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## *Interview: Legislators on Wheels*

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*Doug Mowat represents Vancouver Little Mountain in the British Columbia Legislative Assembly. Percy Wickman is the MLA for Edmonton Whitemud in the Alberta Legislative Assembly. Each has been confined to a wheelchair for much of his adult life. But this disability has not stopped them from full participation in the Canadian political process. In separate interviews they discussed their personal experiences as well as the problems and opportunities for the disabled. The interviews were conducted by Gary Levy.*



Percy Wickman

**Would you briefly describe your life before and after you became disabled?**

**PERCY WICKMAN:** I was born and raised in Thunder Bay. I dropped out of school in grade 9 and shifted around from job to job. I had no real ambition in life. The industrial accident



Doug Mowat  
(Visions West Photo)

that left me paralysed also caused me to re-evaluate my life. In fact I have often called the accident a blessing in disguise for it led me to return to school, to become involved in community affairs and ultimately to seek public office.

People react differently to adversity. Some lose their motivation and accept institutionalisation or the relatively limited parameters of working at home. If I have been able to lead a fuller life after the accident I must share credit with my wife. When the spouse cannot handle the challenge it leaves the disabled person alone to rebuild his or her life. My wife has always been a model of support. We had a young son born just a few months after the accident and, of course, this also motivated me to try and make something of my life. I was fortunate to have had a physiotherapist who took a personal interest in me and would not allow me to give up, even if I had wanted to. A social worker was also instrumental in convincing me of the need for retraining (and pointed out that I could get paid for going back to school.

**DOUG MOWAT:** I was injured playing rugby in school in 1947. I was 18 years old and always led an active life in sports and in the boy scouts. In high school I had worked on the coastal boats during the summer.

In those days there were few facilities for paraplegics. There was no transportation, no health insurance, no job opportunities. It was expected you would spend the rest of your life in an institution and I did spend more than two years in the Vancouver General Hospital.

My mother was a very strong person and she made up her mind that I was going to live at home. After several months staring at the four walls I got my first job as a taxi dispatcher. It paid 25 cents an hour and since there was no way for me to get to and from work the owner would pick me up and drop me off. He charged me a dollar per day each way which might not sound like too good a deal but it got me out of the house and into contact with people. Eventually I moved to the night shift where I earned a bit more money and

when I could find someone else to give me a ride I could save a dollar.

I quit because the owner would not give me time off to attend the wedding of a very good friend. It was a tough decision as it meant going back to staring at the walls but I decided then and there that I was going to control my own destiny and it was very important for me to attend that wedding.

Later I found work in a dry cleaning outlet, I sold cars, and I owned a floral shop before becoming involved with the Canadian Paraplegic Association in 1960 where I am now Executive Director.

Being a paraplegic is not something I would wish on anyone but at the same time it has allowed me to achieve things I otherwise would never have expected.

**What made you decide to enter politics?**

**PERCY WICKMAN:** My very first experience in politics was as a student in Business Administration at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. Some students wanted me to run for president of the student council. I was reluctant but eventually decided to run for vice president. I was successful and enjoyed the feeling of being able to influence change.

I became involved with other disabled activists, particularly in the fight to get the worker's compensation legislation amended to provide for cost of living increases. I began to attend City Hall meetings to monitor items such as public transportation. Eventually I ran for city hall in a by-election to fill a seat held for many years by Mrs. Kiniski. My organization consisted of my brother-in-law who came in from Thunder Bay for a few weeks and myself. We spent about \$100 for advertising and signs which we put up on some telephone polls. I came in third last out of about a dozen candidates but still managed to win over a thousand votes which was very encouraging. It also made me realize that you cannot win office without a

good organization and money to go with it. I ran three more times before finally winning.

Some people love the limelight and I guess I am one of them.

**DOUG MOWAT:** My first experience in public affairs was a result of my involvement with a wheelchair basketball team sponsored by the automobile dealer for whom I worked. Many community centres were inaccessible to the disabled and some wanted us to build our own centre. I thought this was a mistake and that we should work toward making existing centres more accessible.

I became a member of the Non-Partisan Association and was nominated to run for city council. There were 55 candidates for 10 seats. I came in 13th and while this was a good showing I decided to lower my sights a bit and the next year I won one of seven spots on the parks board. When the 1983 provincial election was called Grace McCarthy, herself a former parks board commissioner, asked me to run for Social Credit. At first I declined but she is a very persuasive woman and finally I accepted.

One reason for deciding to run provincially was that I had noticed how many decisions of the parks board had to be approved by City Hall and in turn how many decisions of City Hall depended on legislation from Victoria. It made sense to try to become involved at the level where these decisions were being made.

**What are the essential requirements to permit a person in a wheelchair access to a public building?**

**PERCY WICKMAN:** The most obvious need is for a ramp although many people forget that it has to be on a gradual slope. I have seen some ramps so steep they are actually dangerous. There should also be provision for parking nearby and access to elevators. Perhaps most important is adequate washroom facilities for without this you limit the amount of time a disabled

person can spend in a building. Ideally there should be a separate washroom for the disabled since some require assistance from their spouse or another person.

I have travelled a good deal and there is a great disparity in accessibility for the disabled. In my experience Hawaii has by far the best facilities whereas most European countries are extremely difficult for the disabled. Since the early 1970s I think Edmonton has been among the leaders in providing services to the disabled although Vancouver and Winnipeg are also very advanced in this regard. Quebec and the Maritimes are less progressive in my opinion. In Quebec City there are some obvious problems because of the narrow streets and hills of the old city.

**DOUG MOWAT:** Any community with new buildings has a significant advantage when it comes to making buildings accessible since it is much cheaper to change a design than to renovate a building. In Vancouver we are fortunate to have an understanding community which is sympathetic to the needs of the disabled. There are very few revolving doors being constructed any more.

In Victoria a major renovation of the legislative building had been completed before I was elected and virtually every part of the building was accessible to persons in a wheelchair. The one area that remained inaccessible was the Premier's office and, of course, that is the last place a backbencher wants to be called because it usually means he is in trouble. Later I became Chairman of Caucus and of course I had to meet with the Premier on a regular basis but Bill Bennett would always come over to my office. He was very good about that.

**A couple of years ago Rick Hansen and his "Man in Motion" world tour did a great deal to sensitise people about the problems of the disabled.**

**Were you involved in any way in that campaign?**

**DOUG MOWAT:** My involvement with Rick Hansen goes back many years. I knew him as a wheelchair basketball player and as a young student determined to obtain a degree in physical education. He had to overcome the traditionalist mind set which automatically excuses the disabled from physical education courses and sends them off to the Library to study. He wanted to show that there was room for the disabled in physical education as coaches, managers and in many other capacities.

When he first came up with the idea of a round the world trip in a wheelchair he asked the British Columbia Paraplegic Association about financing. He had a budget of some \$150,000 and a very vague idea of the difficulties involved. I told him the Association had too many local needs to finance the project but I did manage to obtain \$10,000 for a feasibility study. A consultant from Chicago who had organized an around the world bicycle tour was hired and he came up with a solid business plan and a budget that showed it would cost somewhere in the neighbourhood of one million dollars. Armed with this information and with a good deal of help from the media and some corporations Rick was able to get his man in motion campaign into gear.

There were many times when he was in far off parts of the world that it looked like the campaign would fail for lack of money. Things picked up when he got back to Canada and left Newfoundland to start the trip across Canada. In Ottawa Prime Minister Mulroney pledged a million dollars and across the country the provincial premiers set up advisory councils on the disabled and pledged money to match the funds collected by the private sector.

It was an important event for the disabled but the credit for the success belongs to Rick and to the Media.

**PERCY WICKMAN:** I had no direct involvement in the Man in Motion campaign although when Rick Hansen came to Edmonton I was invited to "wheel" with him and other disabled persons in a parade through the streets of Edmonton. Of course he was in great condition and I could only keep up with him for a few feet so I ducked down a back lane and headed home to watch the ceremonies on TV.

**To what extent do you think your status affects the way people viewed your candidacy and your work as an MLA?**

**PERCY WICKMAN:** At first my greatest fear was that people would think I could not do a proper job of representing them because I was in a wheelchair. I was treated differently and perhaps in a bit of a paternalistic manner. But this did not last long. I was also worried that I would be perceived as a one issue candidate. People are still a bit unaccustomed to "mainstreaming" by the disabled.

**DOUG MOWAT:** I never worried too much about being labelled a one issue candidate. In fact, if anything, I have sometimes been criticised for not advocating the cause of the disabled as much as I should. This is mainly a reflection of my style. I have never been one to lead demonstrations or embarrass a Minister in public over some issue relating to the disabled. I would rather spend my time meeting with the elected persons and public servants who write the regulations that affect the disabled. Such activities do not get much publicity but they do get results.

**Did your disability have any influence on your choice of which party to join?**

**PERCY WICKMAN:** Not really although my first involvement was with the NDP as a result of a letter I wrote to the former leader, Grant Notley. Actually I wrote to all party leaders asking them to change the workmer's compensation legislation to index benefits. The other leaders sent me acknowledgements but Notley called me up and invited me to lunch. We discussed the problem in great detail and I was very impressed by him. He would call me from time to time about other matters and I became a member of the NDP. After his death I remained a party member but became much less active. During my years at city hall I became acquainted with Laurence Decore who later became Mayor of Edmonton and then Leader of the provincial Liberal Party. When I decided to run for the Liberals I do not think it came as a shock to very many people and in fact I did not get a single call criticizing me for changing parties. I guess that is a bit unusual.

**DOUG MOWAT:** I have always believed in the free enterprise system and that everyone, no matter what their disability, has something to contribute to society. That attracted me to the Social Credit Party and until the autumn of 1989 I was a member of the Social Credit caucus. I withdrew temporarily from caucus for a number of reasons but mainly because I wanted to be free to speak my mind on certain issues such as the Goods and Services Tax, Meech Lake, the forestry policy and provincial spending into which I did not think we backbenchers were giving enough. I have now rejoined the caucus.