O.D. Skelton Memorial Lecture

Seen and Heard: Children’s Rights in Foreign Policy

By Landon Pearson

University of Manitoba
WINNIPEG, Manitoba • March 17, 1997
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Memorial Lecture

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Oscar Douglas Skelton was born on July 13, 1878 in Orangeville, Ontario. After a brilliant undergraduate career at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, Skelton was awarded his M.A., along with medals for highest standing in Latin and Greek. In 1908, he received his Ph.D. in political economy from the University of Chicago. That same year, Dr. Skelton was named Sir John A. Macdonald Professor of Political and Economic Science at Queen’s. Eleven years later, he was named Dean of Arts, a post he held until he resigned from the university in 1925. Dr. Skelton was a prolific scholar, the author of several major books, including biographies of Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt and Sir Wilfrid Laurier.

In 1925, Dr. Skelton accepted Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King’s offer to succeed Sir Joseph Pope as Under Secretary of State for External Affairs. Until his death, in late January 1941, Dr. Skelton served as the principal adviser to the Prime Minister, sometimes called the “deputy prime minister”. To Mackenzie King, his death was “the most serious loss thus far sustained in my public life”. One Canadian historian has described him simply as the most powerful civil servant in Canadian history.

As head of the Department of External Affairs for more than fifteen years, Dr. Skelton helped to define a distinct Canadian foreign policy. He was also responsible for the recruitment of a remarkably able group of officers. Dr. Skelton firmly believed in appointment and promotion by merit and the list of recruits he attracted to Ottawa is an impressive one indeed, highlighted by two Governors-General (Georges Vanier and Jules Léger) and one Prime Minister (Lester B. Pearson) as well as numerous senior mandarins.
O.D. Skelton
Landon (Mackenzie) Pearson was born in Toronto in 1930. She graduated from the University of Toronto in 1951 with a B.A. in Philosophy and English. In 1978, she earned her M.Ed. in Psychopedagogy from the University of Ottawa. Wilfrid Laurier University awarded her an honorary doctorate in 1995.

Landon Pearson has been actively involved with children and issues associated with young people for more than 40 years. As the spouse of a Canadian diplomat, she worked with children’s groups in France, Mexico, India and the Soviet Union. In addition to numerous articles on child development and policy questions, she has written *Children of Glasnost: Growing up Soviet* (1990).

In 1979, Senator Pearson was Vice-Chairperson of the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child and Editor of the Commission’s report, *For Canada’s Children: National Agenda for Action*. During the period 1984 to 1990, she was President, then Chairperson, of the Canadian Council on Children and Youth. She was a founding member and Chairperson of the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children. She is co-founder and chair of “Children Learning for Living,” a prevention program in children’s mental health operating in the Ottawa Board of Education. Landon Pearson is Vice-Chair of the Centre for the Study of Children at Risk at McMaster University and a member of the Board of the Canadian Paediatric Foundation. She was a Canadian delegate to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995 and to the First World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm in August 1996.

Landon Pearson was summoned to the Senate in September 1994. In May 1996, she was appointed as Adviser on Children’s Rights to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.
I feel greatly honoured to have been asked to deliver the 1997 O.D. Skelton Memorial Lecture on a foreign policy issue. Dr. Skelton’s is not a household name; indeed before coming to this lecture many of you may never have heard of him. Yet in 1952, when I arrived in Ottawa as a foreign service bride, his was a name to conjure with. As new recruits to the foreign service preparing to serve our country abroad, we were told on several occasions that it was Dr. Skelton who had created the Canadian foreign service, a foreign service that, thanks to him, was second to none, one that we should feel proud to be part of. We were.

Dr. Skelton built the Canadian foreign service between the wars by persuading a number of talented young people to sit his challenging foreign service exams and, when they were successful, to move to Ottawa to work under his influence until they were ready for posts abroad. One of these young people was my father-in-law, Lester B. Pearson. So, although Dr. Skelton died some years before I came to Ottawa, I feel personally connected to him. Indeed, except for him, I might be sitting with you in the audience today instead of standing here before you — an alumna of the academic community rather than a “graduate” of the Canadian foreign service. This is because my husband had two choices before him when we were first married and living in Oxford. One was to join the Department of External Affairs (as it was known then) for he, too, had passed the difficult exams; the other was to pursue an opening in the English Department at the University of British Columbia. That he chose the former and made teaching and poetry an avocation rather than the other way around was due, I am sure, to the passion for world affairs created in him by growing up as his father’s son. And that choice, of course, made my own adult life very different from anything I could have imagined as a young girl living in a small town in Southwestern Ontario or even as a student at the University of Toronto.

Once we were married my horizons expanded rapidly as we travelled with our growing family from Canada to France, then to Mexico, then to India and finally to the former Soviet Union. With each move I became more aware of the richness and diversity of the wider world. At the same time, through the eyes of my children, I learned to see what is common to the human condition. Helping my children confront the challenges of our
mobile life made me sensitive to the difficulties all children face as they grow and develop. It also made me sensitive to the need all children have for strong family support. At the same time, as I observed the ways in which my children were coping with their difficulties and marvelled at the survival skills of the poor children at the project in India where I worked, I learned how much children can actually do for themselves if only we provide the necessary means.

And then there was my father-in-law. I both loved and admired him. The way he thought about human beings, his respect for human rights, his internationalism, his commitment to peace, the compassionate attitudes and honourable beliefs that motivated him — all had a profound influence on me. So did his sense of humour, which was such a part of the way he looked at the world. And he was a delightful grandfather; piedpiper rather than patriarch. Our children adored him.

Yet for all Lester Pearson's understanding of human rights and sympathy for children, children's rights never became an issue for Canadian foreign policy under his term as foreign minister nor under the terms of his successors, including Joe Clark. Human rights were important for all of them, but attitudes about them were caught in the prism of the Cold War. Children were seen. Few of us will ever forget some of the photos from those days: the Biafran children with swollen bellies, the big-eyed refugee children taking refuge in huge sewer pipes during the birth of Bangladesh, the burning children running in terror in Vietnam. We looked at these images with compassion and grief, yet I don't recall that we actually saw those children as persons whose human rights had been abused or to whom we should listen because they just might be able to tell us how to respond to their plight. In those days, children were seen, yes, but they were not heard.

This public attitude toward the world's children, an attitude of genuine concern that recognized their needs but not necessarily their rights, persisted until quite recently. Now, however, it has changed. In the Speech from the Throne that opened the Second Session of the 35th Parliament, the Government of Canada made an explicit commitment to the promotion of children's rights. And when the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy became Minister of Foreign Affairs in January 1996, one of the first things he did was
to express his determination to make children's rights a priority for Canadian foreign policy. He has.

How did this remarkable development come about? To answer we have to look at the history of human rights discourse. The ideas of justice and freedom that frame our current understanding of human rights emerged during the Age of Enlightenment in 18th century Europe. It was the human wrongs of the 20th century, however, that made them universal. When the 20th century began, the hand of colonialism was heavy, democracy was limited and women had no vote. Then came the tragedy of the First World War, the massive and inhuman oppressions of Hitler and Stalin, the growth of Japanese imperialism and the global conflagration of the Second World War. Once the war was over, vast numbers of people finally became aware of the extent of the horrors that had been taking place all along. Concern for human rights, particularly for civil and political ones, deepened. The United Nations (UN), founded in 1945 to prevent a new outbreak of global hostilities, quickly made the promotion of human rights a key element of its strategy for global security.

In December 1948 the UN proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the common standard of achievement for all people and nations. By adopting this declaration member states committed themselves to the proposition that “recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and unalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”. Since then the UN, through negotiation, has developed a wide-ranging body of understandings about human rights to which we can all turn for guidance and direction. Among the first to be drafted were the two broad legal instruments known as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Both were adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1966. These covenants are complemented by four focused conventions: the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (December 1965); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (December 1979); the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (December 1984);
and finally, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (November 1989). One by one these conventions entered into force as international treaties after being ratified by the requisite number of states; adherence to them is monitored regularly by six treaty bodies functioning under the UN Commission for Human Rights.

Most of the UN’s major human rights instruments were drafted during the period of the Cold War and the political polarities of the time affected the process of ratification, slowing and restricting it. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, however, was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly after the fall of the Berlin wall and rapidly became the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. As of today, March 17, 1997, less than seven years after coming into force, this convention has been ratified by 191 countries. Only Somalia and the United States (which, at least, has signed) have so far failed to do so.

The end of the Cold War was also marked by a flurry of UN-sponsored or UN-related conferences whose declarations and programmes of action refined and elaborated the propositions and understandings imbedded in the covenants and conventions. For the evolving understanding of the human rights of children, the most important declarations and programs of action are those adopted at the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990), the Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), the Conference on Human Rights (Vienna 1993), the Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women, which had a special focus on the girl child, (Beijing, 1995), and the First World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (Stockholm, 1996). Each of these conferences built on the preceding ones, crafting and clarifying language and concepts to describe more and more accurately the real situation of children from a human rights perspective. As a result each new programme of action was better designed than its predecessors to enhance the inherent dignity of the child as a member of the human family. During the same period UNICEF (UN Children’s Fund), with its annual reports on *The State of the World’s Children* and *The Progress of Nations* (with respect to the goals agreed upon at the World Summit for Children),
kept us informed about ongoing abuses of children’s rights and directed us how to respond.

So, at the end of the twentieth century the world talks very differently about children than it did a hundred years ago. Does it matter? Of course it does. As a woman I can easily trace in my own lifetime the extraordinary differences that language can make. I had a happy childhood in a loving family, but neither I nor my parents could envision a future outside the words used then to describe possibilities for little girls. And my youthful understanding of the conditions of childhood in the rest of the world was largely framed by verbal exhortation. “Remember the starving Armenians!” my grandmother urged when I wouldn’t eat my dinner. “All those little children with nothing to eat.” But my childhood imagination could not grasp that these were children just like me. All I knew was that they were creatures I should feel sorry for. The vocabulary of the time didn’t include the human rights of children. So I never thought of children in that context.

Then the war came and I grew up. The language that described women and children began to change. Once they were born I had no trouble comprehending that my own children were persons or accepting that they had rights. And when we went abroad, especially to India, not only my but also their eyes were opened to the realities of other children’s lives. Then the starving children my grandmother told me to pity (but never taught me how to help) became young persons whose rights to survival and protection had been trampled upon, young persons with whom I could now identify and with whom I could work in partnership so that together we could find solutions to their problems.

By 1979, when I became the vice-chair of the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child (IYC), I was open to the challenge. My experiences that year politicized me. My fellow commissioners and I sought information from a variety of sources. One of our activities was to cross the country to listen to what Canadian children and young people had to tell us. After all, it was their year! We were both surprised and dismayed to discover how few of them felt truly valued and respected by Canadian society. And how rarely they were consulted about important issues. This was less a reflection on their parents than a comment on the social environment in which
they were living. Yet for the most part these were articulate and thoughtful young people. On a positive note we were struck by the fact that those who appeared to be most successful at managing the transition from uneasy adolescence to responsible adulthood all told us that they had been given opportunities very young to have some say in what went on in their lives.

During IYC the Canadian Commission uncovered many problems related to Canada’s children. So did the national commissions of most other countries. The 1959 UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, a noble document that had organized the themes for IYC, was clearly not the right tool for redressing the problems that had been brought to our attention – problems we were learning at last to recognize as abuses of children’s human rights and not just failures to meet children’s needs. So, in 1980, a UN working group was established to transform the Declaration into something with teeth, a legal document, an international covenant. This process, which included not only country representatives but also non-governmental organizations, produced a draft Convention on the Rights of the Child which came before the UN General Assembly in 1989. Canada was active in all parts of this process from negotiating the text to co-sponsoring the Resolution in the General Assembly. On November 20, exactly 30 years after adopting the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, the UN unanimously adopted the new Children’s Convention.

Following IYC I spent three years in the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, my experience there deepened my understanding of the foreign policy implications of human rights abuses appreciably. But as I began studying the situation of Soviet children, my understanding of the interrelatedness of all human rights also deepened. During the Cold War there was constant tension between those who gave primacy to civil and political rights, which were understood as individual rights, and those who favoured economic, social, and cultural rights, which were understood as collective rights. The former set dominated the human rights discourse of one superpower, the latter the rhetoric of the other. In those days it was almost impossible to integrate the two sets in any discussion without being called “soft on communism” by one side or “an enemy of the people” by the other. Yet the voices of the wistful young people of Canada, the impoverished children of India and the disillu-
sioned young of the former Soviet Union combined to convince me that the two sets of rights are organically connected and that neither can be fully realized without the other.

After the end of the Cold War frozen attitudes melted and there was a positive shift in the language of human rights. It was not by accident, therefore, that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which integrates both sets of rights in one document, was ratified so rapidly. Now that there was no longer a political price to pay for linking the two sets of rights, children could be described as persons whose civil rights need economic, social and cultural support and whose growth into responsible citizenship requires opportunities to learn and to make choices. While the implications of the Convention’s articles are still unfolding there is no doubt that its nearly universal ratification has brought children’s rights permanently onto the international political agenda. Around the world, nations are building the Convention into their laws, sometimes right into their constitutions. They are establishing children’s commissioners and designing action plans for respecting children’s rights. Issues such as child labour, children in zones of conflict, the commercial sexual exploitation of children and discrimination against girls have become visible as never before. Children are now discussed at all kinds of international meetings where governments are represented. Even trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, with its side agreement on child labour, have begun to take children into account.

Canada, traditionally a strong proponent of human rights, has taken leadership in this movement. We began work on the Convention under a Liberal government and ratified it under the Conservatives. Former Prime Minister Mulroney co-chaired the World Summit for Children in 1990. On their return to power in 1993, the Liberals explicitly made children’s rights a foreign policy concern. This was stated in Canada and the World, the document the Government released in February 1995 in response to the report of the Special Joint Parliamentary Committee reviewing Canadian foreign policy. Canada and the World lists three foreign policy objectives: (1) the promotion of prosperity and employment; (2) the protection of our security within a stable global framework; and (3) the projection of Canadian values and cul-
ture. It is in the context of these three objectives that the protection and promotion of children’s rights can be seen as fundamental to our foreign policy.

The promotion of global prosperity and employment is a trade and human resources issue. But, at the end of the 20th century, who are the workers and who are the potential consumers on whom global trade depends? Much of the world’s population is currently under the age of 18. In fact, this is the largest and youngest generation the world has ever known. Most of these children live in Asia, Africa and Latin America in countries whose populations continue to grow. In Europe and North America, in contrast, populations are either stabilizing or declining and are aging as a result. These demographics are profoundly significant for the global economy. So how are these now and future workers and eventual consumers faring? Not as well as they should be. Far too many of them live in abject poverty, deprived of basic services such as health and education, battered by ethnic conflict, exploited for their labour, beaten and abused, their fundamental rights as human beings violated every day. As a result a generational time bomb is being primed to go off. These are children who, if they survive at all, may grow up with as little respect for us as we adults are showing for them.

But a human disaster is far from inevitable. No investment in global prosperity is as vital as investment in the human and social capital that, properly looked after, these children will create. Let me give just one example of what happens when we do the right thing. Through the Canadian International Development Agency, Canada is helping girls, notably in Africa, to improve their access to education and the World Bank estimates that for each additional year girls are educated, child mortality is cut by up to 10 per cent, female fertility is reduced by 10 percent and wages are boosted by 10 to 20 per cent. As a further example, in Kerala, an Indian state that is no richer than its neighbours but where girls are valued for more than their reproductive capacity, the incidence of child labour is considerably lower than it is in the rest of the country.

Child labour, when it deprives a child of formal education and other opportunities to develop in a normal and healthy manner, is a major problem for global prosperity, a fact that even the countries where it is most prevalent have begun to recognize. Government leaders have become aware that large
numbers of working children imply large numbers of untrained and unemployed adults. Now, spurred in part by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the global community has begun to act. Canada is taking a leading role in building a world consensus around an effective action plan that will reverse the alarming growth in the number of child workers which the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates today as around 250 million worldwide.

The second priority for Canadian foreign policy is the protection of our security within a stable global framework. This is where the issue of children in zones of conflict becomes so important. As Graça Machel recognized in her powerful report to the UN on the subject delivered in the fall of 1996, in recent times children have become more than accidental victims of conflict between adults, they have become targets, deliberately killed or wounded during ethnic conflict, intentionally raped and violated, forcibly recruited as combatants. Such gross abuses of their human rights are likely to have grave implications for the behaviour of those who survive. So we must pay attention to the millions of children of this generation who are caught up in armed conflicts. How can we protect them from the worst consequences of war? And when hostilities cease, how can we take the war out of them? Eliminating landmines, controlling the sale of small arms, raising the age of recruitment are all essential measures. Reuniting children with their families and providing programmes of physical and psychological rehabilitation, an important focus for our overseas development assistance, are also helpful ways to prevent future outbreaks of violence. To diminish the potential for violence in a world where the impact of even a minor war can affect us all is a crucial foreign policy objective.

The third foreign policy objective of the current government, the projection of Canadian values and culture abroad, has particular significance for the promotion of children’s rights. Polls consistently demonstrate that Canadians continue to value the qualities that were so important to Lester B. Pearson: tolerance and respect, social justice, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, participatory democracy, a place in the world defined by common human goals rather than by the exercise of power. We are faithful supporters of the United Nations and its member organizations: UNICEF, UNESCO
(UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the World Health Organization, the ILO and so on. We are active in all the international fora that are shaping the global conscience. We are guided by a fundamental commitment to human rights. As an actor on the world scene we unequivocally declare that those rights include not only the rights of women but also the rights of children.

It is notable, and I think characteristically Canadian, that Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy would choose to attend the First World Congress Against Commercial Exploitation of Children in Stockholm in 1996 and that, in his speech there, he would make a special point of calling for the participation of young people in bringing an end to this abhorrent practice. For as the 20th century ends, participatory democracy is proving to be the most effective protection for global security. Participatory democracy, however, is neither easy nor inevitable. It requires responsible citizenship and the capacity for responsible citizenship is shaped in childhood through education and practice, observation and opportunity. Through its promotion of children’s rights, Canadian foreign policy is demonstrating respect for children and youth, enabling them, as they learn about their own rights, to learn respect for the rights of others.

It is impossible to predict the future or to see with any clarity what the next century will bring. But there is one thing this century has taught us for sure; there can be no global security without human security; no human security without respect for human rights; no respect for human rights without respect for children; no respect for children without listening to and hearing what they have to say. In our interconnected world we have to be more than just observers of children’s suffering, we have to be partners with them in their struggles, talking and consulting with them because they often know better than we do what will help. Then together we can act.