

The Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children: Origin and Early Days

Reflection by the Honourable Landon Pearson

The Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children originated within the context of two major international events, both of which significantly advanced the rights of children: the adoption by all member states on November 20, 1989 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) followed less than a year later in September 1990 by the World Summit on Children (WSC). The WSC was also held in New York; it was attended by 71 prime ministers and heads of state who all signed their country's commitment to the rights and wellbeing of children.

As soon as the CRC was adopted in 1989, Landon Pearson, then Chair of the Canadian Council on Children and Youth (CCCY), an Ottawa-based non-governmental organization (NGO) that had long promoted the rights of children and youth, called together a small number of like-minded organizations to propose the creation of a coalition to devise strategies for the WSC. Canada was one of the six countries asked by UNICEF Executive Director James Grant to initiate the event, to have input into the outcome document and to attract other world leaders to sign it. This provided Canadian NGOs with a unique opportunity for action on behalf of children so in March, 1990 UNICEF Canada, under the leadership of Harry Black, expanded the original coalition by convening in Ottawa a much larger group of both domestic and international development NGOs with an interest in children's rights in order to expand the original coalition and develop terms of reference for what was now called the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (CCRC). Canada signed the CRC on May 28, 1990 and shortly afterwards, at a meeting in early June, Coalition members agreed to terms of reference which included :

1. Ensuring full implementation of the CRC in Canada in respect of Canadian domestic and International policies.
2. Monitoring and analyzing the periodic reports submitted by Canada to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as established by Article 43 of the CRC.
3. Making recommendations for improving both the reports referenced above and Canada's domestic and international compliance with the CRC.
4. Establishing national, provincial, regional and local as well as international links with government and organizations concerned with child well-being.
5. Fostering education and awareness in Canada of the rights of children, especially among Canadian youth.
6. Acting as an information network in Canada for materials related to the CRC.
7. Urging the federal government to ensure that Canada be represented on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Now formally established, the CCRC invited Landon Pearson to act as chair. As the CCCY was now faltering, owing to funding difficulties, she agreed and was able to transfer some of the CCCY's resources to the YMCA, an active member of the Coalition which agreed to host a small secretariat and be helpful in other ways. Since it was now a recognized entity six CCRC members were invited by Foreign Affairs to have some input into the WSC Declaration which

was circulating among the initiating countries. By this time Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had been named as co-chair of the WSC and was eager to hear from children so the last joint activity of the CCCY and the CCRC was to gather young people at Christie Lake Camp in late August so that they could write their own declaration which the Prime Minister promised to take with him to the WSC. One of the young participants, Sahira Piracha, was chosen by her peers to represent Canadian children there and, after meeting with Mr. Mulroney, she was asked to join the Canadian delegation, along with Landon Pearson.

The WSC Declaration and Plan of Action set in motion a flurry of activities in Canada. The Minister of Health and Welfare, Benoît Bouchard, had responsibility for children added to his mandate and the Children's Bureau was set up within his department to draw up a plan of action for Canada's children which became "Brighter Futures." At the same time major efforts were made to bring the provinces and territories, which have so much responsibility for children's issues, on side, so that Canada could ratify the CRC. With official letters of agreement in hand (with the exception of Alberta which delayed its agreement for another couple of years) Canada proceeded to ratify the CRC in the Great Hall of Parliament on December 13, 1991. The Coalition was funded to bring in children from across Canada to witness the Prime Minister's signature on the Instrument of Ratification. It was a fine event!

From 1990 to 1994, the Coalition was very active: managing projects worth more than \$500,000; conducting workshops on the rights of children and youth; acting as the secretariat for the CIDA-funded Children In Difficult Circumstances Fund which included writing a booklet on "Lessons Learned"; drafting position papers on children's right; and taking part in consultations and conferences, notably the "Stronger Children Stronger Families" conference in 1994. Another secretariat was established in Montreal and connections were built with coalitions of child and youth organizations across the country. The Coalition also established a youth committee that rewrote the CRC in a more accessible format for youth and engaged in a number of other activities promoting children's rights. As a result the Coalition was slowly achieving its goals, although the presence of a Canadian on the CRC committee had to await the appointment of Landon Pearson, now a senator, as Advisor on Children's Rights to the Foreign Minister. Brent Parfitt served from 2003-2007, bringing a Canadian perspective; he was well-respected by his colleagues.

Overall the 1990s were significant years for the promotion of children's rights and kept the Coalition busy. Beijing's commitment to the rights of girls in 1996, the Stockholm World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in 1997, the Oslo Conference on Child Labour in 1998 and the Winnipeg Conference on War Affected Children in 2000 kept children on the international agenda and Coalition members busy. All this culminated with the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in September 2002. This major event was delayed by one year by the tragic events of 9 /11; and, although the outcome document, A World Fit For Children, and Canada's action plan, A Canada Fit For Children, set out goals and objectives for advancing children's rights everywhere, governments became preoccupied by terrorism and defence and the window of opportunity that had opened with IYC (the International Year of the Child) in 1979 began to close. However, there is still so much to do to

advance children's rights everywhere that the CCRC's task of keeping all of us accountable is more important than ever.