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*Senator Landon Pearson – the Senator for Children and the Children’s Senator – retires from her seat in the Senate in November 2005. This issue of ‘real leaders’ is dedicated to a woman whose life has been devoted to the task of advocating for children and youth.*

When Elizabeth Landon married “King” Carter in Virginia in the late 1600s, they established a family tradition of naming a baby girl in each succeeding generation Lucy Landon Carter. Most of these little girls grew up to be women of principle and action. Upon hearing about her American ancestors from her mother, (now) Senator Lucy Landon Carter was inspired by their examples of tenacity and purpose. As she prepares for her retirement from the Senate in November 2005, Senator Pearson is determined that her work on behalf of children will continue.

Landon was the youngest of three children and the only daughter born to Hugh and Alice Mackenzie in Toronto, Ontario, in 1930. Her mother was an artist and her father combined his work managing a brewery with an active interest in politics. He instilled a faith in his daughter’s abilities which was complemented by her mother’s non-intrusive approach to child rearing. Says Landon: “They were parents who understood the importance of giving children the freedom to learn about life from their own mistakes. I discovered early that I could find solutions to most of my difficulties, but that my parents were there to help out when I got stuck.”



*Senator Landon Pearson*

Landon also learned about the limits society placed on females of her generation. In university, she was discouraged from further studies in the ‘unfeminine’ discipline of mathematics, but credits her degree in Philosophy and English with sharpening her critical thinking and problem solving skills. She learned to recognize when a battle could not be won and was willing to make the most of the opportunities she was given.

Landon married Geoffrey Pearson, son of Lester B. Pearson, in 1951 and together they raised five children. Geoffrey had a successful career in Canada's Foreign Service and the family alternated stays at home with postings in France, Mexico, India and the Soviet Union. Witnessing the poverty and suffering of children in poorer countries firmed Landon's resolve to improve the lives of all people. In her words: "The starving children my grandmother taught me to pity – but never how to help – became the young people I met whose rights to survival and protection had been trampled upon."

### *From home to community and beyond*

During her years abroad, Landon worked on many projects to help children, mainly as a volunteer. While in Canada, she became progressively more involved in children's advocacy organizations. Throughout the busy years of moving from place to place and raising her children, Landon honed her skills as a 'mindful mother,' a term she applies to the art of carefully observing children and tailoring opportunities to develop their individual assets.

Says Landon: "In order to advocate for their children, parents must pay attention to who their children are and help them to do well at something. Every child needs at least one person who cherishes them and to whom the child feels deeply connected in order to grow up emotionally healthy. We must do everything we can as a society to ensure that children and parents remain close to one another. Parents must not be made into bystanders in their children's lives."

In 1978, Landon completed a Masters of Education degree at the University in Ottawa. She and a classmate designed a prevention and early intervention program called "Children Learning for Living," which ran for 24 years in the (former)

Ottawa Board of Education. The program was designed for children in kindergarten to Grade 6 who were considered at risk emotionally.

As she continued to deepen her network of contacts within the community, Landon became more involved in organizations that were concerned with the rights of the child. In 1976, she joined the Canadian Council for Children and Youth (CCCY), a non-governmental organization that advocated on behalf of children at the national level.

In 1979, Landon acted as the Vice-Chairperson of the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child and edited its report, *For Canada's Children: A National Agenda for Action*. In 1990, in her role as chair of CCCY and founding member of the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of Children, Landon attended the World Summit for Children in New York City. She appreciated the support that Prime Minister Mulroney lent to the work of meeting the conference's human development goals. Says Landon: "Many of today's children's programs had their roots in the work that was done at the World Summit, including the 'Brighter Futures' program."<sup>1</sup>

Landon believes that Canada's involvement with both the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the World Summit for Children helped to reestablish children and youth as valued and valuable members of society. In particular, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* reinforced the notion of fundamental human dignity, highlighted and defended the family's role in children's lives, sought respect for children and endorsed the principle of non-discrimination.<sup>2</sup> The 192 countries that have ratified the Convention are required to bring their legislation in line with its provisions, except where domestic standards are already higher. Says Landon: "The UN documents reinforced the notion that all children are important and, if some are in trouble, it is our duty to

reach out to them. Rights instruments have helped counteract the privatization movement and created a space for a new kind of youth involvement movement to develop.”

### ***Senatorial duties***

Landon continued to lead the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children until 1994 when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien appointed her to the Senate under the proviso that she be a voice for children. She soon learned the senatorial ropes – hiring a highly capable assistant (Yolande Arsenault), locating resources and learning the political, legislative and party members roles. In 1995, she began publishing *Children & the Hill*, a thrice-yearly newsletter that provides summaries of recent legislation, events, reports and policies which affect children and youth.

Landon was a Canadian delegate to the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 and, in 1996, she represented Canada at the first world congress against the commercial sexual exploitation of children held in Stockholm. That same year, she was appointed Special Advisor on Children’s Rights to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. In that capacity, she has attended numerous international conferences on a variety of children’s issues – always moving in the direction of involving children in decisions made on their behalf, and entrenching the rights of children in Canada and abroad.

At home, Landon joined with a small number of Liberal MPs led by Gar Knutson to form a child poverty caucus that worked to increase benefits for children and their families in the federal Budget. This group evolved into a larger children’s caucus, under the leadership of the Honourable John Godfrey which helped to advance the chil-

ren’s agenda in Ottawa.<sup>3</sup> Landon also joined the Social Policy Caucus and the Women’s Caucus – both effective mechanisms for moving ahead her work on behalf of children and youth. Clarifying the rights of children experiencing family breakup was part of Landon’s work as co-chair of the Special Joint Parliamentary Committee on child custody and access during 1997-98.

In 1996, Landon was asked to establish a stakeholder committee to address the action plan developed at the Stockholm Congress on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. After her departure, this committee will continue under the leadership of Lt. Gen. Senator Roméo Dallaire. In 1998, Landon co-chaired an international summit for sexually exploited youth, held in Victoria, BC. In 2001, she attended the Second World Congress on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Yokohama.

In 1999, Prime Minister Chrétien named Senator Pearson as his personal representative to the UN General Assembly’s Special Session on Children in 2002. Between 2002 and 2003, she coordinated Canada’s response to the 2002 UN Special Sessions on children, which resulted in the publication of *A Canada Fit for Children*. Released in April 2004, this document lays out a plan of action for Canada to complement the document that issued from the Special Session, *A World Fit for Children*.

### ***More work to do***

The federal government’s priorities do not currently place a heavy emphasis on children and youth. Says Landon: “Our original conception of the role of a commissioner for children has yet to be realized. The government’s decision to abandon its file on children and youth in late 2004 was

disheartening. We need a re-evaluation of the fact that someone in government with access to the levers of power has to speak for children.”

As she leaves her position in the Senate, Landon is focusing her efforts upon building a robust children’s information and human resources network that will continue the work she has begun on behalf of Canada’s children. Landon’s retirement will coincide with the opening of The Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children’s Rights at Carleton University. She believes that the United Nations framework and *A Canada Fit for Children* will provide the structure needed to direct future child- and family-friendly policies.

Says Landon: “If I could choose one priority, I would like us to put in place public policy that makes us a family-enabling society. We need to help families do what they do best – which is to parent. Children in the care of the state have not fared well. We need to support the family and ensure that every child has a wide spectrum of choices that will allow them to live full, productive lives.” In support of that wish, Landon continues to act as the Honourary Chairperson of the Vibrant Communities initiative, a pan-Canadian learning community of 15 cities that share information in order to reduce poverty and strengthen supportive relationships among community members.

Landon’s office on Parliament Hill is in the historic East Block – a place where, long ago, a friend of Landon’s worked as an administrative assistant to Prime Minister Pearson, and where her husband Geoffrey had an office when he was first hired by Foreign Affairs. When she leaves the East Block in November, Senator Pearson will be remembered for the many important works she has advanced on behalf of children and youth. She will be missed as the warm, funny and intelligent advocate that she has always been.

*Anne Makhoul*

*Anne Makhoul coordinates the ‘real leaders’ series on behalf of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.*

#### **Endnotes**

1. Brighter Futures, which began in 1992-93, is a Canada-wide program designed to assist First Nations and Inuit communities in developing community-based approaches to health programs. The purpose is to improve the quality of, and access to, culturally sensitive wellness services in the community. These services, in turn will help create healthy family and community environments which will support child development. While the program is intended for First Nations and Inuit children from ages 0 to 6, it is recognized that children’s needs cannot be separated from those of their families and community. There are a number of components to Brighter Futures: mental health, child development, injury prevention, healthy babies and parenting skills. Communities determine their priorities and allocate their resources accordingly.

2. The Convention, which has been ratified by 192 countries, is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights – civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights. Two Optional Protocols, on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography were later adopted to strengthen the provisions of the Convention in these areas. These protocols entered into force on February 12 and January 18, 2002, respectively.

3. John Godfrey is currently the Minister of State (Infrastructure and Communities).

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