

Remarks to CRAN: June 4, 2021
15th Anniversary of the Opening of the LPC

Welcome to all of you to this virtual CRAN meeting and to a celebration of the 15th anniversary of the founding of our Centre for Children's Rights here at Carleton.

Fifteen years ago on this very day, which is a Friday, but not on this very date because it was actually on June 1, 2006 that the University held a reception to launch the Centre. This event was followed the next day, June 2nd, International Children's Day, by a symposium that we (my colleagues and I) had organized to explore the themes addressed by "A Canada Fit for Children", Canada's national action plan created in response to "A World Fit for Children," the outcome document of the 2002 UN General Assembly Special Session on Children. "A Canada Fit for Children" was drawn up in consultation with the six young people I had persuaded PM. Jean Chrétien, whose personal representative I was to all the processes related to the Special Session, to name to our Canadian delegation. Other youth were added to this group as we crossed the country seeking input and one of them, a young Indigenous person from Alberta, stood with me in May 2004 as we launched "A Canada Fit for Children" in the lobby of the Senate. Now, two years later, it seemed like a good idea to bring some of them and some others back to take a look along with knowledgeable adults at how we were doing implementing the plan of action for Canada in Canada. We held four sessions on the four main themes of "A Canada Fit for Children": health; education; protection and child welfare; family and community. What the young people said was, as always, enlightening agreeing that some real progress had been attained but pointing to areas where much more needed to be done. And now, 15 years later what can we say? If it weren't for the pandemic, I might be relatively positive about a number of things such as the child tax benefit, for example. But new issues affecting the health and well-being of children continue to emerge that were never addressed in "A Canada Fit For Children" such as the impact on children and youth of the explosion of social media and the anxieties created by a fast developing climate crisis. A graduate student, Lindsey Li, and I did another update in 2014 (which is available on our website) concerning some of these new challenges in which we set new goalposts. I will now commit to a third update in 2024, twenty years on.

But let me step back a moment now to describe how the Centre itself came to be. In September 2005, I had been a senator for eleven years but as I was about to turn 75 I knew that my time was coming to an end. So I looked around my office and began to wonder what I was going to do with all the books and documents I had accumulated over the years most of which were related to the study of childhood and of children's rights, my two lifelong passions. Many of these books, papers and articles documented the history of children's rights in Canada and around the world starting with my involvement with the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child in 1979. Other materials related to my role as the official advisor on children's rights to four successive foreign ministers which had sent me to many international conferences concerned with various aspects of children's rights such as the First World Congress against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm in 1996,

child labour in Oslo in 1997 and children affected by armed conflict in Winnipeg in 2000. Still others concerned my role as representative of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien to the Special Session on Children in 2002. And then there were the briefing books for all the pieces of legislation I had been asked to sponsor in the Senate such as the new Youth Criminal Justice Act replacing the old Young offenders Act and the amendment to the National Defence Act that explicitly forbade the deployment of young people under the age of 18 into hostilities (while not preventing their recruitment at 16 so that they could benefit from a free military education). This last was necessary so that Canada could ratify the optional protocol to the CRC on Children in Armed Conflict. When I became co-chair of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Child Custody and Access even more documents appeared and we had to find an additional small office in the Senate to hold them. Looking at all I had accumulated it struck me that these were historical documents and so deserved a more accessible space for students and researchers than my basement!

As I was pondering what to do with them in their handsome red filing boxes, I fortuitously ran into a friendly acquaintance from Carleton, Tullio Caputo, in a parking lot as we were on our way to the funeral of a mutual and much respected friend, the late lamented child psychiatrist, Dr. Dan Offord. So I asked Tullio if Carleton would be interested in what I had and he said he would find out. He got back to me very quickly and said he would like to come and see me on the Hill with the then president of Carleton, Dr. David Atkinson and Dr. John Osborne who was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. They told me that both my library and I would be most welcome at Carleton, that they would find an appropriate space to house me and open an endowment fund to operate it and match any donations I might be able to attract as retirement gifts. A retiring senator is given two months to pack up his or her office and then the Senate pays for any moving costs so in late January, 2006 I found myself occupying two spacious rooms in the Loeb building overlooking the Rideau River. John Osborne had also generously made funds available to build shelves and for Tullio and I to use when we went shopping for furniture. Initially the Centre was associated with Tullio's Centre for Initiatives in Children, Youth and Community (CICYC) but we gradually established a separate identity as "The Landon Pearson Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights" and by June 1, 2006 we were ready to launch. By now I am saying "we" because the Centre and its child-rights focused activities have always been a collective effort. Tullio's sister, Virginia, also a Carleton professor, has been an ally from the beginning ensuring quickly that I had status as an adjunct professor. Without her I can firmly attest that the Centre would never have been able to evolve as it has. But there have been many other allies from the academy, from government and from civil society as well, all equally committed to children's rights. And they have stuck with us. At least five of the current members of CRAN took part in our opening symposium as well as being present for the launch. It seems to me as I look both backwards and forwards, that thanks to the continual positive interaction among us, we have formed "a circle of care," a village, so to speak, to improve conditions for the children who mean so much to us. It was the initial members of our "circle of care", most of whom now belong to our advisory board, who were responsible for drafting the vision that informs the Centre and all that we do.

“The Landon Pearson Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children’s Rights” we wrote in the first brochure we printed “was created to honour a powerful vision, that every child in Canada can grow up aware of his or her rights and responsibilities, fully enabled to exercise them within a receptive and respectful society.”

The tragic revelation this past week of the remains of 215 Indigenous children on the grounds of the Indian residential school in Kamloops is proof, if any were needed, of how far we still have to go to fulfill our Centre’s vision because, as we know from Cindy Blackstock, another longstanding ally, and from all the work she had done on behalf of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, the human rights of Indigenous children, so grievously flouted in the residential schools system, are still far from being fully respected. And they are not the only children whose rights are being denied in our country to say nothing of what is happening to children nowadays in other parts of the world.

With the Centre’s vision now resonating with a new sense of urgency, let me remind you of the strategies we have designed over the past 15 years to get closer to our goal and also urge you to continue collaborating with our efforts. While it is impossible to prove that we have been able to substantially change cultural attitudes about children I am convinced that collectively we really have and so I am determined to continue our activities and, if possible, expand their scope.

First of all, I scarcely need to reiterate that everything we do is framed by our responsibilities as duty bearers under the CRC and therefore is guided by its general principles; non-discrimination (i.e. rights for all children), best interests (we must always be ethical), survival and development and child participation. And we have added a number of items to our checklist for any activity we undertake: collaboration; cultural sensitivity; relationship building; knowledge transfer; student engagement and, where possible, the use of both official languages.

Now let me remind you of our most important activities to date, all of which interact with one another in a more or less cohesive manner.

- 1) The curating, cataloguing and promotion of the Centre’s resource collection
- 2) Shaking the Movers annual cross-country events, their reports plus a newly designed toolkit available on our website.
- 3) Child Rights Academic Network, annual meetings, reports and collaborations
- 4) Canadian Journal of Children’s Rights (seven issues so far)
- 5) Publications in addition to the CJRC many of which are available on our website:
 - a. Half-way There—UNICEF funded publication written by Tara Collins and myself re progress from the World Summit on Children
 - b. Tibacimowan—written by Judy Finlay and myself connecting First Nations elders with their grandchildren.
 - c. The Children’s Senator—a collection of essays on children’s rights edited by Virginia Caputo and published by McGill-Queen’s (2020)
 - d. Numerous articles and lectures

- 6) Engagement with students through mentoring, supervision and employment. Two students currently working on youth justice and children in armed conflict
- 7) Collaboration with universities and institutions: King's University in London, Ontario, Ryerson, University of Ottawa (Human Rights), University of Waterloo (Global Engagement), Museum of History (Children's Museum) and others
- 8) Collaboration on a number of ongoing research projects related to children's rights
- 9) Regular events sponsored at Carleton to engage the whole community such as National Child Day, International Day of the Girl, Commemoration of historical events such as IYC plus 40, Beijing plus 25, World Summit on Children plus 30. Events envisioned for this Fall include a celebration of the 30th anniversary of Canada's ratification of the CRC.

Many but by no means all of these activities have been put on hold by the pandemic or gone online. But we have still had a busy year what with some STM gatherings, my 90th birthday party graced to my astonishment and delight by the virtual presence of five Prime Ministers from both sides of the aisle, the launch of "The Children's Senator" in the Senate, another volume of the CJCR. We even held a contest for different age groups to share their experience of COVID. The one thing that was really stopped was our physical presence in the Centre and the ongoing cataloguing into a word-searchable database hosted by the library at Carleton of our growing collection. And also lamentably, visits from students! The only actual creature that came into 735 Loeb was the mouse that ate the chocolate bar I had left in my desk drawer! Our advisory committee, however, continues to meet regularly on Zoom and we were able to increase our endowment by a fair amount thanks to generous givers and a match by the University. And let me, once again, thank all those who have funded our activities, the foundations, PHAC, the Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Public Health and others. We are particularly grateful to the Muttart Foundation which really believes in the importance of the work that we do and has done so from early on.

So what next? What will the next 15 years look like for children as well as for the Centre? Not long before he died 13 years ago, my husband Geoffrey spoke about the four issues that he thought would dominate the rest of the twenty-first century: climate change; intercultural, interracial, and interreligious conflict; growing disparities between the haves and the have nots; and world-wide pandemics like the one currently raging, all of which threaten children's rights to survival and development let alone their other rights. However, my husband, as anyone who knew him will remember, tended to take a dim view (which did not prevent him, fortunately, from doing all he could to promote international peace and security) whereas I have always been more optimistic seeing promise as well as threat. Last week on behalf of the Pearson Family and the United Nations Association in Canada I had the privilege of presenting the 2021 Pearson Peace Medal, named for my father-in-law Lester Pearson, to the Right Honourable Beverly McLachlin. In my presentation speech I used a quote from one of the 31 previous laureates, Hannah Newcombe, who had come from Austria to Canada in 1939 at the age of 18 to escape the Nazis. Once here she became both a scientist and a peace researcher. This is what she said based on her own experience: "Between pessimism and optimism there is something called courage." So "bon courage, mes amis!"

Now I recognize that I may no longer be with you in the flesh in 15 years but I hope I will be here in spirit. Still after listening to that 107 year old woman survivor of the Tulsa massacre speaking to Congress last week, don't count me out! However I know the Centre will still be here as a couple of years ago we extracted from the University a written guarantee that it would have a place at Carleton "in perpetuity." Also, the "architecture" we have carefully constructed over the last few years to fulfill our mission will hopefully endure and most of our activities will continue, if, and that is always an "if", we can secure the necessary funding. We would also like to see some new ones. For one thing I would like to see an increased focus on early childhood and the growth of the imagination through play and the arts. This is why we are so excited to-day to announce the Joy Calkin awards to encourage more and more students to look at the implications of paying attention to the human rights of infants and very young children and how they should best be protected and promoted. We would particularly like to express our gratitude to Chris Smith, whom many of you have met at previous CRAN meetings, for his support for this initiative, a wonderful 90th birthday gift to me from the Muttart Foundation! We are also announcing to-day the creation of an annual prize in honour of Francine and Gerison Lansdown for essays related to the rights of children with mental health challenges, another area of ongoing concern for the Centre.

Of course we are interested in looking at every aspect of children's rights at our Centre and we are certainly keen about youth engagement but the older I get the more I see that our end is in our beginning, as the poet T.S. Eliot wrote, and so attention must be paid. If little children get all the loving, caring, nurturing support they need within an overall culture of respect then perhaps they will be able to elicit "the better angels of their (and our) nature" so that together we can move forward in security and peace.

Hon. Landon Pearson O.C.