

Disability in Parliamentary Politics

Although parliamentarians and public figures with disabilities have attained a heightened profile in Canada over the past decade, new research suggests that people who identify as having a disability are not seeking public office in numbers representative of their place in the general population. In this roundtable the Canadian Parliamentary Review gathered scholars, parliamentarians and public officer holders who have an interest in disability and politics to discuss the state of parliamentary politics for persons with disabilities and strategies for making political life more accessible to Canadians.

Hon. Steven Fletcher, MP, Jennifer Howard, MLA, Mario Levesque, Hon. Kevin Murphy, MLA, and Hon. David Onley

CPR: Prof. Levesque, your recent research suggests persons with disabilities are not seeking elected office in numbers representative of their place in the general population. Why is participation in elected politics among persons with disabilities so low?

ML: I first became interested in this topic by wondering if we elect people with disabilities, or women, or Aboriginals or other identifiable groups to political office in numbers equivalent to their place in the overall population; and, once elected to office, if members of these groups make a difference in policy relating to the particular issues they face.

To begin, I tried to get a sense of the numbers by distributing a survey to all the presidents of the provincial political parties. My focus is the provincial

level because there's little existing material on it. I asked them: 1) if they sought out candidates with disabilities, 2) whether there were specific mechanisms they used to attract people such as funding, and 3) to list the candidates with disabilities who had run in the past three elections. I also asked for their ridings because there's a body of literature that suggests political parties tend to run marginal or minority candidates in ridings they have little chance of winning just to achieve a quota faster.

I received about 21 responses and they suggested that only about one per cent of the candidates who ran provincially in the last three general elections were persons with disabilities. This is really, really low when anywhere from 15 to 21 per cent of the population identifies as having a disability. Also, none of the parties that responded stated that they have any particular recruitment strategies to identify and encourage these potential candidates to run. Instead they look for the best candidate for the riding in order to win the riding. In one case a party approached a person with a disability to run, not because they were actively seeking to be representative of the population, but because they already knew the person from their work within the party and they considered them a strong candidate.

DO: What's your definition of disability, by the way?

ML: It was broad. It could be a physical disability; it could be a learning disability; it could be an intellectual disability. I tried to be as inclusive as possible on that front.

The Hon. Steven Fletcher is Conservative MP for Charleswood — St. James — Assiniboia (Manitoba). He is a former Minister of State for Transport and for Democratic Reform. Jennifer Howard is a New Democratic Party MLA for Fort Rouge (Manitoba). She is a former Minister of Finance and Minister responsible for Persons with Disabilities and the Status of Women. The Hon. David Onley is a former Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. A former journalist, he was one of the first on-air media personalities in Canada with a visible disability. The Hon. Kevin Murphy is Speaker of the Nova Scotia Assembly. Elected as a Liberal MLA for Eastern Shore (Nova Scotia), he is the first Speaker in a Canadian jurisdiction with a permanent, long-term physical disability. Mario Levesque is an Assistant professor at Mount Allison University who specializes in public policy analysis and public administration. His recent research explores disability policy and politicians with disabilities at the provincial level.



Steven Fletcher

DO: What's interesting is there is an *a priori* assumption that the best candidate would not be someone within that 15 per cent of the population, therefore they didn't look there.

ML: It did puzzle me though. I looked at this data and I wondered if persons with disabilities who may consider running didn't identify with the political parties. So, I dug up all the party constitutions I could find across Canada and I found there were no specific provisions in the constitutions. There was only one party constitution which had any sort of language dealing with disability and that was the Ontario New Democratic Party. They have a disability rights committee as a part of their party. And that's interesting because a number of other parties have committees for particular groups, like the Saskatchewan NDP's Rainbow Pride Committee or its Aboriginal Committee. The Ontario NDP also has a policy to get three-quarters of their non-incumbent targeted seats

to have candidates from affirmative action target groups, including people with disabilities.

CPR: Perhaps we can ask the politicians if they can speak to the mechanisms, or lack of mechanisms, to encourage candidates with disabilities to run. And are their roadblocks which dissuade these people from running?

KM: We held an event concerning disability, policy and political party recruiters here in Nova Scotia called Forum 29 with the hope of getting people with disabilities involved with democracy. As the first Speaker of a legislature in Canada with a disability, I related my own personal story about how I was introduced and groomed and got to the point where I actually put my name on the ballot. Our end goal was to inspire people to put their name on a ballot at some point in time, and although we had a good turnout I found there was a lot of misinformation out there, at least among the people who attended. There was not a great understanding of the political system and how it works in Canada and there was not a great understanding of the difference between parties.

To be frank, although we're slowly growing out of it, I think there's a history of people with disabilities not being encouraged to become involved with these sorts of things. And it's for a host of reasons – traditional unemployment levels are higher, there are socio-economic barriers, the day-to-day reality of living with a disability and worrying about your own personal circumstances. Getting involved in politics is so far off most persons with disabilities' radars, that I think it's contributed to the small numbers that were alluded to earlier.

CPR: On the other side of that equation, there are philosophical differences among parties about recruiting candidates based on a group identity.

SF: I am absolutely opposed to affirmative action, particularly for me. I think if you're going to go into politics it can be pretty rough. Federally I had to go through two contested nominations, one for the Canadian Alliance and when the parties merged one for the Conservatives, and then run against a man named Glen Murray, who was a well-known and popular mayor in Winnipeg. Now there was a challenge during the nomination when some people were passing around notes saying "Fletcher is a cripple and just wouldn't be able to do the job." But the vast majority of the people in the party ignored that.



Jennifer Howard

I also found that when I was door-knocking, people were very surprised to see that I was in a wheelchair. And I was aware of that. When I first ran in 2004 and we did the campaign literature there would have been difficulty seeing that because at the time there were some very powerful stereotypes of persons with physical disabilities. People often think if you're in a wheelchair there may be a cognitive problem. People will speak to you louder thinking for some reason that being in a wheelchair affects your hearing. Rather than combating these stereotypes one by one, I thought it best to demonstrate through action that, yes I can door-knock and do all the things that an MP needs to do and I can do it very well. I'm blessed to have a very good education with an engineering degree before my accident and an MBA after my accident.

So when it came down to the politics, I had to demonstrate that I could do it. I couldn't just ask for a waiver. That would just be inconceivable to me. You

have to demonstrate that you can get through the nomination process to prove that you can get through and election.

That said, I did face some substantial barriers. Even things like road cuts and pot holes. I became convinced that Glen Murray had planned this for a decade and had tried to stymie me by keeping the streets full of potholes throughout the riding. (*Laughter*). But the other real challenge I had was with my insurance company. Manitoba Public Insurance did not want me involved in politics. In fact I still have the note saying "If Fletcher were ever to become a Member of Parliament we would have no way of mitigating our expenses." What's the point of having insurance? I was going to live as normal as life as possible and they were, at least initially, very hard to that idea.

CPR: Actually, this might be an opportunity to ask about Manitoba, which I believe is currently the only province to refund additional expenses incurred by candidates with disabilities if they reach a certain threshold of the popular vote.

JH: I didn't actually know that we're the only ones with it. I think it is something that should be done elsewhere. In my campaign, one of the ways we used that was with door-knocking. My disability is mobility-related in that I have difficulty walking long distances. It was actually Steven who inspired me to use a scooter while door-knocking. We were at an event and he said "I can see twice as many people while door-knocking in my chair with my team." I wondered why I was trying to do it like everyone else, but for me it caused pain and it meant that I was grumpy by the time I got to someone's door, which is never good for a politician. So I began using a scooter and had extra staff with me to go to the door if it wasn't accessible and I was able to claim these extra expenses.

And just to touch on an earlier point in the discussion about candidate search, in my party, when doing a candidate search, we have to actively seek out people with disabilities and women and other minority groups. I'm sure every party wants to ensure they have the best candidate, but sometimes we already have an image in our minds of who the best candidate is. I think one of the ways to ensure we don't exclude people with disabilities is to ensure they're on the list of people to think about and to ask. One of the things I have often found is that people who don't live with disabilities have preconceptions. During my nomination there were certainly some



Mario Levesque

people among the NDP supporters who said “maybe they should have picked someone else who would have been physically able to do more door-knocking” before I did the Steven Fletcher version of door-knocking. That plays into people’s perceptions of what we’re capable of. One of the things we must do during candidate selection and recruitment is to pause and think, “Are we approaching everyone who might be a good candidate or are we automatically striking someone off the list by thinking it would be so hard for someone who is blind to run, so we obviously just won’t ask them.”

And then we learn from each other. Being a woman in politics I find this is true. If we have women with small children, or men with small children, we ask “How do I balance running for office and taking care of the kids?” They learn from others who have faced that question. I think having events where you have people who have run, and who have run successfully,

with disabilities talking to other people who might be interested and wondering “what are some of the tricks of the trade?” “How do you fit into a world that wasn’t designed for you?” And people with disabilities are experts at that because we do it every day.

CPR: A number of you have been either elected or appointed to positions in a parliamentary democracy and have had a high-profile. Is that visibility in itself helping to break down barriers?

SF: I’d say yes. Before I tried to hide because of the systemic stereotypes, I had been worried about that. But any questions that people may have had about how I would do the work have been answered. And this has created awareness on Parliament Hill. There are more ramps around and they’re rebuilding the parliamentary precinct and I think it’s going to be more accessible than it might have been otherwise.

What I notice in Ottawa politics is that very few people have ever met and gotten to know someone in a wheelchair, let alone be a colleague of that individual. So they’re not familiar. The people who report on the laws and the lawmakers – the media – I’ve found they haven’t really dealt with people with disabilities before. Just look at how they angle the camera or take the picture or how they talk. And then we wonder why we have bad laws around disability in Canada.

I think having accessible housing, accessible transit, home care support and financial support allows more people with disabilities to get out into the community and the more normal and familiar it becomes. And it’s not just politics. We want to see people with disabilities as CEOs, or warehouse managers, or working at Best Buy. Why can’t a person with a disability work at a retail store? I’ve never encountered a person with a disability, at least in a wheelchair, working at a retail store. Why not?

KM: Just to speak briefly in support of what Steven said, visibility is the best thing we have in terms of recruitment of people with disabilities who are capable of fitting the job description. I don’t agree with affirmative action either in its traditional sense. I’m not looking for any free rides. I don’t think anyone based on their race, background, disability, or whatever should get a free pass. They should pass the test that any party or elected office would have. If you can do the job, manage the demands of the job, and are qualified, then we have to encourage these people to consider politics as a viable choice for them.



Kevin Murphy

In Nova Scotia I'd been kicking around the Liberal Party for 15 years as a volunteer. I worked my way up to the policy table. And I can tell you – and I'm not suggesting this as a boast – since I've been sitting around the government caucus table there have been more things happening with regard to people with disabilities, disability policy, the locations of meetings, accessibility of meeting places and accommodations because where I can't go in my wheelchair neither do my colleagues. My colleagues now approach their way of doing business a little bit differently because the level of awareness has increased.

There are people out there who are very good candidates who for whatever reason have not given consideration to entering public life. And certainly with my Speaker's hat on, I've made a point to reach out to all parties and encouraged them to consider people with disabilities and also to encourage their local ridings associations to look at the entire

population and to make sure they're not missing any good candidates just because they may have a disability or some other circumstance.

DO: After being in the position of Lieutenant Governor for seven years – an apolitical and unelected office that has allowed me to observe things in an apolitical way – I really felt and I still believe that people with disabilities are the final group in our society yet to achieve full civil rights. It's a term that tends to grab people's attention and I've phrased it deliberately that way. But I go back to the *a priori* assumption I mentioned earlier. You could just not fathom in Canada today that any political party would opt not to look for a woman to be a candidate because they looking for the "best" candidate and the "best" candidate wouldn't be a woman. You can't conceive that any party would say "well, we haven't look for any persons of colour to run for office because we're just looking for the best candidates." It's just not part of the thinking process. And yet, it still is part of the thinking process as it pertains to people with disabilities. And until that changes, people like us in this conference call, who have a range of disabilities, are going to the exceptions.

And yet, having said that, friends and acquaintances on Parliament Hill have told me that Steven has done more to change the physical reality on Parliament Hill than the previous five decades of legislation such as it was. The same I think applies for the Queen's Park complex in Toronto where the office of the lieutenant governor is housed. More was done to make the building accessible to all of the citizens of Ontario who happen to have mobility issues because I became lieutenant governor than even in the previous years when the already in-place and very good *Ontarians With Disabilities Act* was being enforced. It took the appointment of a person who uses an electric scooter to get around before the issue was addressed.

Until we get to a point where the parties don't blink an eye when considering a candidate with a disability in the same way as they wouldn't when thinking about a person or colour or with a different sexual orientation, that one per cent figure we heard about at the start of our conversation won't budge much. And yet, the longer that people who have a disability have a high profile in the political realm, the more it's going to encourage other people with disabilities to seek public office.

CPR: Two questions come to mind as follow-ups based on some of what was said. First, people have



David Onley

said that visibility of persons with disability in public offices tends to spur change. Do you find yourselves becoming the *de facto* representative for people with disabilities or the specialist in debates, and is that a role you're happy to take on? And second, and somewhat related, I wanted to ask about non-visible disabilities. Would people with these kinds of disabilities be at a disadvantage in terms of raising their profile and combating stereotypes?

JH: I was lucky enough to be appointed as the minister responsible for people with disabilities, so I was both officially and unofficially the spokesperson. But I was always conscious in that role about not becoming tapped as the expert on accessibility. What I've found is that I may be the expert on what I need in order for the world to be accessible for me, but I don't know, beyond what I've been able to learn through experience, about what someone who is deaf needs or someone whose disability is mental illness. I think

it's natural that people will want to put you into that position so they can say they've got the advice or the blessing of the minister responsible for persons with disabilities and therefore they must be fine. I was always clear with people that there are experts who can help you design accessible events and accessible spaces and I can give you some advice and point you in the right direction, but that's not my expertise. I think it's important to remember that people with disabilities are incredibly diverse, have different experiences and different needs in the world.

I was the minister in Manitoba who brought in the *Manitobans With Disabilities Act*, modelled after Ontario's act but also different. Whenever you waded into that area you get the sense that people become nervous because they expect to be judged based on perfection and if they don't measure up they'll be treated harshly. When we brought it in I said we would try to be the model for the legislation, but I was up front that we were not going to hit the mark every time. We're not going to the perfect. But we're going to listen and when we don't get it right we're going to change the way we do things. Breaking down barriers and making the world a more accessible place is a journey. I don't believe that you get to a destination where everything is fine. Every time a new technology is developed, every time there's a new architectural fad, we have to revisit how to make these things accessible to all. I was conscious in my time as minister not to let perfection be the enemy of good policy. I think that acknowledgement of the learning process brought on board some other people who might not have otherwise been part of that discussion.

In constructing that legislation we had a great process where we had people with disabilities, people who worked with people with disabilities and representatives from the business and public sector who came together to talk about how to make Manitoba a more accessible province, and we learned together and from each other. We came out of that process with a piece of legislation that not only had the support of all the parties in the legislature, but also all of those groups. It probably took longer than most people who have liked, but I would not have short-changed that journey because I think it made the legislation stronger and it will stand the test of time. And, moreover, the discussions between the groups and business led to greater understanding that will ultimately benefit them all.

SF: Behind the scenes I do a lot to make sure the issue of accessibility is considered. When I was

minister of state for transport I was responsible for the Marine Atlantic ferry service and I wanted to make sure they had accessible accommodations. The new ships are very good and have accessible rooms. VIA Rail has some accessible cars now. But it was always behind the scenes. I declined an invitation to be the honorary chair of a standing committee on disability because I don't want to be "the disability guy." That's not what my constituents elected me for. They wanted me to focus on things around taxation, immigration and the economy.

If I could share one of my pet peeves; I think Speaker Murphy mentioned it – your colleagues not going to places which you can't access. I'm constantly invited to places for receptions or dinners that are not wheelchair accessible. I find it so rude. It would be like me and David and Speaker Murphy inviting Jennifer out to dinner and when you get there you find out it's a men-only club.

CPR: Prof. Levesque, you mentioned at the start of this discussion that in your research you used a very broad definition of disability including several non-visible disabilities such as mental disabilities or intellectual disabilities. These kinds of disabilities tend not to be disclosed as often in politics. What has your research uncovered about this?

ML: That's the fun thing about research. You're often left with more questions than answers. From my perspective, I'm not advocating issues but rather trying to unpack things all the time. My survey was voluntary, so perhaps that one per cent figure is lower than what it is currently. And it also did not compel them to identify people with disabilities nor do all people with disabilities have to self-identify publicly. And some people may not consider themselves to be a person with a disability.

I'll give you an example, when I was at Forum 29 in Nova Scotia a couple of people came up to me. They were MLAs and they had heard I was doing this research. They said "I'd like to identify to you that I do have a disability, but please do not identify it or me in any of your research because even my political party does not know. I have not identified to them because I'm afraid it will mean I won't get certain positions within the party." I heard this from people across party stripes at that session and also elsewhere across Canada. The stigma and discrimination is a huge factor and barrier. Trying to break that down, I think it's important to have leaders who are elected and are visible.

To give you an example, research by one of my students examined BC after the last election because a number of people with disabilities were elected. MLAs Stephanie Cadieux and Michelle Stillwell were interviewed and asked what prompted them to get involved in politics and they answered that one factor was Sam Sullivan. They both said "if he could do it, then I can do it and I want to do it. I want to make a difference too." So the people with disabilities who are elected to office and become well-known – their reach goes far beyond what they could imagine or know. I applaud all of them for their work for their constituents as with any MLA, but I think beyond that their impact and influence on people with disabilities goes far beyond what many might think.

And, for example, Sam Sullivan when interviewed was asked if being at the table makes a difference. He said that it absolutely does. You might not see it with specific policy options, but when you're at the table you will find people will not bring up certain policy options. It won't be discussed, it won't even be broached because he's sitting there at the table. They know it's not an option. That's power!

JH: I do want to come back to the issue of disclosure of disabilities and people being afraid to self-identify. There is still a tremendous stigma attached to disability, to varying degrees, and I think a significant portion of that stigma is attached to mental illness. It is thought of, in politics, as a liability to mention that you have any issues with depression or anxiety. Yet we know from the figures in the general population that there are people in elected life that deal with those issues. But we still have this expectation of strength and perfection from politicians that does mean that people are less likely to disclose invisible or less visible disabilities.

I remember early in my political career being asked to be on a committee dealing with disability and the woman who asked me said "You know, I don't even think of you as having a disability because you're so intelligent." And this was a good person whose moment of not thinking, or moment of ignorance, shone through. That is still something we have to break down. Some of that is the example we set in living our lives and some of that is being willing to show vulnerability which some of us have more choice in than others. I can put up with an event where the only access is up three flights of stairs. I can grumble under my breath, but I can do it. Or I can have the courage to say "You know, that's very difficult for me to do. Is it possible to move it to an accessible location?" Not

all of us have that choice. But it does mean having to reveal a certain vulnerability. And that's difficult because people have this perception that politicians are supposed to be perfect and strong; and yet at the same time they can believe we're the most imperfect and weak individuals – it's interesting. Still, there is an image of politicians and it's one that does not equate to being vulnerable. I think this is something that prevents a lot of people living with less visible disabilities from admitting in order not to appear vulnerable. It's some we need to create space for in all of our parties.

SF: Just to dovetail on what Jennifer was saying. I think if you have a disability in politics it can and will be used against you by your political competition. That often comes from within your own caucus. People will make assumptions and perpetuate these assumptions to advance their agenda. That can happen, and I've seen that happen. By in large everyone is great, but there are always a few who will hold it against you if real or imaginary issues arise.

KM: To touch on the issue of hidden disabilities, when we were doing Forum 29 last year I reached out to all parties to get involved. I have a colleague on my side of the floor who confided in me that he has dyslexia and it's been a challenge for him throughout his whole life. He was very inspired and did participate in Forum 29, but he did not, to use a phrase, "come out of the closet as it were" publicly or to the party about his personal circumstances. He plans to identify eventually, but everything about that kind of disability and the stigma about its reflection on his intelligence is a very real fear for him. If he does disclose it, he will have to come to terms with it himself and be fully aware of his feelings about it to move forward and then hope that people will continue to see him for the person he is and not for the physical condition he has.

CPR: Thank you all very much for taking part in this discussion. This topic is one we could spend much more time on.