

Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities: A New Network

Building on his work promoting collaboration and discussion among Canadian parliamentarians with disabilities, in this article the author highlights plans for an exploratory conference looking to establish a Commonwealth-wide network. The three-day conference is being planned for this summer in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Hon. Kevin Murphy, MLA

In the Spring 2015 edition of the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (Vol. 38, No. 1), I joined with colleagues from across Canada to provide personal perspectives on what it's like to be a parliamentarian with a disability and the associated challenges, including running for a party's nomination and championing local accessibility legislation.

I serve as both a Member and Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly as a person with a disability (quadriplegic) and I am joined in the House by my colleague, Alfie MacLeod (amputee). In Canada alone, we have many serving parliamentarians with disabilities at the provincial and federal levels who are spread out across our great and vast country, including two federal cabinet ministers, Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities (visually impaired) and Kent Hehr, Minister of Veterans Affairs (quadriplegic). Member of Parliament Diane Finley (visually impaired) in the House of Commons and Senator Chantal Petitclerc (paraplegic), are joined at the provincial level by: Steven Fletcher (quadriplegic) in Manitoba; Stephanie Cadieux (paraplegic), Michelle Stilwell (quadriplegic) and Sam Sullivan (quadriplegic) in British Columbia; Ed Doherty (mobility issues) in New Brunswick and Mark Docherty (mobility issues) in Saskatchewan.



Hon. Kevin Murphy

Hon. Kevin Murphy is Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly and Member of the Legislative Assembly for Eastern Shore.

To reaffirm the obvious, our populations are diverse and the Commonwealth is a perfect example which reflects this diversity. Nations can categorize their populations in various ways including, but not limited to age, gender, sexual orientation, Indigenous peoples, income, ethnicity and/or faith, but a community that is often overlooked in a political context are persons with disabilities. The World Health Organization reports that in most countries about 15 per cent of the population report having some form of disability; yet research shows that very few people with disabilities have been elected to public office.

In discussions with like-minded parliamentarians and persons in the disability community, since my own election in 2013 I have tried to bring the topic of encouraging persons with disabilities to run for elected office to the public arena.

To further this discussion and to increase general awareness, one of my ideas is to establish a network of parliamentarians with disabilities Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) within the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). This network would be similar in nature to Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) and promote specific aims and objectives.

These include: increasing representation of persons with disabilities in our Parliaments; providing opportunities for strategic discussion and development for future and present parliamentarians with disabilities; identifying barriers preventing persons

with disabilities from seeking elected office; developing outreach programs and materials to encourage persons with disabilities to seek elected office; fostering closer relationships between Commonwealth parliamentarians with disabilities; and discussing, strategizing and acting on issues relating to persons with disabilities internationally.

I contacted the Secretary General of CPA to discuss my proposal of bringing together parliamentarians with disabilities from across the Commonwealth to Halifax, Nova Scotia for a three-day conference to put forward a recommendation to CPA to establish this network. With the CPA's support, the planning and preparation for this conference in late August 2017 is underway and the CPA has been in contact with member countries to determine the level of interest and to locate prospective delegates. In addition, I have championed this idea in Canada and with other jurisdictions as opportunities arose.

The outcome of the conference will be to formalize a recommendation to CPA to establish CPwD and this recommendation would then be put forward at the next Annual General Meeting.

In the months ahead I look forward to sharing what we learn from this conference and these ongoing discussions with all Canadian parliamentarians in future issues of the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. For more information about this conference and related initiatives, please contact my Legislative Assistant, Scott Burke, by email at: scott.j.burke@novascotia.ca