



UNCHARTED TERRITORY



Louise Arbour's unprecedented contributions to the Canadian justice system continue to echo across the globe.

By Anna Cipollone





FAR LEFT:
ARBOUR IN
BOGOTA,
COLOMBIA
IN 2005
RIGHT:
ARBOUR IN
FENGOLO,
IVORY COAST

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LOUISE ARBOUR'S DILIGENT APPROACH TO THE UNPREDICTABLE SET THE TONE FOR HER GROUNDBREAKING WORK IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE EARLY ON IN HER CAREER. Born February 10, 1947 and raised in Montreal, she spent her formative years within the sheltered environment of a convent school and boarding college, a far cry from the world of pluralism and multiculturalism she would go on to inhabit.

With no predisposition or prior interest in the legal profession, it proved to be the ideal fit for Arbour, with the right mix of complexity, intellectual rigor and moral

dilemma. In 1969, Arbour enrolled in Law School at the University of Montreal, a turning point in her life. "Law has been the anchor for everything I've done subsequently," she says, "even though I've never had a traditional law practice."

Tracing her interest in civil and political rights to the enactment of the War Measures Act in 1970, Arbour says witnessing this event firsthand was the catalyst for her move to the nation's capital. "To my surprise looking back, it took me 43 years to come back to live in Montreal," she laughs. "I got distracted by all kinds of opportunities." From her role as Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada to United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, she has been beckoned toward both Canadian and international judiciary crises.

This willingness to dive into the unknown is a recurring theme at the heart of Arbour's many accomplishments. Despite the daunting task of teaching in a language other than her native French, she accepted a position at Osgoode Hall Law School in 1974 without hesitation, and by 1987 was promoted to Associate Dean. "I became addicted to diving into environments that were very

unfamiliar," she remarks, noting she was the first French-speaking Quebecer on the faculty. "I constantly seem to have stepped into the unknown—in retrospect maybe a bit foolishly, because I took a lot of risk," she says.

Perhaps the most significant contribution she's made internationally occurred when she served the United Nations as Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda. "The idea that we would have international criminal law was revolutionary, certainly in theory, and also in practice. It was an amazing challenge," she says, explaining that she never would have imagined this would materialize in her lifetime. "It was operational, it was strategic, it was the most hands-on thing I've ever done," says Arbour.

From leading an inquest into allegations of abuse at Kingston Penitentiary for Women, to prosecuting war criminals in foreign countries, Louise Arbour is certainly at ease in situations that demand innovative and novel approaches. She's won countless accolades, honorary degrees and international awards, from the Order of Canada to the Roosevelt Four Freedoms Medal and the UN

Human Rights Prize. Now, her life's work will be cemented within our national canon as she is inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame.

Finding inspiration in larger-than-life figures like Nelson Mandela, whom she admires for the strength and quality of his moral fibre, it's not surprising that Arbour has been similarly praised for her advancement of human rights worldwide. When it comes to her homeland, Arbour has spoken candidly on Canada's distinguished legal tradition. "The hallmark of a healthy democracy is the capacity to publicly acknowledge your errors, examine your records, and make changes," she says. "We have a justice system that we should continue to invest in and develop and preserve."

Louise Arbour is, above all things, a visionary. "It takes immense optimism to do this kind of work," she says, "because the results are long to come and quite intangible." With unwavering hope that future generations will continue the work she's set in motion, she looks ahead with enthusiasm: "I may not be there to see their accomplishments, where and how they will shine I can't tell, but I can see the sparks."

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LOUISE IN NORFOLK COAST / KAMPBEL; LOUISE IN COLUMBIA / LUIS ACOSTA; BOTH APPI/GETTY IMAGES; UN HEADSHOT SCAN COURTESY OF WILLIE LIANG / LOUISE ARBOUR SECONDARY SCHOOL