The Florence Bird Lecture.

March 8, 2012

From Strength to Strength: The Interrelated Rights of Women and Children over the Life Cycle.

It is an honour to have been asked to deliver the Florence Bird Lecture here at Carleton on International Women’s Day, a day that reminds us, year after year, of the ongoing struggle for women’s rights around the world. At the beginning, more than a century ago, the focus of the day was equality in the workplace and universal suffrage. Today women can vote in virtually every country and their rights have been ensured in numerous constitutions, including our own, thanks to the concerted efforts of women on every continent. In 1979 the United Nations adopted the Convention to End Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which has since been ratified by 160 member states. There have been many setbacks, of course, and major barriers remain worldwide to the achievement of full equality between men and women, but overall progress has been remarkable, a triumph for women’s groups in civil society over patriarchal systems in place for centuries. There is no going back now to the way things once were. The status of women has clearly changed, not enough, not nearly enough, but it has changed. Women’s voices are now part of every discussion and on every issue and their voices matter. Women have worked hard for this and over the years a number of them have gained recognition for their ability to bring women’s voices to the attention of the public both in Canada and abroad. One of these was Florence Bird for whom this lecture is named.

Florence Bird was the Chair of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, established in 1967 by my father-in-law, L. B. Pearson, who bowed, so he used to tell us with a chuckle, to pressure from one of my co-grandmothers, Laura Sabia, who threatened she would march one million women to Parliament Hill if it was not created! Its mandate was to inquire into the status of women in Canada and “to ensure equal opportunities for women in all aspects of Canadian society.” The Commission’s report was tabled in 1970 and, in spite of some derisive comments at the time, the government of Canada eventually adopted two-thirds of its remarkably forward-looking recommendations. A gift that Florence Bird brought to the Commission was her understanding of the importance of media exposure for the credibility of the Commission’s work. Earlier in her career, as Anne Francis, she had been a broadcast journalist and she was able to persuade the CBC to cover every public hearing including those in the far north. Women all over Canada had their voices heard as never before and the result was positive social change.

As a child advocate I am particularly grateful to the Royal Commission because I am convinced that the profile of women in Canada had to be raised and their rights recognized
before the same could be done for children. I am also convinced that these rights are fundamentally interrelated. It is this linkage that I will now explore. Before I do, however, I have to offer a caveat. This presentation will be more of a personal essay than an academic lecture. There will be no slides and no PowerPoint, and no one need take notes! By the time you reach my age, I expect you will have discovered, as I have, that wisdom is more likely to be found in narrative than in footnotes and what I am hoping is that, as you follow my story, you will be drawn to share my conclusions. Because I have an important message for you to take away, the message that stronger women make stronger children and stronger children make stronger women and that this is an iterative process that continues over the life cycle. For me, in this context, strength has a particular meaning and on this International Women’s Day I see that meaning perfectly embodied in Aung San Suu Kyi, who some of you had the privilege of meeting on Skype here at Carleton last week; personal integrity, a moral compass and grace under pressure.

A friend recently asked me where my passion for children’s rights came from and what keeps it alive? The only way I can answer is to tell something of my life because it is only by looking back that it is possible to see how the patterns formed. I was born in 1930, just a year after women in Canada were declared “persons” by the Privy Council of Great Britain so that they could serve in the Canadian Senate. My American mother was an artist and my father an accountant who hadn’t worked for five months. He got me and the job that sustained us through the Depression on the same day. So naturally he was delighted. Besides, I was a girl and he already had two sons. It was a lucky start and I was very fortunate to grow up with the emotional and financial security denied to so many of my generation in other parts of the world. The Second World War affected me only indirectly although I was aware that children were suffering and dying and I remember being horrified by Hiroshima. I continued to go to school and then to university. My parents believed that almost anything was possible for me (although I don’t think the Senate entered their field of vision!). But, like so many of my friends, I fell in love and married shortly after graduation. My husband was a budding diplomat and our first posting was Paris. It was there that my first child was born and I became a child advocate. I know now that a childhood during which I felt both valued and respected helped to shape my response to my daughter Hilary’s arrival but I still remember the shock of recognition with which I greeted her. This is what I wrote in my journal at the time:

“When I came to, there she was all wrapped up with her eyes wide open and Geoffrey looking very pleased... already a separate person whom I shall grow to love more and more because she is ours, not because I carried her in my womb... It’s hard to explain what I feel – but it’s a question of her complete individuality.”

I went on to have four more children and to learn something different from each one of them. I also learned from all of them together that optimal child development requires a great deal of strategic thinking! You have to get to know your children very well so that you can set the challenges that will bring out the best in them. When we were subsequently posted to Mexico,
India and the Soviet Union and I became involved with local children in each place, I could not help but compare the opportunities we were able to offer our own children with those available to children in our host countries. The comparison was salutary and it convinced me that all children deserved more than most of them were getting. With this thought my perspective gradually shifted from being charity-based to being rights-based.

Geoffrey and I and our now mostly grown children spent the greater part of the 1970s in Canada on a home posting. My husband headed the UN Bureau at Foreign Affairs and I became increasingly involved with civil society organizations concerned with advocacy for children, especially the Canadian Council on Children and Youth. I also completed a master’s degree in education at the University of Ottawa where I met my friend, Jane Legg, with whom I established a program of primary prevention in mental health for elementary school children entitled “Children Learning for Living.” This program which taught me a great deal, survived in the Ottawa Board of Education for 26 years until it disappeared under amalgamation.

My sustained engagement with children, both at home and abroad, led to my appointment in 1978 to the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child (1979) which turned into a full-time volunteer commitment for two years. The Commission’s task was to raise the profile of children in Canada by funding celebrations for them all over the country and also to develop strategies to promote their rights. The UN resolution that established IYC asked member states to frame their activities with the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) and so we did. But as we investigated the circumstances of children’s lives both in Canada and elsewhere in the world it became clear that this declaration, while inspiring, was inadequate to the task of bringing about real change. As a result our Commission strongly supported the transformation of the declaration into a convention, an international human rights treaty that would mandate states parties to it to be accountable to the international community.

The best part of IYC for me, however, was crisscrossing the country with several of my fellow commissioners to listen to what children of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds had to say to us. Every time I began to flag they restored me because, although their stories were often difficult ones they had nevertheless found the courage to tell them. What we learned from them was both positive and negative. On the upside, the young people who were obviously thriving, all credited the same two factors for their success. In the first place, there had always been at least one person who was consistently “there” for them and secondly, they had been given many opportunities from a very early age to make meaningful choices. On the downside, most of the young people we talked with said that, although they usually felt valued by their own families, they did not feel valued by society at large. This was a shock for me because this was not what I had experienced as a child. Perhaps having spent six years of my childhood under war conditions, when every child was expected to do his or her part, I had never encountered the kind of prejudice they described that led to them being regarded with suspicion in public, always served last in a store, thought of as likely to steal or otherwise to make trouble. So we promised them to do what we could to change the stereotypes that enclosed them and in 1980, after much deliberation, we
came out with a report entitled “For Canada’s Children: A National Agenda for Action.” Some of our report’s recommendations were accepted by the government of the day but many key ones were still outstanding 25 years later as the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights (of which I was vice-chair) discovered as we listened to the testimony of witnesses (including young people) pursuant to our mandate “to examine and report upon Canada’s international obligations in regard to the rights and freedoms of children.” The committee’s final report entitled, tellingly, “Children: The Silenced Citizens” was tabled in the Senate in April, 2007.

In 1980, as a UN working group comprised of representatives from 40 countries began the process of transforming the Declaration on the Rights of the Child into a convention, I went with my husband to Moscow. There I soon discovered that while I hated the system I liked the people, especially the women, and I began to wonder if there was something special about Russian childhood. With my curiosity piqued, I set out, whenever my diplomatic duties allowed, to collect material for a book on growing up in the Soviet Union entitled, by the time it was published in 1990, “Children of Glasnost.” We returned to Canada in 1983 and I spent the rest of the decade splitting my time between writing my book (I went back to Russia five times for further research), supporting Children Learning for Living and presiding over the Canadian Council on Children and Youth.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell and shortly after, on November 20, the General Assembly of the UN adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The push for Canadian ratification and implementation was on. In 1990, a number of us from a variety of child-focused organizations brought together by UNICEF Canada, founded the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Children to make sure that this happened. Later that year, in September, I found myself in New York representing the Coalition at the World Summit for Children along with, Sahira Piracha, a young girl who had been chosen by other youth to take their message to the unprecedented number of world leaders who had gathered there. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney did an excellent job of co-chairing the Summit and, subsequently, of persuading the provinces to signal their support so that he was able to ratify the CRC on behalf of Canada in the Great Hall of Parliament on December 13, 1991 in the presence of children we (the Coalition) had brought to Ottawa from every province and territory for the occasion.

With the adoption of the World Summit Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and its detailed Plan of Action for implementation followed by the rapid coming into force of the CRC the decade of the 1990s started off full of promises for the advancement of children’s rights around the world. Women’s rights were also actively promoted. Paragraph 12 of the World Summit Declaration reads “Strengthening the role of women in general and ensuring their rights will be to the advantage of the world’s children. Girls must be given equal treatment and opportunities from the very beginning.” In Canada, after the Summit, Mr. Mulroney asked his Minister of Health and Welfare, Benoit Bouchard, to take on specific responsibility for children and for developing Canada’s Plan of Action in response to the Summit. A children’s bureau was created within the ministry to coordinate this task. So the Canadian Government
appeared to be taking its responsibilities seriously, but for a variety of reasons, civil society was not actively involved in the process of developing “Brighter Futures” as our national plan came to be called. It was then that I began to think that the next move for children would have to be a political one. It never occurred to me that I would be the one making it.

In 1994 I was “summoned”, as they say, to the Senate of Canada by Prime Minister Jean Chretien and asked to represent that segment of the Canadian population that has no vote, children under the age of 18. Technically, of course, I represented Ontario but I soon became known as the Senator for Children as well as the Children’s Senator. The distinction is important because in the first role I spoke on behalf of children and in the second I enabled them to speak for themselves. On every bill that I sponsored or was involved with in the Senate from the Youth Criminal Justice Act to the Amendment to the Constitution that changed the status of schools in Newfoundland and Labrador I ensured that their voices were heard.

In 1996 I was appointed advisor on children’s rights to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (first Lloyd Axworthy and then three subsequent ministers) and in 1998, Prime Minister Chretien appointed me his personal representative to the 2002 UN Special Session on Children. He agreed with my proposal that youth participation should be a priority for Canada and, with his backing, I am happy to say that we were able not only to bring young Canadians from a variety of backgrounds to New York on our official delegation but also to persuade many other countries to do the same. Afterwards most of these same young delegates, joined by several other thoughtful youth, helped us to draft Canada’s response to the outcome document of Special Session on Children which was called “A World Fit For Children”. Not surprisingly we entitled this new national action plan “A Canada Fit for Children”. When it was launched in May 2004 the young people reminded all those present that “A Canada fit for children is a Canada fit for us all”. Without their engagement and the energy and knowledge they shared I am not sure I would have been able to persuade our working group that we would have to go back to check with everyone we had consulted in the first place, both inside the government and in civil society, to ensure that we had heard them properly. This delayed the process, of course, and meant spanning two administrations before I could go to Cabinet for approval but it was worth it. Stronger children make stronger women!

During my eleven years in the Senate, given my personal experience of the relationship between women’s and children’s rights, I was also deeply involved in women’s issues. As soon as I entered the Senate I joined the women’s caucus as well as the social policy caucus and its small sub-caucus related to children chaired for several years by MP John Godfrey. Collectively we helped to bring about important changes in Liberal government policy in support of children and families. We extended parental leave, we enhanced the child tax benefit and we helped to convince the government of Paul Martin to create a national Early Education and Child Care program which, alas, did not survive the change of government.
Very early in my term as Senator, in 1995, I had the privilege of attending the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing as a parliamentary observer. My instructions were to focus on the girl child. The Platform for Action that emerged at Beijing marked a significant advance on earlier documents. The tensions between the rights of women and the rights of children that had marked the previous decade had resolved to some degree as it was increasingly recognized that the Convention to End Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which had been adopted at the UN in 1979, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted ten years later were actually compatible instruments deriving from the same human rights perspective, a perspective clarified at the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993 which stated that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated.

This led to a separate section in the Beijing Platform for Action devoted to the girl-child which opened with the statement; “In some areas of the world men outnumber women by 5 in every 100. The reasons for the discrepancy include, among other things, harmful attitudes and practices, such as female genital mutilation, son preference - which results in female infanticide and prenatal sex selection - early marriage, including child marriage, violence against women, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, discrimination against girls in food allocation and other practices related to health and well-being. As a result, fewer girls than boys survive into adulthood.” Section L of the Beijing Platform for Action then continued with a number of concrete recommendations for change.

With the issue of violence against women and children very much on my mind one of my last acts as a Senator was to sponsor and help to organize the North American Regional Consultation for the UN Study on Violence Against Children. Once again we listened as children and young people told us what it is like to experience violence at home, at school, in the community and in the workplace. Like Dr. Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the independent expert who led the study which was tabled in the UN in 2006, we were galvanized. An earlier report for the UN Secretary-General by Graca Machel on the “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children” (1996) had already addressed those children but he was dismayed to find out how many other children around the world were victims of violence. So were we. Listening to suffering children whose voices were captured in a number of consultations, he became increasingly outraged. “No violence against children is justifiable,” he insisted in his final report and “All violence against children is preventable.” Once again, giving children the opportunity to speak up led the way to positive action. We are a long way from solving the problem of violence against children but at least, it is getting harder for anyone to think violence it is acceptable.

When I had to retire from the Senate on my 75th birthday in November 2005 I was not at all ready to retire from my work for and on behalf of children. Fortunately, thanks to good friends, I was invited to bring all my papers and books as well as my experience here to Carleton to establish a resource centre for the study of childhood and children’s rights. This has given me a base from which to continue raising awareness about the CRC, to organize workshops for
children and youth and establish a network of child rights academics around the country. I plan to hang in as long as I can because there is so much still to be done.

So what have I learned thus far from my long life as a daughter, a mother, a woman, a lover, a writer and scholar, a senator and a child advocate about women’s and children’s rights over the life cycle? First of all I have learned that while there are a number of ways in which we can frame issues related to children and youth, the human rights perspective is a particularly constructive one. Using it pushes you to engage directly with young people, for example and to let them help you find solutions to their problems that are likely to work. Secondly I have learned that human rights, properly understood, are about relationships rather than entitlements. They are about the relationships between individuals, between individuals and society and between individuals, either alone or in groups, and the state. I have also learned that all the human rights instruments that have been negotiated under the authority of the UN to address the human wrongs of the first part of the last century are designed to spell out the universal norms that should govern these relationships. My life experience has also confirmed that the human rights of women and children are interrelated. The big question is how this interrelationship can be supported so that it produces strength rather than weakness over the life cycle.

Let me now apply what I have learned to three components of the human life-circle with which we are familiar and where the rights of women and children are constantly at play: birth, reproduction and death. The universality of birth is incontrovertible. None of us emerged like Venus from the sea or Minerva from the head of Zeus. Every one of us had a mother. But it is the circumstances of our birth that makes us different. When my grandson, Geoffrey, who celebrated his birthday on March 3rd was born twelve years ago there was a flood in Mozambique and on the same day that Geoffrey was born a baby boy was born there in a tree above the rushing waters. This is what I wrote at the time in “Children and the Hill”, the regular report on legislation and government policy affecting children that I issued from my Senate office two to three times a year: “These two little creatures will grow up to share the same planet and in our interconnected world the choices one will make will indirectly affect the choices of the other.” How true! I wonder where that second boy is now? In an era of climate change and growing inequality how are we ever going to be able to protect the rights of children to healthy growth and development. Or the rights of their mothers to an active and constructive life? All countries that have ratified CEDAW and the CRC have promised to do so but the devil, as always, is in the details. I am now going to quote short extracts from several of the documents I have already referenced and let you make up your own mind as to how well we are doing in Canada and around the world.

From CEDAW (1979):

Art. 5(b) “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that family education includes a proper understanding of maternity as a social function and the recognition of the
common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children, it
being understood that the interest of the children is the primordial consideration in all cases.”

From the CRC (1989):

Art.18. “States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of:

1) The principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and
development of the child... The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

2) ...States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents... and shall ensure the
development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.”

From the Program of Action from the Cairo Conference on Population and Development
(1994):

5.1. “While various forms of the family exist in different social, cultural, legal and political
systems, the family is the basic unit of society and as such is entitled to receive comprehensive
protection and support... sensitive to the needs and rights of women and children.”

From the Platform for Action from Beijing (1995):

Para.29 ” The social significance of maternity, motherhood and the role of parents in the
family and in the upbringing of children should be acknowledged. The upbringing of children
requires shared responsibility of parents, women and men and society as a whole. Maternity,
motherhood, parenting and the role of women in procreation must not be a basis for
discrimination nor restrict the full participation of women in society”

As I have said governments take on certain responsibilities when they ratify these instruments
or adopt these programs. Canada is a full signatory to all of these conventions and programs of
action. We know what to do so that stronger women can make stronger children and stronger
children can make stronger communities – so why aren’t we doing more? For a long time I have
thought that if I had control of the allocation of funds in a government budget I would give a much
higher priority to supports for healthy pregnancies and best babies possible and post-natal care
particularly during that challenging first year of life when new parents are so stressed.

The year after I attended the Beijing conference I went to Stockholm as a delegate to the First
World Congress Against the Sexual Exploitation of Children. It was, I have to say, a revelation.
Delegates came from all over the world to discuss this appalling and destructive abuse of
children’s rights and to agree on strategies to address it. There were many experts there but only
one experiential youth, a member of our own delegation, Cherry Kingsley. So Cherry and I
decided to create our own summit of sexually exploited youth from the Americas and with the
help of various government departments and UNICEF New York, we managed to pull it off. In
the spring of 1998 Cherry and I spent a week in Victoria, B.C. with 54 young people who had
been or still were in the sex trade and they shared their experiences in a variety of ways. We captured all these learnings in a report called “Out from the Shadows.” Listening to these boys and girls was difficult but their words have kept me close to the issue ever since. I had already established, under direction from Lloyd Axworthy, an ad hoc committee in the Senate to follow up on Stockholm, a committee that still continues under the direction of Senator Romeo Dallaire. We meet regularly, make connections, and keep the issue on the agenda.

My second experience was as co-chair of the Special Joint Parliamentary Committee on Child Custody and Access. This was less obviously about sex but I was taken aback by the amount of the emotional violence that colored so many of our hearings as we travelled across the country. At one point we were assigned a plain clothes policeman to protect us in case someone got out of hand. Of course sexual jealousy may have been only one of the factors underlying the stories we were being told but it was clearly there and in the worst scenarios that came to our attention we could see, to our dismay, that the children were being used as ammunition in a battle of the sexes. No wonder we entitled our report “For the Sake of the Children” and did our best to formulate recommendations that would encourage everyone to simmer down and consider the impact of their decisions on the rights of the children involved.

My third sexually charged challenge came during my last year in the Senate when as a member of the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs I heard the testimony of witnesses with respect to the Civil Marriage Act. While I accepted from the beginning that same-sex marriage was a civil rights issue, what really persuaded me to support the legislation was testimony about the bullying of children either because they belonged to a same-sex family or because of their own emerging sexual identity.

Sex permeates the world around us, as we all know, and it is constantly affecting our relations with one another. My view over a life-time of experience is that our failure to see what it means to us is what lies at the root of so much violence and abuse. Women and children are the primary victims of this blindness. The only remedy over the long term is education and building a culture of respect for the rights of every individual human being without discrimination. Sex is not going to go away; we are, after all, sexual beings. There is good sex and there is bad sex and a healthy sexual life is truly a right for women and girls as the Platform for Action from Beijing says in paragraph 96: “The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality… free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences.”

Now we come to the last turn of the life-cycle, one in which I am particularly interested as I myself am somewhere near the end. It is a bit more of a challenge to link the rights of women and children to the process of dying but the link is definitely there. Yet all the documents and human rights instruments on the rights of women and children are silent on the topic. Only the
Beijing Platform makes a brief reference to the unique health needs of aging women. Yet, in my view, a human rights perspective on the process of dying, which is, after all, a universal experience, is much needed. I believe strongly that everyone has the right to die, if humanly possible, with their dignity intact and that this right involves the responsibility of society as a whole to make a much greater investment in palliative care and in the education of health care professionals in end-of-life issues. At this moment in time most end-of-life caregivers are women and they are probably someone else’s children as I like to remind those who complain about their tax money going for child care and education since they have already educated their “own”. The personal qualities of those who will look after us in our final days are just as important as their professional skills as I have noted in the knowledgeable and compassionate palliative care nurses with whom I have had contact. I know from personal experience that a good death is perhaps the last best gift we can leave behind. The grace under pressure of my daughter, Katharine, as she lay dying of breast cancer in the West Island Palliative Care Centre gave strength to us all.

But to finish on an upbeat note, I would like to leave the last words of this presentation to the girls and young women who spoke to us delegates on the final day of the Beijing conference;

“We now present to you an indication of our vision for a future that will be free of today’s problems. A future where every girl and young woman will have access and a right to education free of discrimination. A future where all women, young and old, will have full access to health care, related information, and complete control of their bodies. A future where women and men will share equally in the sense of ownership of the achievements of their countries.

Also, a future where women can actively participate in determining a New World Order free from armed conflict and guided by the principles upheld in the Culture of Peace. A future where a commitment to the preservation of our natural environment is reflected in all our international, national, and local development plans. A future where work done by women is recognized as an indispensable contribution to the world’s economic growth.”

These girls are now in their thirties, the young delegates we took to New York and who helped me draft “A Canada Fit for Children” are in their late twenties. But what really gives me hope is the new generation I now see emerging, the generation of my grandchildren. Among the students I mentor and teach, among those I work with in the North or who work with me at my Centre, in the high schools where I occasionally teach, at the “Shaking the Movers” workshops my Centre sponsors, at model UNs and, yes, at the recent Liberal Convention, I feel new energy and a new commitment to social justice. The girls are particularly active and I am sure, indeed I know, their mothers are strong so I say to myself with renewed optimism “From Strength to Strength to Strength.”

Landon Pearson