Forum29

Enabling persons with disabilities to participate in public and political life.

Province House, May 21, 2014

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Letter from the Speaker

As Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, I was very pleased to host, and co-present Forum29 along with the Halifax Regional Municipality Mayor's office, and the Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission at the Nova Scotia Legislature on May 21, 2014.

Almost 60 delegates participated in panel discussions and interactive sessions centred on the topic of how to inspire Nova Scotians living with disabilities to get involved with the political system and democracy.

The one day seminar was attended by many Nova Scotians living with disabilities, the leaders of all three mainstream political parties in Nova Scotia as well as many other elected officials from different levels of government. Among the key learnings was the many myths that exist about people with disabilities and the many myths and misunderstandings that exist surrounding the political system and democracy as we know it in Nova Scotia.

As Speaker, I am committed to a process of engagement and education as we work collectively to diversify our political representation to include more people with disabilities not only here in Nova Scotia, but nationally in Canada via the Canadian Parliamentary Association, and internationally via the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the United Nations.

Congratulations to all involved with the inaugural Forum29, and I look forward to planning and contributing to the next Forum29.

Respectfully,

Hon. Kevin S. Murphy
Speaker, Nova Scotia House of Assembly

Introduction

ABOUT

Inspired by Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), this one-day event brought together people with disabilities who have been involved in all aspects of public and political life, as well as interested stakeholders, policy makers and others, to consider ways to improve participation rates in all aspects of public and political life.

The event provided a forum for which persons with disabilities could relay the issues, barriers and potential solutions for getting involved in public and political life. These issues, barriers and solutions were recorded to inform Forum29 organizers on what topics should be addressed in the research and further work involved with the next steps of Forum29.

The event also provided an avenue for those involved in the overall Forum29 project to relay to participants what work has happened locally and internationally to date, and how this event will inform further work in this area.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the event was two-fold:

- To relay to the public (persons with disabilities who are interested in this endeavor) the progress of current projects related to this initiative, both local and abroad

- To gather more information on how to further reduce barriers and increase participation for persons with disabilities

Both of these purposes relate to our overall goal for the event (also our slogan), to provide the start of an ongoing event/formation of an organization, the purpose of which is to encourage and enable persons with disabilities to participate in public and political life.

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Morning Panel

Forum29 was kicked off with an introduction from the Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, Hon. Kevin Murphy. The Speaker described "Forum29 is a day dedicated to bringing focus to involving persons with disabilities in the democratic process. "

The purpose of the event was two fold; not only to inspire, educate and motivate persons with disabilities in Nova Scotia to get involved in democracy, but to educate, inspire and motivate political parties and government to reach out to persons with disabilities as valued and contributing members of our communities.

After introducing the day's events and thanking event organizers, the Speaker

graciously introduced the Mayor of Halifax Regional Municipality, Mike Savage. Halifax Regional Municipality's Office of the Mayor was a proud sponsor and supporter of the event.

Mayor Savage opened by saying: "Today we're here to talk about community. A place where people belong." Mayor Savage has been very involved in disability issues, previously as a Board member for the Canadian Institute for the Blind, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and the United Way, among many others. Now, in his current role as Mayor, he is making inroads on addressing issues faced by persons with disabilities. The city's Accessibility Advisory Committee, has advocated for accessible trails and playgrounds, audible pedestrian signals, and website and technology upgrades. In a session held in October 2013 on the topic of Healthy, Livable Communities, there was a clearly communicated need to become a more inclusive and caring community.

One of the three main priorities created from that event was to have more portable ramps available for entry into establishments. HRM also recently announced $140,000 in spending on accessibility upgrades at HRM facilities.

"Nova Scotia has the highest percentage of persons with disabilities in Canada. We all reap the economic and social benefits of having persons with disabilities fully engaged in the community and within government. Mayor Mike Savage shared the sentiment: "The lives of all of us, not just people with disabilities, are enriched by working to ensure that everyone can participate in the community."

"[The purpose of Forum29 is] to inspire, educate and motivate people with disabilities in our province to get involved with democracy at whatever level of government that suits your needs. We also hope to educate, inspire and motivate our various political parties and our various levels of government to reach out to people with disabilities as valued members of our communities and our province and our country, and take full advantage of all the abilities people with disabilities have to offer."

- Hon. Kevin Murphy,
Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly

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The above graphic was created in real time during the morning panel session and represents the panel's advice and experience as persons with disabilities engaging in public and political life.

Anne MacRae of the Disabled Persons Commission, a major sponsor and organizing partner in the event, spoke about the day ahead. "This is the beginning of a movement that people with disabilities face in order to participate in a political campaign as a volunteer, campaign manager, agent or candidate," said MacRae.

"The only way that we will ever see the elimination of the many barriers that people with disabilities face on a daily basis will be when people with disabilities are in positions of influence, whether that be as a chairman of a Board, a CEO, or as an elected official."

Mirroring the statement Mayor Savage mentioned earlier about how the Province of Nova Scotia has the highest percentage of persons with disabilities in the country (20% or 1 in 5), MacRae suggested the goal of having at least a 20% representation of persons with disabilities in the Nova Scotia Legislature.

Anne MacRae discussed the various issues facing persons with disabilities in getting involved in public and political life, including the lack of peers and venues to learn about and discuss democratic issues, legislative representation, feeling disenfranchised, and not seeing persons similar to themselves in office.

MacRae described her dream of creating a campaign school for persons with disabilities to allow an equal opportunity for persons with disabilities to participate in politics. MacRae reiterated the purpose of the event, addressing Article 29, from the United Nation Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities, which states "parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to engage - to enjoy them on an equal basis with others."

This event follows a similar event held in Nova Scotia in 2010, for the 30th anniversary of the Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities (NSLEO), where Article 29 was described in greater detail, and a brainstorm session was held to generate ideas on how to implement Article 29. The event had four outcomes:

1. Modernize the Elections Act to include full participation of persons with disabilities
2. Creation of a disability voters' toolkit
3. Create a campaign school for persons with disabilities
4. Creation of a task force by government to work on implementation of this article

The Elections Act was in fact modernized as a result of this work, for the first time in 25 years, to include a clear mandate to improve accessibility of electors to voting facilities.

Work with Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations was completed to ensure their education and training programs were accessible. Forum29 will take this progress to the next level.

MacRae says, "Timing is everything. If you're patient enough, the right circumstances will present themselves to you, and your goals can be realized."

Thoughts from the Panel

"This has been a motto of mine.... to focus on what I can do. There are a few things I can't do, walking being one of them.... As I was considering my candidacy to make the decision to enter politics ,[I thought] how do I go door to door? How did I ensure I had enough stamina as a person with a disability to endure.... 10, 12, 14 hours of campaigning? And getting from point A to point B."

- Kevin Murphy

"We, as people with disabilities, supporters of people with disabilities, have to understand that politics matters! Political parties know who votes and who doesn't. Political parties all develop their platforms around populations and people who go to the polls."

- Kent Hehr

"In 1999, when the government decided to withdraw from the coal mining industry in Cape Breton... I decided to try to see what I could do to have the government improve the package as they were withdrawing... It led me to an ability that... I didn't know I had, particularly in public policy. I have now spent 14 years doing public advocacy in different areas."

- Edna Lee

"Very few doors, whether it is in downtown Halifax or in rural Nova Scotia in my riding of Eastern Shore, are actually accessible for a person in a wheelchair to go right up to the door. We overcame those things with careful consideration to campaign strategically with a team, so I basically had a pair of hands and feet to go up and knock on the door. In 99.9% of the cases, people were very accommodating and clearly understood the limitations, that their home was not wheelchair accessible and were more than happy to come out to the porch, to the

"We really need to get people with disabilities into positions of decision making in order to have the convention implemented"

- Steven Estey

driveway to meet me. The other thing I did was be really strategic in the public events that I participated in. We took advantage of community fairs and church suppers, to be visible, to go and meet as many people as I could in a concentrated time."

- Kevin Murphy

"I encourage you to get involved with your party, get involved in your community. If there is an issue you feel is important to you, have a voice with your government officials and don't be afraid to speak up. You don't know if you will be successful or not, but you won't be successful unless you try."

- Edna Lee

MLA or a city councilor, but anyone can join a party, anybody can go to a meeting, anybody can help out in a campaign, and that is the kind of engagement we're talking about here. We're talking about participation in public and political life. That's not relegated to the 51 people who are members of the legislative assembly in NS. And it will never be. I think it's important to think about it beyond that."

- Steven Estey

"When I graduated from Saint Mary's University, I made the choice to throw my name in the hat and I ran Municipally in 1994 and I came in second and that experience as a young person really taught me a lot about how the system works, and about how to be part of the solution, how to really try to effect positive change in your community. Those experiences led me to a 10 year decision process to get more and more involved as time went on."

- Kevin Murphy

"The obstacle and challenge was within me, too, because I worried about [if having Multiple Sclerosis would be perceived as a weakness]. I didn't talk about having Multiple Sclerosis during my campaign. I think it's important to recognize that not all disabilities are visible."

- Edna Lee

PANEL MEMBERS *(left to right):*
Kent Hehr, MLA Calgary-Buffalo
Edna Lee, PC Candidate
Kevin Murphy, Speaker of the House of Assembly
Steven Estey, NDP Candidate

PANEL MODERATOR
Joachim Stroink, MLA Halifax-Chebucto

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Keynote Address: Steven Estey

In order to help frame the discussion for the afternoon, Steven Estey provided a little history about the issue of participation in political life by persons with disabilities, and engagement on the issue in Nova Scotia. He noted that in 2010 the Nova Scotian disability community had identified participation in political life as the key enabler in realizing the dream of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): equal access to all human rights for people with disabilities. Forum29, he said, should therefore be viewed as an important step in the effort of the Government of Nova Scotia in the implementation of the CRPD.

To further illustrate the importance of this work, Steven spoke about a recent study commissioned by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on participation in political and public life by persons with disabilities (2011). The study took the form of a questionnaire, which was sent to all UN Member states, and other interested parties such as disabled peoples organizations and academics received input from over 60 countries around the world, including Canada, and another 25 from other sources.

Most of the responses focused on issues related to the accessibility of voting for people with different types of disabilities. But in a few cases there was discussion about how to improve participation rates of people with disabilities running for political office, or getting involved as a volunteer with a political party. Steven noted that a good deal of work had been done on these issues in the United Kingdom (UK). He spoke about an interview with Baroness Jane Campbell, a disabled member of the British House of Lords. She described a consultation conducted under the auspices of the Speaker of the House of Commons at Westminster, which concluded that four broad categories where barriers exist were seen in the UK, they were as follows:

1 **Attitudes** - negative public attitudes can have a high impact on prospective disabled political candidates; for example, in relation to election prospects, concerns over additional resources which may be required, and the electorate's reservations about being represented by a candidate with a disability.

2 **Financial constraints** - The usual costs associated with running for political office can be very high. Candidates with disabilities may incur further costs in being a candidate associated with their disability that have to be self-funded. For example, a deaf candidate may have to meet the costs of a Sign Language Interpreter or a candidate with mobility impairment may need adapted transportation at a greater cost.

3 Accessibility - Improving accessibility for disabled candidates was a key feature of the evidence that was collected through the consultation. Accessibility issues will differ from person to person, and will depend on their disability.

4 Need for training, development and support - Measures within this area could be targeted toward providing candidates with the opportunities to develop skills and experience to run for elected office. For example, establishing good support networks where coaching, mentoring or buddying systems can be implemented, providing individually tailored support for candidates.

Steven then invited facilitators Stephanie Pronk and David Upton, from "Common Good Solutions," to outline the small group process that would consider barriers to participation of people with disabilities in Nova Scotia, and once these had been identified groups were asked to brainstorm about ways to overcome these barriers.

Brainstorming Session

BARRIERS

Reports from the small group discussions were in large part framed under the same headings used in the UK report discussed in the previous section, with specific references to access, finances and attitudes. Along with this, some groups raised points that have been brought together here under the headings of 'education and communication' and the need for 'policy development and peer support'. Key points related to barriers and solutions are presented below in bullet format:

Accessibility

- Lack of access to political information
- Lack of access to education
- Lack of access to internet
- Transportation is costly, especially in rural areas
- Lack of accessible hours of polling stations
- Lack of polling stations in multi-resident buildings
- Lack of access to technical tools before and during campaigns
- Lack of technical tools for candidates
- Need to network

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Financial

- Many persons with disabilities live in low income situations
- High cost of living for persons with disabilities because of disability related costs for things like transportation, interpreters and adaptive aids
- Campaigning is expensive with high costs for things like travel and other disability related accommodations associated with being involved, so people would need financial backing to cover these extra costs
- High cost of preparing young persons with disabilities for political involvement
- Lack of political will and political party support
- It is not only people on income assistance that can lose their income. Many persons on Long Term Disability benefits may fear the same repercussions. Canada Pension Plan, for example, allows a person to volunteer and for a person to work and make so much money therefore doing a campaign does not pose a threat for those on Canada Pension; however persons who may be on Long Term Disability for an employer could be negatively affected. Legislation to provide protection should have a broad umbrella to capture the varying income sources for disabled persons

Attitudes

- Perceptions/stigma surrounding disabilities and lack of awareness
- Discomfort when getting involved politically due to general attitude and treatment of people with disabilities
- Perception of people with disabilities as being incompetent
- Lack of support results in lack of stamina/staying power
- Employers/government doesn't value people with disabilities and are, therefore, reluctant to hire them
- "We/they mentality"
- "Out of sight, out of mind"

Education & Communication

- Little public awareness and understanding of persons with disabilities
- Lack of education leads to misperceptions of people with disabilities
- Lack of recognition of specific skills of people with disabilities
- Campaign education
- Lack of training programs for persons with disabilities to gain knowledge, skills, and access to participate in politics
- Little awareness in disability community of how to be involved in politics
- Lack of technology to communicate
- Lack of preparation for young people with disabilities for political involvement
- Lack of awareness of resources and little understanding of where to look for them

Policy & Peer Support

- Lack of policy that supports people with disabilities when running for office
- Lack of peer support organizations
- Lack of viable support regarding insurance, disability claims, etc.
- PR/media/posters, ad-spots do not reflect inclusivity and diversity
- No "Champion of the People with Disabilities"
- Lack of role model i.e. someone in politics now to look up to
- Need to create a draw to Halifax for people with disabilities and make Halifax a global leader in this area
- No political party guidelines to identify participation of persons with disabilities in political activity

SOLUTIONS

Accessibility

- Constituents go to public venues to meet Candidates
- Go where people are – places like municipal buildings and coffee shops
- Town hall meetings during campaign
- Create networking opportunities for people with disabilities between campaigns
- Host forums and workshops
- Make available timely and affordable access
- Make information available in braille, audio, etc.
- Use existing resources - no need to reinvent the wheel
- Ensure that campaign offices, candidate offices and meetings are in accessible buildings
- Offer access to interpreters

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Financial

- Increase allowances to people with disabilities for election costs
- Additional funds made available
- Draft legislation
- Giving leave of absence with pay for political involvement
- Protecting benefits for people with disabilities when they become politically involved
- Elections Nova Scotia must accommodate for technical tools like Braille, iPads, etc.
- Absolutely critical to pass legislation that people on disability pensions with the province will not lose their pension while campaigning
- Portion of budget of political parties set aside for initiatives to invite and create positive inclusive and diverse membership for marginalized people
- Get parties to consider assistance pre-electoral costs
- Legislation to provide protection should have a broad umbrella to capture the varying income sources for disabled persons

Attitudes

- Help inform facilitators/electoral workers
- Sensitivity training
- Education = increased awareness
- Disability consultants
- Consult for political work and involvement
- Modeled after university disability facilitators
- High-level government involvement
- Create acts/bills in support of persons with disabilities
- Persons with disabilities coming in to talk/share their experiences
- Increased youth exposure
- Develop from "preparing and giving workshops" to "creating and implementing change"
- Political advertising should reflect population make-up, and include people with disabilities
- "Ability facilitator's" in all governmental departments - people who disabled persons can go to figure out how to navigate whatever they need done, and people who the able-bodied could go to and develop better understanding of what needs should be met

Education & Communication

- Create presence in non-profit sector
- Create websites with resources and information on the political process and how people with disabilities are getting involved
- Use social media
- Educate individuals on political process and opportunities for involvement of people with disabilities
- Outreach
- Integrate political/people with disabilities education in school system
- Integrate political/people with disabilities in curriculum
- Regular panel presentations
- Target younger population
- Network
- Through education sector
- Through political parties
- Have a disability interpreter

Policy & Peer Support

- Provide an online presence (e-support)
- Provide telephone hotline
- A form of peer support with classification
- "How to live a politically engaged life?"
- Government official/role responsible for helping individuals navigate the peer support network
- Increase efforts to merge and cooperate amongst separate peer support networks.

- PR/media/posters, ad-spots need to reflect diversity in political life
- Strike correct balance between amalgamation and specific separate networks
- Increase collaboration between separate peer support networks
- Between "visible" and "invisible" disabilities
- Between networks competing for resources
- Combine efforts of similar networks for efficient use of funding
- Consistent guidelines within each political party for initiatives on inclusiveness and diversity

Feedback

The following information was gathered after the event, through an online survey. The survey captured attendees' feedback regarding many facets of the event. Out of over 60 event attendees, 16 individuals provided their feedback using the survey, of which some results are provided below. The findings of the survey were overwhelmingly positive and useful, both in gauging the success of the event, and also in seeking improvement for future events. A few of the comments left through the feedback forms are provided below.

- The whole event was very well organized and fully accessible for me (I am deaf).

- This event did instill in me a desire to become more involved in "political" life. I have decided to volunteer for a political party. Congratulations on initiating this event!

- Tremendous networking opportunities! Would like to say a special thanks to Kevin Murphy and Mike Savage for hosting - well done gentlemen.

- This event should be offered again in a larger space and open to more people. Sighted guides should be available [for visually impaired persons] in order to make us feel comfortable and welcomed.

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Next Steps

The Forum29 team is very keen to determine next steps. Work has already begun in researching similar initiatives in other parts of the world. Those findings will be combined with the findings of the Forum29 sessions outlined above to draft an Action Plan for enabling persons with disabilities to participate in public and political life. The Action Plan will work towards the following goals:

- Identify and establish the best mechanism for ongoing work in the field
- Develop a business plan to begin moving forward
- Seek funding and sponsorship to assist the launch and development
- Engage local disability organizations and non-partisan political groups to commence addressing the issues identified
- Encourage government to create policies to support persons with disabilities to engage in public and political life
- Engage all political parties in creating supportive policies and funding to support persons with disabilities who wish to run for office
- Begin planning for an annual Forum29 event

Based on the identified barriers and proposed solutions in the framework created by Forum29 participants, a series of next steps suggest themselves. These can be considered together to form an Action Plan to grow the Form29 initiative. The key, however, to implementing the Action Plan will be the establishment of an office, an organization or some other mechanism to raise funds, oversee separate projects and guide these activities together while providing an accountability mechanism in the longer term. Some specific next steps that connect to the discussions held at Forum29 are as follows:

ACCESSIBILITY

- Launch website and social media presence for Forum29
- Seek student interns to assist with management and content development

FINANCES

- Seek all party support in Nova Scotia to launch an "Access to the political process and elected office fund"
- Work with Elections Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Election Commission to generate ideas and develop necessary legislation

ATTITUDES

- Seek funding and support to launch legislative intern and page program
- Publicize Forum29 report and seek opportunities to dialogue with relevant agencies (for example the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities)

EDUCATION & COMMUNICATION

- Building on support from Nova Scotia university Presidents and seek meetings to discuss ways to engage with Post Secondary Education community on this idea, including, but not limited to research
- Launch a campaign school focusing on engagement in all aspects of political participation

POLICY & PEER SUPPORT

- Work with all parties to review their constitutions and by-laws to improve inclusive practices
- Seek meetings with all party executive committees to discuss ways to increase participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of the parties work and activities

Supporters

Forum29 received astounding attendance, as well as the support from many government and political officials, including:

Hon. Stephen McNeil, Premier of Nova Scotia
Hon. Jamie Baillie, Leader of the Official Opposition
Hon. Maureen MacDonald, Acting Leader of the New Democratic Party
Hon. Lena Diab, Attorney General and Nova Scotia Minister of Justice
Hon. Tony Ince, Nova Scotia Minister of Communities, Culture and Heritage
Eddie Orrell, MLA for Northside-Westmount

Numerous Executive Directors, MLAs, and other notable community members were present. We deeply appreciate the support we received for the first year of the Forum29 event.

A special thanks to the Planning Committee, who made Forum29 a success:
Hon. Kevin Murphy, Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly
Kelly Cantelo, Legislative Assistant to the Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly
Stephanie Pronk, Business Manager, Common Good Solutions
Steven Estey, Consultant, Common Good Solutions
Anne MacRae, Executive Director, Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission
Jim MacInnes, Legislative TV, Nova Scotia House of Assembly
Peter Theriault, Coordinator, Nova Scotia House of Assembly

A special thank you to the following persons who submitted short videos to share their stories as persons with disabilities who have experience in political life.
Judith E. Heumann, Special Advisor for International Disability Rights, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC
Stephanie Cadieux, MLA for Surrey – Cloverdale, Surrey, British Columbia, Minister of Children & Family Development, British Columbia
Michelle Stilwell, MLA for Parksville-Qualicum, Parksville, British Columbia

A very special thanks to the event sponsors:

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