**A Thirty-Year Reflection on the 1990 World Summit for Children:
Interview with Landon Pearson**

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Abstract

This interview with the Hon. Landon Pearson was held in the Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights at Carleton University. Virginia Caputo, the Director of the Centre, was present, along with research assistants, Raven Griffin and Sarah Ham, who formulated a series of questions for Landon Pearson regarding the 1990 World Summit and associated children's rights initiatives. As a dedicated advocate for children's rights, Landon Pearson provides a unique perspective on the 1990 World Summit, the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child as part of a broader look at the past thirty years of children's rights advocacy. In looking to the past of children's rights, Landon Pearson shares insights on the inception and context of the World Summit as well as an outlook on the present and future of youth activism.

Keywords: children's rights, Landon Pearson, interview, 1990 World Summit, Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations

What led to your participation in the World Summit? With your long career in children's rights, what specifically triggered your involvement?

At the time, I was working with both the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (CCRC) and the Canadian Council on Children and Youth (CCCY). They were beginning to blend at that stage and the Coalition was growing while the CCCY was faltering.

You founded the Coalition, is that correct?

I founded the Coalition. Well, I co-founded it with others and then became its Chair. Since the goals set for the World Summit for Children were tied to Canada's efforts surrounding the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it was natural that the CCRC and I became involved.

However, the real initiator of the World Summit was James Grant, who was then the Executive Director of UNICEF, New York, not the UNICEF here in Canada which is actually the Canadian Committee for UNICEF. We often confound the two when we're talking here in Canada because UNICEF Canada is quite active. But when I talk about UNICEF in this context, it is the branch of the United Nations which happens to be headquartered in New York and is always headed by an American. That being said, since Canada had been involved in the development of the CRC with contributions from both government and civil society, we were considered important allies to be engaged. And since I had been the Vice-Chair of the Canadian Commission for the 1979 International Year of the Child (IYC), my personal involvement in the World Summit was logical.

It took a period of ten years to develop the Declaration into a Convention. Can you comment on this period?

Yes, the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child dates from 1959, twenty years before IYC and was partly designed to help transform the Declaration on the Rights of the Child into a Convention, a UN process that was already underway. UN processes involve lots of discussion in corridors and meetings. You're never quite sure where to put your finger on the absolute moment when a decision is taken. Many countries, including Canada, had been thinking for some time about turning the Declaration into a Convention because a Declaration is a statement of ideals whereas a Convention is an instrument of international humanitarian law and therefore can be

used in the courts. So IYC kick-started the process of transformation and the World Summit, which took place at the end of September 1990, less than a year after the CRC was adopted, was a way of confirming high level political commitment.

The idea was to bring on as many senior statesmen to New York from around the world as possible in order to give life to the Convention. With this in mind, James Grant went out and did what he often did. He was a real mover and shaker of the kind that says, "well, you know that so-and-so said this, well do you agree?" And then, of course, you discover when you say "yes, I agree" that so-and-so never said that, but he comes back to you and says, "well, you said you agreed to this, so I agreed to it!"

And that's what he did. He had decided, perhaps along with some of his senior advisors, that because Canada had played such a significant role in the development of the CRC, that Canada should be one of the six principal initiating countries to help organize the Summit. The choice of Sweden as another organizing country was obvious because of the significant role Sweden had played in drafting the CRC. The choice of Mexico was also logical because this was a time when there was quite a lot of interest in the Americas. The choice of Mali rather than another country from South Saharan Africa I never quite figured out. Benazir Bhutto was the President of Pakistan at that time and she was a very impressive individual. I think Grant and his colleagues felt, as a South Asian, she would be an ideal choice. And then there was Egypt. At that time, the Egyptians were also in a fairly progressive mode.

The World Summit was partly a function of the so-called "Peace Dividend" resulting from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the easing of tensions between the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the West. So, it was a particular period in history. Such a gathering would be unlikely to take place at this moment in time. There was a feeling then that many things were possible. People were saying to themselves, "Let's do what we can. Let's try to make things better for children. Let's try to improve their conditions. Let's try to ensure that they grow up to continue the progress we're making for world peace at the moment" and all that kind of thing.

As a result, the nineties were full of promising international events: the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993), the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), followed by the Copenhagen Conference on Social Development (1995) and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995). These were huge conferences, worldwide conferences.

The Conference on Population and Development was significant because that was the one that first raised the issues of reproductive rights, issues that were further pursued in Beijing. The 1996 First World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children held in Stockholm, Sweden continued the discussion. Finally, there was the Oslo Conference on Child Labour in 1997. The full decade created a strong agenda on human rights framed by the UN's various documents and covenants and treaties. Alas, it all crashed down along with the World Trade Center in 2001. Attention shifted away from human rights and towards terrorism and defence, and people stopped thinking about social justice in the same way.

Back to the 1990 World Summit. Naturally, an initiating country has considerable responsibilities and therefore, Canada had to unlock government coffers so that there would be money flowing and energy and so on. And so it happened. It was asked at that time, probably partly because of what I'd been able to do and the reputation I'd been able to build with the CCCY and the founding of the Coalition, but also, I have to admit, partly because my husband was a diplomat and my father-in-law was a Nobel Peace Prize winner, that I become engaged. People knew who I was so there was an opening there that probably might not have been available to someone else, and given my commitment to children, I was honour-bound to take it.

UNICEF had already drawn up the Declaration and Plan of Action to be adopted at the World Summit under the eagle eye of James Grant. Each country was supposed to take it, edit it, and change it, or do whatever they could to improve it. And so, the dedicated committee of officials here in Ottawa asked the CCRC to come and take part in that discussion. There wasn't much in it that we felt needed to be changed since it was so tied to the Convention itself in terms of the issues it was addressing. But we were glad to have the opportunity to see what was being drafted as part of Canada's contribution. I can't honestly remember whether we had made any substantial changes. I have no proof that we did but it was all very cordial and we were pleased to be consulted.

The engagement of Global Affairs in this process was at a very senior level so they were taking it seriously. And they were taking it seriously partly because then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was taking it seriously. He was actually deeply concerned with certain kinds of social issues and is still noted for his stance on South Africa. He was strongly against apartheid and forced South Africa out of the British Commonwealth until apartheid was abolished. There was this progressive side of him that was quite genuine and so he threw himself with enthusiasm into

the Summit, even agreeing to be the co-Chair. And when you have a Prime Minister who throws himself into a process with enthusiasm, then the PMO (Prime Minister's Office) just opens up and anything can happen.

The person who was then at the PMO in charge of these issues was a man named Brian Ward who happened to have worked for me for about five years at the CCCY. His background was youth work at the YMCA, after which he became the Executive Director of the CCCY and then joined the PMO to work on the Summit and other children's issues. Another involved person who had replaced Brian at the CCCY was Marion Dewar, who used to be the Mayor of Ottawa.

But I have to admit, the constructive connection with Brian Mulroney came through me because Brian had worked for me so, it is probably my friend Brian Ward who encouraged Brian Mulroney to invite us to put together a group of kids to make their own special Declaration. This was the last joint activity between the CCCY and the CCRC.

We spent a very interesting few days in early September at Christie Lake Camp. It was a camp for disadvantaged kids that was run by another friend of mine named Dan Offord, who was a well-known child psychiatrist here in Ottawa. It's a beautiful site and we had a really good time. The youth came from across Canada and from a variety of backgrounds and they worked hard to compose their Declaration and to choose two people to present it to the Prime Minister. He then invited one of them, Sahira Piracha, to join the Delegation to the Summit along with me as a chaperone. The other youth delegate was a young lad who was on probation at the time so we feared the US would not let him cross the border!

Was that unusual to have youth on a delegation?

Yes, we were the only Delegation at the World Summit that had a youth chosen by her peers. The others were all representatives from their countries studying at the UN school in New York.

What was the outcome of the Declaration drafted by the youth at Christie Lake Camp? After they presented it to Prime Minister Mulroney, did he then try to incorporate it into the Declaration?

Well, the World Summit Declaration was already drafted by this time. I think it was more that he used it to inform his own speaking and negotiating and talking and so on, validating that some young people had actually made it possible for him to understand what their issues were. How he would have used their Declaration in private conversation or in conversation with other leaders I can only guess. What I do know is that he made an excellent and empathetic Co-Chair of the Summit itself.

What happened post-Summit, then, with Prime Minister Mulroney? Once he was no longer part of the government, did he continue to be active?

After the Summit, Mulroney mandated Benoît Bouchard, who was then the Minister of Health and Welfare, to follow up. Bouchard established the Children's Bureau within his Department and asked it to create an Action Plan; it was called "Brighter Futures." But by the time the Brighter Futures action plan came to be, Mulroney was no longer in power.

Part of the post-Summit process was to get the provinces to sign on to the ratification of the CRC. The federal government is responsible for signing a UN Convention, which it did in May 1990, but ratification is necessary to bring it into force. Since jurisdiction is split in this country with respect to children, all the provinces had to sign on for it to happen and send letters of agreement. The only province that dawdled was Alberta (although it did eventually come on board later) so, fed up with waiting, Mulroney decided he was just going to go ahead. And so he set the day, the 13th of December 1991, as the day for ratification. The CCRC was asked to bring children to Parliament Hill to witness Mr. Mulroney's signature. Funded by the government, we were able to bring kids - a representative from every province and territory - to stand in the Great Hall of Parliament and add their signatures to his.

What part did the CCRC play in the days before the Summit itself? Was your organization involved in any of the pre-Summit presentations?

Well, we were still in our own process of formation. We didn't fully form, as I remember, until May 1990. And then we had to figure out what we were going to do. We developed our goals and a plan of action, and we were setting up parallel organizations in different parts of the country, including an office in Montreal. Everybody was eager and hot and full of ideas. The

CCRC separated from the CCCY and we moved our headquarters to an office in the downtown Ottawa YMCA (the YMCA was one of our members and always very helpful.)

Then, as Brighter Futures was being developed by federal and provincial governments for deployment in Canada, there was a separate program at CIDA known as the [*Children in Difficult Circumstances Fund*](#). CIDA provided \$2 million dollars to be used for projects all around the world because, after all, the Summit was aimed at international issues related to children as well as domestic ones. CIDA funded the CCRC to help run it and a joint committee was established to evaluate the proposals. Each successful proposal involved an organization on site like the one for rag pickers' children that I went later to visit in Bangalore, India. There also had to be a local organization in Canada to partner with them and channel the funds, and then a third organization responsible for research related to the proposed project. It was a tripartite model. A committee comprised of a CIDA representative, General Roméo Dallaire and myself selected the projects. The CCRC was given the responsibility for writing the final report. At the same time, the federal government continued to develop Brighter Futures. As the years passed, however, the process became constipated as, alas, government processes often do. The CCRC was allowed to have a peek at the finished plan but our insights and recommendations were not really sought.

Thirty years later, how has the landscape of children's rights changed? Is there anything new that's come to the forefront? Are there issues that are still very prominent that haven't yet been addressed fully since the World Summit?

For one thing, a whole set of new issues have emerged having to do with the rapid expansion of the digital universe. I mean, in 1990, the Internet had scarcely been invented.

Were you talking about climate change in 1990 at all?

I don't remember it being something we were preoccupied with beyond the impact of pollution. Pollution was an issue at the time because of acid rain and things like that so people were generally concerned about pollution and the hole in the ozone layer. But it wasn't seen then as a real crisis. It wasn't seen as an emergency. And other issues that are now prominent with respect to sexuality had not yet emerged. Issues around reproductive rights were significant but there was little concern being expressed about gender identity or fluidity. These kinds of issues are completely new since then in terms of public awareness. Even the extent of sexual

exploitation and sexual abuse was less visible than it is now. The focus then was more on physical abuse and violence against children. There were a lot of hidden icebergs in the area of sexuality and children and fewer people prepared to address them.

There was an article in the Convention about preventing the sexual exploitation of children. But was this issue much more taboo then?

It was the Convention itself that began to raise the profile of the issue. After the Beijing Conference, when we were listening to girls and their issues, Sweden took on the reality of the commercial sexual exploitation of children to sponsor a major conference which made the whole problem much more visible. Other issues such as poverty of course, had always been there as well as violence, food insecurity, and child health. There was a lot in the Plan of Action from the World Summit to do with child health issues because James Grant himself was very interested in them, although mental health did not have the profile then that it does now. Nevertheless, if there's been a lot of progress on most of these issues since 1990 much of that goes back to the commitments that were made at the World Summit.

What about Indigenous children around the world? The language of reconciliation that we hear today, is that something that has emerged since the World Summit?

All of that is something that's happened over the last nearly thirty years.

The language is changing as well as the foci? A feminist concern is that if you don't have a language for an issue, then the issue doesn't appear as real. But as soon as you can name something, then it becomes concrete. And so, part of the value of the World Summit was that it began to name what these issues were.

It began to name things. And with the Convention, it had a framework within which people and countries could be held accountable to the international community for progress. Without the Convention, it would be harder to hold them accountable. And this is the case with all the other frameworks provided by the UN human rights instruments, based on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that have collectively moved the discourse forward.

I engaged a student some years ago to look at all the internationally agreed upon texts and the negotiated instruments that had emerged over the 1990s putting flesh, so to speak, on the

Conventions, Covenants and Treaties. She went through all of them to see how the language has developed concerning children's rights up until 2001. But then in 2001, we had 9/11. The postponed UN Special Session on Children finally took place in 2002 to focus attention on children's issues was now displaced by a new focus on terrorism. Child labour is one example of the loss of attention. We don't have major pushes on child labour now as we did in the 1990s. On sexual exploitation, there are fewer agencies taking it on in the way they did after Stockholm. And yet we know that the issue continues to destroy the lives of children and probably becomes more widespread all the time.

Attracting the world's attention to what's happening with children has become difficult. I don't know whether another World Summit would do any good, but you have to keep moving. It's not that things haven't been improving. There has been considerable progress on child health, for example. But there are so many barriers, armed conflict, for one, and droughts and floods associated with climate change. As always, children living in poor countries are suffering the most. I think we are going to have to look seriously at population growth. The world population in 1990 was 5.3 billion compared to 7.8 billion and still growing. That growth has had a huge impact stalling every advance you make addressing children's rights because the number of children gets larger and larger. When my family was living in Mexico City from 1961 to 1964, you could still see the volcanoes. You can't see them anymore because of pollution. The population of Mexico was 43 million when we were there. It's now 129 million. When we were living in India from 1968 to 1970, the population was just over half a billion. It's now well over a billion. So when you add up those numbers and when you recognize that 41% of the world's population is now under the age of 25, it's really hard to try to figure out how can you help children without, at the same time, addressing issues around health and gender and reproductive rights particularly because where those young populations are growing the fastest - in Africa, the Middle East and parts of South Asia - are all areas of conflict and climate crisis.

On the topic of how to enable children to be able to help themselves, for example, having the youth come in to formulate ideas to bring to Prime Minister Mulroney about what they themselves want, could you comment on how youth activism now is changing or staying the same?

Youth activism is clearly much greater. Today it's taking various forms so it depends on which particular activism you are looking at. I mean, it's one thing to look at Greta Thunberg and applaud her, and it's another thing to look at the kids in the United States who are opposing gun violence and so on. But when one considers the youth activism on the streets of Beirut or on the streets of Hong Kong and in Baghdad, one has to question whether it is able to be effective. It is exciting to see that there is so much of it but is it really able to make a difference in Teheran or Egypt or Moscow where, up to now, it clearly has not?

Much of youth activism is tied to the digital world. The digital world is great at motivating people, but it also doesn't actually give them the structures to help them achieve the changes they want to see. So, while I see it as a positive, I worry about how many young people are going to be hurt or shot in the process because that is what is happening, left, right and centre. Youth activism was not a big issue at the World Summit, but it is now, partly because there are so many more young people with a stake in the future frustrated by their elders.

Do you think it reflects a growing awareness of youth surrounding their own rights?

Well, I expect it's a combination of things. When you look at the two names that pop up, you think about Malala Yousafzai and girl's education and Greta Thunberg and the climate crisis. Both of these activists have extremely supportive and eloquent fathers. I went to the Day on the Girl Child event at the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995. It featured a panel of successful women who were asked to talk about what had made them successful. There was a Minister of Defense from Chile, there was Bella Abzug, who was a famous American activist, and there was a woman from Egypt who was also a cabinet minister. Each of them said it was their father who had helped them succeed. It's a great message about the role that fathers can play by being supportive of their daughters. And Greta Thunberg has said the same thing about her father. And, of course, Malala says the same thing about her father. That's not to say their mothers are not influential. But I think in a culture which is paternalistic, a father who goes against the grain of paternalism is perhaps more influential than he would be otherwise. I was struck by this and I'm struck by it every time that I look at really effective young women activists, I find a supportive father. This is anecdotal; I have no scientific evidence to support it but it's worth considering.

So, in talking about the issues that have come up since the World Summit on Children, what was talked about then and what the issues are now, I think a lot has changed. And it has changed partly because of the digital universe and the connections that happen that way. It's changed because there is more youth activism now than there was then. That's a positive, I think, on the whole. It's changed because, in those days, climate was not a crisis. It was understood as a problem but not as an emergency. It's changed because of issues around gender and so on. The issues around sexual health and reproduction were big then but in a different way than they are now. And the issues around the kinds of diseases that affect populations have grown. I mean HIV/Aids, in 1990 had begun to emerge but it wasn't having the sort of huge impact on children that it had later. Of course, other diseases that are having a major impact on children's lives are now emerging that people are concerned about.

You have talked about the synergy around world events including the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, when there was hope of making some change, of doing things together, of collaborating as they did in 1990 when all of those representatives got together. You said that there was hope for children of the future. Then 2001 was another turning point. In 2019, what would it take to have that kind of synergy happen? Do we need another 'fall of the Berlin Wall'? Is this what the impetus is for getting children's rights on the political table so that countries pay attention? They paid attention in 1990. What would it take to get another 72 world leaders to sit around a table and come up with an agreed upon agenda for the world's children? Do you think there's a possibility that we'll ever see that kind of cooperation across world leaders again?

It doesn't look very evident now. We're getting more and more separate from one another. It's a good question because I've always felt that the Convention itself, as well as the World Summit, were the products of a particular time and that you wouldn't be able to achieve the same sort of agreement now. You wouldn't get a Convention written that way specifically for children. I mean, we're still getting Conventions negotiated and adopted but if the rights of children are included it is almost an afterthought. It's a good question.

If getting world leaders together in that particular format is not a useful format for our current time, then, another perspective is needed. This is probably what will be talked about on May 13, 2020 at the event your Centre is organizing to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the World Summit for Children.

Yes, the international organizations that we will invite to share their experiences since 1990 will come with their stories. There are lots of good stories out there but it's just that the size of the problem, the size of that population, is so huge now, 41% of 7.8 billion.

I would like to see one or two visionary political leaders somewhere. Younger leaders or even older wiser ones who say, "this is what we should be doing" and who'll be able to put their country's money where their mouth is. It's a political issue. If young activists want something to happen, they've got to figure out how to vote for someone who will make that something happen. We can look at some of the Nordic countries who have done pretty well by their children. And they've done so in a variety of ways including balancing their populations so that population growth is not overwhelming their efforts. But given its leadership role, if you don't have politicians in the United States prepared to take on issues related to children's rights and wellbeing, efforts to realize the World Summit's goals will falter because the United States is still the world's powerhouse. On the other hand, there are a growing number of young activists as well as young leaders in the United States. So, who knows? I'm not going to give up hope.