

WHEN DISABLED PERSONS' VOICES ARE MISSING, SO IS GOOD POLICY

There's a simple truth we too often overlook in public life: the best decisions are made when the people most affected are at the table.

As a former MLA and the first person with a disability to be elected as the Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, I've seen firsthand how policy is shaped - not just by good intentions, but by the voices included in the process. When those voices reflect the full range of lived experiences in our communities, policy is stronger, more thoughtful and more grounded in reality. When they don't, we see the consequences, which in most cases result in the further deepening of systemic biases and the ongoing marginalisation of those minorities excluded from the process.

That's why the recent situation in the Province of Nova Scotia around proposed government budget cuts affecting persons with disabilities is so troubling. While I'm glad those decisions were ultimately reversed, it's hard not to think they should never have been considered in the first place. If there was meaningful involvement from persons with disabilities, it would be difficult to imagine those cuts ever being proposed at all.

This isn't about blame as much as it is about a broader lesson. Diverse voices and perspectives don't just improve the process - they lead to better outcomes. People with lived experience understand the real-world impact of policies and decisions in ways that others simply can't. That kind of insight is not a nice-to-have in policymaking; it's essential.

Disability doesn't affect just one group of people. It touches every family, every community and every

sector of our society. Whether through a loved one, a colleague or our own lived experience over time, disability is something that connects us all. That's precisely why it must be reflected in the rooms where policy making is discussed and decisions are made.

However, disability inclusion doesn't happen by accident. It requires intention and deliberate focused ongoing effort. It means creating a political system that is not only accessible to persons with disabilities, but genuinely welcoming.

One where persons with disabilities see themselves not just as participants, but as potential leaders and decision makers - serving as volunteers in local electoral district associations, as members of Executive teams, as candidates, as elected officials, as policy makers and as leaders across the public and private sectors.

We have more work to do to build that kind of system. That includes removing physical, attitudinal and systemic barriers, challenging assumptions and actively encouraging the participation of persons with disabilities at every point of entry in our political systems.

In 2017, I founded and launched the Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) network to support and encourage persons with disabilities to become politically engaged across Commonwealth countries.

In 2025, I helped launch the Nova Scotia Liberal Party's Persons with Disabilities Commission to create more pathways for persons with disabilities to engage in Provincial politics and build toward a more disability inclusive Province. Through that work, we've focused on making space for



Hon. Dr. Kevin Murphy, ECNS, served as the former Member of the Legislative Assembly for Eastern Shore and first person with a disability to be elected as Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, in Canada and the Commonwealth.

people with disabilities to share their experiences, shape policy and see a place for themselves to participate in public life.

If there's one lesson to take from all of this, it's that policy works best when it's built with people, not just for them. That starts by making sure every voice has a seat at the table.

For those persons with disabilities and their supporters who want to be part of that work, I encourage you to get involved with the party of your choice and attend your local political meetings. Reaching out to your local elected representative is good, but getting involved in the political system that selects candidates and shapes political priorities is even better.

Our politics is stronger when more people with disabilities are part of the conversation at every step of the way in policy making and decision making.

Historically persons with disabilities, disability issues and disability policy have not been seen by our political systems as priorities. Generally, this demographic has been easily ignored as a voiceless 'burden' on society which needs 'looking after' by governments with a bare minimum of investment and resources. Persons with disabilities and groups representing PwD have traditionally not been accustomed to working together towards high-level common goals would enable political recognition, and the resultant political will. With the advent of our ability to collect more sophisticated demographic statistical data we are now realising that persons with disabilities collectively make up significant proportions of the global

population. For example, the most recent Canadian census data from 2022 reveals that 27% of our population in Canada self identifies as having at least one significant disability which impacts on their ability to carry out regular activities of daily living.

By any political measurement, 27% of a voting population is a powerful cohort that should command the attention of any government, or government in waiting, at any level, in any jurisdiction in the world. Even though persons with disabilities have been part of our populations since the beginning of time, we have yet to see any freely elected democracy give any proportional political attention to this demographic. Nor has any political party truly made any significant efforts to recognise the potential of attracting and harnessing persons with disabilities (and their supporters) for its own political agenda.

Where are the targeted efforts to find and attract potential political candidates with disabilities? Persons with disabilities are noticeably absent from long established and well documented efforts by political parties to diversify their slate of candidates who include gender parity, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and sexual orientation.

There are many clichés that apply to politics no matter where you live, and one of the most basic widely accepted notions is that 'all politics is local'. I feel strongly that the pathway to political relevance for persons with disabilities is to get involved locally with the party and/or the candidate of one's choosing. Politics is complicated, but at the same time it is rather simplistic. If persons with disabilities start showing up at local political meetings of electoral district



Above: During the 68th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Barbados in October 2025, the Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) network highlighted how Parliaments can engage with local communities on disability inclusion during a town hall event in Bridgetown. The CPwD Regional Champions and delegates examined how Parliaments can engage with civil society and representative organisations in shaping inclusive public policy.

associations, campaign rallies and reaching out to candidates themselves, this creates opportunities to raise awareness of disability issues and opportunities for those associations and candidates. For example, just by showing up and being visible, the political machinery will recognise basic things like our meeting locations are not wheelchair accessible or we need to find ways to overcome communication barriers for people with vision or hearing losses to participate in political meetings. Never underestimate the power of your presence to inspire and facilitate systemic change.

Once people with disabilities start showing up at local political meetings in numbers that can't be ignored, political party organisers, powerbrokers and decision-makers will then begin to better understand what issues are important to the demographic of persons with

disabilities. This then opens the door for the inclusion of disability priorities in policy development and decision-making which will make its way up the political food chain to election platforms and government policy. The natural evolution of increased participation by persons with disabilities is that natural leaders from the disability community will emerge and begin to seek opportunities to occupy leadership positions, and from that group potential candidates will be recognised and tapped by political parties in an effort to curry political favour amongst this increasing, long-ignored global demographic.

Then, and only then will we see governments truly create policies, programmes and legislation that truly empower, enable and support persons with disabilities to become full participants in all aspects of our society.