



# Statements and Speeches

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## THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE CHILD

A Statement by Mr. Douglas Roche, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary to the Secretary of State for External Affairs and Representative of Canada to the Second Committee (Economic and Financial) of the Thirty-fourth Regular Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, October 17, 1979

As we reflect on the International Year of the Child, the mood I express, on behalf of Canada, is one of challenge as well as congratulation.

We are indebted to Canon Joseph Moerman of Belgium for originating the idea, to Mrs. Aldaka-Lim, Special Representative of IYC, and UNICEF, which continues to distinguish itself in the cause of children's rights. We are grateful for the sharp focus that has been put on the lives of children all over the world during their special year. We pay tribute to the countless organizations which sponsored activities and events that can never be adequately recorded. We appreciate the work of so many adults in so many fields who made the year a success. And most of all we thank the children and young people of every land who inspired us with their own involvement in ways that were often ingenious.

It is clear that the world community has renewed the United Nations' concern for the present condition and the future of our children. Let us celebrate that achievement. But our celebration ought to be brief. For what the International Year of the Child has underscored is the shocking amount of exploitation and discrimination against children that exists in different ways throughout the world. And if we are now impelled to work harder to advance the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, we must more urgently get at the roots of the problems that afflict children. The Special Year ought to have given us more profound insights into the essential fact that children do not live in isolation. Children live in families, families live in communities, and these communities make up our world. To express our love and affection for children is hollow unless we are now resolved to implement programs of action that will make the world a safer, more just place to be born into.

It is my pleasure to recount for a moment the observance of IYC in Canada. Here was an example of widespread public participation complementing government initiative. The Canadian government, through the Department of National Health and Welfare, provided \$1 million to the Canadian Commission for International Year of the Child, a body comprising representatives of the federal, provincial and territorial governments and, most importantly, 15 non-governmental organizations representing the 103 non-governmental organizations across Canada participating in IYC. The Commission, comprising 45 volunteer members headed by Judge Doris Ogilvie, was directed to distribute this money in small grants to communities across the country to stimulate local involvement in programs for children. I might note parenthetically that this was one instance of a commission forsaking a national conference in order

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to get out to the grass roots. So popular was this approach that the Commission was inundated with 4,000 applications; unfortunately only 500 projects could be funded. These embraced ethnic and cultural events, sports and physical fitness, family enrichment and medical-nutritional programs.

Frequently recurring themes were poverty, isolation and rural deprivation, handicapped children, family life education, day care and day nurseries, getting children off the streets, bridging gaps between young and old.

These are just a few examples of this kaleidoscope of activities:

In Montreal, a group concerned with the lack of recreation for retarded children matched 25 normal children with 25 retarded children in a recreational setting that demonstrated the often untapped potential of the mentally handicapped.

The Indian Regional Council in Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta, is in the process of establishing a community organization to deal with first-time native juvenile offenders rather than sending them to court.

In New Waterford, Nova Scotia, a group, appropriately named "Jay", was set up in which older people taught nutrition to slow-learning children.

Responding to the enthusiasm generated by these special projects, the government has compiled a list of more than 200 on-going programs of benefit to children. These programs cover a wide range of health, nutrition, and day care activities as well as educational films. IYC has heightened our awareness of the need for a higher priority in helping disadvantaged Canadian children. Although Canadians are blessed with a high standard of living, with universal health care and a broad range of welfare and social services, we nonetheless have children who are poor, badly nourished, abused, diseased, under-educated, unsupervised and uncared for. These are the innocent victims of a changing society in which family life is subjected to economic and social stress that is sometimes too much to cope with.

Having identified the principal areas of concern in the well-being of children, the Canadian Commission has drawn up a National Agenda addressing 12 areas: economic issues, the family, health and welfare, life skills and education, play and immigration, children and the law, television and the media, culture and children, international and intercultural understanding, child care and protection, native peoples, nature and the environment. Governments and non-governmental organizations across Canada will be asked to implement recommendations growing out of this National Agenda.

To meet the special needs of children today who are growing up in a world of confused moral values requires more than programs to alleviate specific problems. IYC has taught us that the good of family life ought to have a central place in the formulation of public policy. Families are affected by powerful economic and social forces over which they have little control – unemployment, inflation, increased housing costs. If we truly want to advance the rights of children we must examine more

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critically the reasons for the increasing breakdown of family life as it shows up in the high divorce statistics, child abuse, and teen-age suicide and pregnancy rates. All of this needs to be probed, especially in relation to our growing knowledge of the character and personality formation in the critical learning years of childhood, between the ages of three and five.

When we also look at how children are exploited by television violence, pornography merchants and drug peddlars, we should be filled with shame.

By the time the average child graduates from high school, he or she will have witnessed 18,000 fictionalized violent deaths on TV. Violence has now become an accepted form of entertainment, thus giving the child a distorted view of proper moral and ethical behaviour.

How is it that a society priding itself on civilized social values allows itself to be victimized by the pornography merchants who do not even hesitate to use children in their nefarious business? Degradation of the human person is objectionable in whatever form it takes; but degradation of the person of the child is especially intolerable.

The drug culture also exploits young people. The size and youthfulness of the drug-using population is known to be growing, with children increasingly exposed to a greater variety and availability of dangerous drugs.

Readily available alcohol is another well-known trap awaiting children.

It is not easy growing up in the modern world and, as the father of five children, I salute young people for meeting head-on and, in most cases, triumphing over the obstacles we have placed in their path. It is a tribute to the resilience of today's young generation that they cope as well as they do in a culture that is only now beginning to realize that technology alone is not the answer to a more human existence.

We need more programs to relieve the harm done to those children who are dispirited, angry and withdrawn. But we need even more the full attention of society on ways to help children grow into mature, responsible and caring adults. This means nurturing their environment while they are young and surrounding them with a community of values which opens their minds and hearts to the needs of their fellow humans throughout the world.

As a measure of this opening to the needs of others...a CBC/Radio Canada television special will show young people across Canada how man's survival on our shrinking planet requires a new spirit of co-operation and collaboration. Entitled "Why Should I Care" this project, sponsored by the Canadian Red Cross and the UNICEF Committee of Canada, has also prepared audio-visual kits for 285,000 teachers and 6 million students. Two days later, on World United Nations Day, every school in Canada will focus on international understanding and development issues. This project, the largest educational one ever funded by the Canadian International Development Agency,

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aims to make Canadian children aware of the cultures and conditions of the other children on "Spaceship Earth".

Surely the International Year of the Child will have no global benefits unless it galvanizes our attention on the 350 million children in developing countries who do not have access to even the minimum of health services, nutrition and education. These children — and their children — cannot achieve the rights we proclaim for them unless the conditions of absolute poverty are wiped out. Compassion for a suffering child is empty unless accompanied by a determination to establish conditions of economic and social justice to grow up in.

To guarantee a child freedom from hunger means guaranteeing at least one of his parents a job and a decent wage. To guarantee a child fresh air and clean water requires a degree of international co-operation not yet attained. A child's right to affection and security is mocked by those who perpetuate violence, those who enslave him in child labour, those who commit vast sums of money to elitist development when the human needs are so great. Recognizing that we cannot banish overnight all the evils that invade childhood, let us at least end the International Year of the Child resolute in our commitment to respond to the physical, spiritual, emotional, and cultural needs of children in every region of the world.

As we make decisions in our own countries and in this international body, let us respond favourably to these questions: "What do children need for their optimal development?" "What do parents require to help them meet these needs?" "What public policies are needed to enhance family life?"

It is in this spirit of continuing and universal concern for the needs of children that Canada commends the draft resolution now before this body. The children of every race, every region, every religion, every culture, deserve the unanimous passage of this resolution because it reaffirms the continuing rights of all our children. To build on the enthusiasm generated by this Special Year is the challenge we face.