

Landon Pearson

The children's senator

From the extermination camps of Europe to the famines of Biafra and the killing grounds of Rwanda, the 20th century saw some of the grimmest chapters in the history of children's suffering. Now, at the start of a new century, Senator Landon Mackenzie Pearson sees a glimmer of hope—a dawning recognition that children too have human rights, including the right to be heard.

Senator Pearson can trace the growth of this awareness in her own life. Born in Toronto in 1930, she grew up in a small Ontario town. There the sufferings of children registered in her awareness only in her grandmother's exhortations to "remember the starving Armenians" when she wouldn't finish her dinner.

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at the survival skills of poor children.***

—Landon Pearson

"I understood that these were creatures I should be sorry for," she said in an O.D. Skelton Memorial Lecture entitled *Seen and Heard: Children's Rights in Foreign Policy*, delivered in Winnipeg in 1997. "But I could not grasp that they were children just like me. As for their human rights, the vocabulary of the time didn't include the term."

The vocabulary expanded during the Second World War, and so did Pearson's own perceptions when she became a mother: "I had no trouble comprehending that my own children were persons or . . . that they had rights."

The wife of a Foreign Service Officer—Geoffrey Pearson, son of Lester B. Pearson—she accompanied her husband on postings abroad and there came face to face with child suffering: "The starving children my grandmother taught me to pity (but never how to help) became young persons whose rights to survival and protection had been trampled upon."

In the over 40 years since then, Landon Pearson has been working at home and abroad to help children, most of the time as a volunteer.

In India, for example, she worked with a mobile child care service for the children of nomadic construction workers in New Delhi and Bombay. During rotations home, she fought for children's rights, co-founding a children's mental health program that operated for 23 years in Ottawa, and chairing many children's rights organizations.

But the experience that, she says, "politicized" her thinking about children's issues came in 1979, when she served as Vice-Chairperson of the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child and editor of its report, *For Canada's Children*. This became a virtual manifesto for children's rights in Canada.

At hearings across the country, Ms. Pearson realized with dismay that shockingly few children "felt truly valued, respected or consulted about important issues."

In 1994, Landon Pearson was appointed to the Senate of Canada. In her maiden speech she vowed to be "the Senator for children," working to give children a stronger voice and to protect their rights in law.

Since then she has represented Canada at domestic and international conferences on a multitude of children's issues. In 1999, Prime Minister Chrétien named her his Personal

Representative to the UN General Assembly's 2001 Special Session on Children.

In September, Senator Pearson has an important date on her schedule: the International Conference on War-Affected Children in Winnipeg.

To anyone tempted to despair at the scale of the atrocities against children and the extent of their vulnerability, the Senator counsels resolve and hope. "I've never ceased to be amazed at the survival skills of poor children," she says. "I've learned how much children can actually do for themselves if only we provide the necessary means. That part is up to us." ●



photo: Senator Pearson's office

For more information about Senator Pearson and her work for children, visit her Web site: www.sen.parl.gc.ca/lpearson/main.html