volunteer campaigner, serves as the international Treaty Coordinator, based in the Melbourne office of ICAN. Gem Romuld is the Australian Director and many other talented staff and board members have contributed to ICAN Australia since its inception.

**The ICAN story really is one of from little things, big things grow.**

In a decade it went from a launch in Melbourne to receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for its “work to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” and “ground-breaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition on such weapons.” ICAN's Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 was the first awarded to an entity born in Australia

Geir Lundestad, a former director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute stated that while many “see the Prize as a declaration of sainthood, winners are often just more or less ordinary people who have tried to do something useful for peace.”

ICAN's story can provide lessons and inspiration to people and movements worldwide. It again demonstrates how a small group of people with a powerful idea whose time has come; working together with passion, a plan and persistence, can make a difference in the world on a big challenge.

ICAN has never been about the messenger, and it still isn't.

The risk of indiscriminate nuclear violence, a nuclear ice age and global famine is growing. The message and the stakes could not be more compelling or urgent. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons provides the best path forward to wind back the Doomsday Clock and end nuclear weapons before they end us. It provides the only internationally agreed path to the world free of nuclear weapons we all need.

ICAN is a good tool to help us save our world. Let's use it well.