Mr Chairman,

The following are my reflections, offered in a personal capacity, on the informal panel discussion I moderated on 14 May under the broader title of “Taking Stock” and the sub-title “Existing multilateral treaty-based obligations and commitments”.

I was struck but not surprised that the three presentations at the start of the discussion by Beatrice Fihn of Reaching Critical Will, Theresa Hitchens of UNIDIR and Ward Wilson of the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies, as well as many subsequent interventions, all represented expressions frustration with the status quo: frustration with the state of multilateral nuclear disarmament, with the perceived lack of commitment of the NPT nuclear-weapon States and other possessors to fulfil NPT Article VI commitments or similar expectations, and with the fact that nuclear weapons retained their value politically and militarily.

But what was useful about this opening panel is that it did not dwell on frustration and some important cross-discussions emerged. I took three overarching points from the discussion which relate to the work of this open-ended working group.

The first is that we should be careful not to devalue the tools we currently have – the institutions and instruments at our disposal – and the mechanisms, be they of multilateral, regional, bilateral and unilateral nature, which have advanced the efforts towards a world without nuclear weapons. This open-ended working group should be examining how new tools and mechanisms can take us closer to our goal, but it should also consider how our existing tools and mechanisms can also do that.

The second is that changing perceptions of nuclear weapons is fundamental to taking our efforts forward. That requires continued work with the NPT nuclear-weapon States and the other nuclear weapon possessors. An observation made by one of our panellists was an important one – nuclear-weapon possessors have to want to get rid of nuclear weapons. And for me, this underlines a connexion which cannot be forgotten. It is the connexion between perception of nuclear weapons and the confidence to keep moving towards their elimination. Pursuing transparency and encouraging reduced role of nuclear weapons in military doctrines were raised by some as just two ways of shaping perception and building confidence. And I think it is important to reiterate, as some argued on 14 May, that we should use this open-ended working group thoughtfully and not turn it into an us-versus-them exercise – or for
that matter, an us-versus-us exercise. This is a creative opportunity that those who are genuinely committed to a world without nuclear weapons should not waste.

The third point is that we do need to define more clearly what the steps or the building blocks are to genuine disarmament – irreversible dismantlement of warheads and disposal of their material. Some interveners spoke of benchmarks and indicators. And those observations built on the questions which one colleague has consistently raised about what would follow an FMCT. It was even interesting to hear at least one advocate of a near-term prohibition on the possession of nuclear weapons argue that it was part of a step-by-step process – that raises the question of what the other steps are. In my view, all of this points to a lack of clarity about a medium-term plan, a broader vision often impaired by the parameters of our debate. And in this regard, I do not mean setting deadlines or timelines or lines of any sort, but rather what needs to be done. I do not need to remind you of Australia’s commitment to the implementation of the 2010 NPT Action Plan – we see it as extremely important set of actions to keep us moving forward. And I was struck by the limited reference to the 2010 NPT Action Plan during our discussion. It was designed as our roadmap for the future and builds on the 13 practical steps. Part of this may be because we have come off the back of a challenging 2013 PrepCom meeting. But having said that, the open-ended working group might look at what it can further develop from the 2010 Action Plan. And more broadly, I hope that with creativity grounded in reality, this open-ended working group can help bring a little more clarity on these issues.

Mr Chairman,

My final thought here is that in reality, we can do very little on the disarmament side without the engagement of the nuclear-weapons possessors, most of whom are not here. I would encourage the Chair and indeed participants to keep the channels of communication open with them about the work of the group.

I thank you, Mr Chairman.