

# Australian Children's Rights News



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UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, DCI founder, Nigel Cantwell and President, Philip Veerman, speak at the DCI Reception at the UN

## DCI's 20th Birthday

In celebration of 20 years of unstinting and innovative work for children's rights, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, joined a hundred DCI members and supporters at a Reception at the Palais des Nations on Friday, 1st October. She praised DCI's leading role in promoting children's rights in 66 countries around the world and its influential work during the 1980s while the Convention was being drafted. DCI has a special place in the human rights movement and is much needed, she said. She then joined everyone in wishing DCI a happy anniversary and a strong future.

DCI members went on to celebrate the occasion with a Forum and fondue lunch on Saturday 2nd October. At the Forum, the founder of DCI, Nigel Cantwell spoke passionately about the meaning and purpose of the Convention. "Participation has become the flavour of children's rights in the late 1990s," he said. "It has become idealised, not based on CROC, but partly based on a renewed desire to manipulate children for adult goals and to deflect attention from real ways of defending the human rights of children."

Katarina Tomasievski, who conducted the first DCI investigation into children in prisons, and is now UN Special Rapporteur on Education, urged the children's rights movement to return to its roots in human rights, rather than get drawn into development cooperation with governments. The enforcement of minimum human rights standards for children is as important now as ever, and this cannot be done in partnership with government. Human rights is about the abuse of power, including by governments and it is essential to use international human

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rights law more for children, It is important not to see children's rights work as qualitatively different from other human rights work, she said.

Jaap Doek, member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and one of the earliest Council members of DCI agreed with Katarina, saying that we should try to make as little difference between the rights of children and those of adults. They are the same rights and there are the same procedural issues. Promotion of the child's "dignity and worth" (Article 40) is more important than the promotion of the child's autonomy i.e.: his/her participation



Photo: Helen Bayes

Jaap Doek, Phillip Veerman and Nigel Cantwell cutting the DCI 20th birthday cake rights. The overriding rule is that we should do nothing except in the best interests of the child.

Maria-Cristina Salazar of DCI Colombia, current member of the International Executive Council, expressed her concerns about the emphasis on participation in the movement against child workers in Latin America. Children who have been selected as representative and given many privileges, now look down on their family, are reluctant to go home, don't want to work, and see NGOs other than UNICEF as inferior. Some children have been accommodated at hotels for meetings where they are not allowed to eat in the restaurant or go in the lift.

On the other hand she said there are child workers in Colombia who are working in very hard conditions, who don't go to school, or who are too tired at school to learn. Their rights are better advanced by projects which involve adolescents in caring for the younger children, making them feel more interested and able to do something useful about their situation

Paolo David, who now works for the

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Committee on the Rights of the Child and was the Editor of the International Children's Rights Monitor (see page 7) for many years, rounded off this stimulating forum by urging DCI to be an independent, critical watchdog, acting swiftly on violations, using strong language and doing hard lobbying. DCI's original role as an independent think-tank for children's rights must be maintained, he said. He too questioned whether this role is compatible with partnerships - with government, with service providers, and indeed with coalitions. The dilemma is that it makes it hard to generate public support, especially where there is still widespread concern about children's rights.

*Helen Bayes reporting from Geneva*