

B.C. legislature removes architectural barriers

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Hon. Speaker Linda Reid and MLA Sam Sullivan

Accessibility improvements open the Parliament Buildings in Victoria to all British Columbians

Rick Hansen's Man in Motion World Tour left Vancouver in 1985, with its mission of removing barriers that stood in the way of people with disabilities. Yet when he returned home more than two years later, he found the Parliament Buildings—representing all the aspirations, values and principles inherent in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms—needed immediate attention.

"Almost all our historic buildings have architectural and cultural barriers that are difficult to break down or accommodate," says Hansen. This is no more evident than when he recalls the unpleasant experience he endured during his first visit to Victoria's Parliament Buildings. Entering from the rear of the building, the one wheelchair accessible entrance took forever. He had to push a button to summon someone to open the door, navigate through a basement, past garbage, then up an elevator only to get to the starting point for able-bodied visitors.

"Something about that experience made me think 'Oh My God.' I realized there was more work to be done since the Man in Motion Tour, yet my mentors say even that [the ramp] was a huge victory. There used to be stairs..." says Hansen.

Although the architecture of these Parliament Buildings has been behind the times when it comes to consideration for those with disabilities, change is afoot. Today, in British Columbia, at the 'People's House' as Hon. Speaker Linda Reid fondly calls it, there have been recent significant changes, and the improvement in accessibility is outstanding.

Hansen returned to Victoria for a visit in February 2014 and remarked on the accessible and inviting front entrance that allowed his entry to be just like anyone else's.

"There was a permanent ramp and secure handrails reflective *not* of a temporary band-aid but a permanent commitment. All parts of the building are usable," he says. "It's unprecedented in the country—three MLAs in wheelchairs. They're there because they're brilliant at their jobs, and they can function at their jobs due to the changes made."

MLA Sam Sullivan would likely agree. Sullivan has a high level of quadriplegia with no movement in his fingers, no triceps and no wrist flexors. He says there used to be security doors he couldn't open. Now, new electric door openers allow him to move about the building freely at any time of day.

When the House was in session, as he could not rise and wait to be recognized or even wave for the Speaker's attention to gain permission to speak, other options were required.

"Our Honourable Speaker recognized this and developed an upgrade to the computer system that enables me and the other members with disabilities to push a button to be recognized and to operate the microphone. The system works extremely well," Sullivan says. "It is important for me to speak on issues for the people of my riding and to express my opinion as an elected official. I also feel a sense of empowerment knowing that I can be recognized whenever I would like to make a comment, thanks to the technology that has been installed."

Sullivan expresses his personal regret that the price of this upgrade, which has notably enhanced his ability to do his job, was erroneously reported and the expenditure criticized. The new computer system cost slightly more than \$13,000. There was additional cost to house the computer in a desk at the Speaker's Chair, which required custom woodwork in keeping with the heritage aspect of the building. "Government must lead by example. If our Parliament Buildings cannot accommodate an elected Member of the Legislature, how can we expect employers or building owners to do so for their employees or patrons with disabilities?" he adds.

Sullivan has always advocated for accommodation for the varied needs of people with disabilities in housing and transit and the workplace. "I am pleased that our Honourable Speaker has implemented every request I made. I have been in the ancient elevator to get to the Legislative Library several times. It is an experience that I do not look forward to. I truly wonder if the old elevator will make it all the way. I am a heavy user of the Legislative Library and I was thrilled when I learned that the Honourable Speaker had committed to building a ramp. It is a very difficult physical layout and the beautiful workmanship of the stairs made it a real challenge. The implementation was of the finest quality that respected the wonderful heritage aspects of the building."

MLA Michelle Stilwell acknowledges that the building itself, both in age and heritage value, brings additional challenges. "I would say that on a daily basis, my biggest frustration is the doors. Whether they lead into an office or a meeting room, they are very heavy and most do not have lever handles on them for easy access. As a quadriplegic my hand function is limited."

Work is underway, says Speaker Reid, to modify all existing doors to include electronic door openers.

The access ramp to the first floor of the library is also much valued by MLA Stilwell. "The library ramp not only allows me access to the information available but it enables me to attend functions, announcements and hold meetings. Being able to come and go as I please without assistance from others is critical to my ability to do my job to the best of my ability."

Stilwell says the People's House should be accessible to all British Columbians no matter their ability, age, race or gender. "Every change made has been a step forward to making that possible."

According to Speaker Reid, the inclusivity of the Parliament Buildings represents the heart of British Columbia. "I want my tenure as Speaker to be characterized by ever-increasing levels of accessibility in the People's House, so that all British Columbians feel included."

Hansen also recognizes the value of high levels of accessibility, explaining how it will enable kids with disabilities to visit the People's House with their schools, and that someone with a disability can be considered for a job at one of the Parliament Buildings.

Indeed, that inclusivity is what we stand for, says Hansen: "Being open and accessible and inclusive so no one is left behind."

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