

David Shannon excerpt from Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, March 31, 2014:

My name is David Shannon. I live in Thunder Bay, Ontario. I had a spinal cord injury 32 years ago. That means I have had the benefit of experiencing many elections using a wheelchair. I'm also the executive director of a non-governmental organization that serves people with disabilities in Thunder Bay, Ontario. I'm here on behalf of the Canadian Disability Policy Alliance, which is a national collaboration of disability researchers, community organizations, and federal and provincial policy-makers aimed at creating and mobilizing knowledge to enhance disability policy in Canada.

Of course today I'm here to talk about disability policy and in particular some recommendations. I would submit that this is an opportunity for all of us to enhance the inclusion of persons with a disability.

When I talk about persons with a disability in Canada, I'm not talking in a vacuum. I'm not talking about an ideal or an idea. I'm talking about four million Canadians who are of an age to vote. In fact 4.4 million Canadians have a disability, and according to the latest statistic, four million are of voting age. It's a critically important bloc to access for any politically minded individual, and indeed to open the doors to greater democracy, which I believe is the purpose of this bill.

We have found, however, that obstacles to electoral involvement for persons with a disability are not limited to just inaccessible polling sites. The Elections Act has tried to address that. The Hughes decision at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal tried to address that. But it goes beyond polling sites. It goes to meeting venues, campaign offices, and constituency offices. They are all central to the effective functioning of Canadian democracy. I want to talk about that. At the very fundamental level of our democracy, every party, every politician has to open the doors to meetings and campaign offices to guarantee that they have inclusive design.

Our research has shown that people with disabilities are 20% less likely to vote than those with a disability. That's ironic, however, that they're less likely to vote, because if you ask them, as our research also indicates, there is a greater urgency and desire among the disability community to vote than the rest of Canada. This leads to, within these 4.4 million Canadians, what is termed absent citizens. Therefore, meeting venues, campaign offices, and information materials are central to accessing these absent citizens.

A recent study conducted under the auspices of the Canadian Disability Policy Alliance surveyed candidates from the Ontario election campaign of 2011 to discover the extent to which campaign offices, meeting venues, party platforms, and official websites were accessible and inclusive toward their disabled constituency. Party leaders were polled to seek their position on disability issues and accessibility in their campaign and their platform.

The findings from this survey indicate there is a general lack of understanding of the imperative to achieve accessibility standards, not only of polling stations and booths, but also of political campaigns, if representative democracy in Canada is to include people with disabilities.

Of course that was a provincial election. I would not imagine that same error would visit itself upon any federal campaign.

The survey found that accessibility practices tended to be reactive instead of proactive, exceptional instead of inclusive. Electoral practices do not appear to have kept pace with the shift in policy and attitudes towards disability that has occurred. We've seen a shift in the past generation from 1981 to 2014 in the way in which the public views inclusiveness and includes persons with a disability, but political campaigns and politicians have not kept pace.

(2110)

Mr. Chair, we therefore ask for your consideration to add a section under the general provisions of the bill known as the fair elections act.

We recommend: one, that the standing committee mandate campaign office accessibility in the legislation; two, that the fair elections act adopt and implement an accessibility standard for all campaign websites, offices, and meeting spaces during the federal election; three, that Elections Canada communicate with the individual candidates about the expectations of accessibility. We do have, by the way, a tool kit, which is a survey of how to make one's campaign offices accessible. Finally, Mr. Chair, we recommend that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs recommend enhanced and broadened funding through the enabling accessibility fund to help achieve greater accessibility during a federal election. In other words, this section can be implemented.

We believe this would help us lead to a much broader constituency and a voice for all Canadians.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.