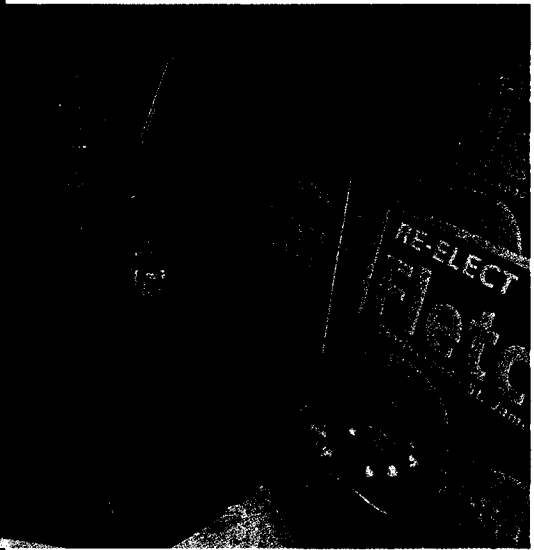


NEW MOBILITY

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All photos courtesy of the Canadian House of Commons

BACK IN 1996, STEVEN FLETCHER, working as a mining engineer, was driving to work at a Manitoba gold mine when his car struck a moose, injuring his cervical spine. Doctors told Fletcher that, if he survived, he should expect to live in an institution. He was 23 years old, just a year out of university. “The prospect of spending the rest of your life in a senior’s home is not at all what you want to hear,” he says, with typical understatement. Today Fletcher takes pleasure in revisiting that prediction. “I don’t think they thought the institution would be the Parliament of Canada,” he says.

The Parliament of Canada is indeed where Fletcher earns his living. A member of the Conservative party, Steven Fletcher has represented the Charleswood-St.James-Assiniboia district of his home province of Manitoba since 2004. When the Conservatives were in opposition, Fletcher was the health critic, part of the shadow government that reviews the administration (called the government). When his party was elected to a minority government in 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper appointed Fletcher parliamentary secretary to the minister of health.

As a C4 complete quad who uses a headrest-controlled chair and requires around-the-clock assistance, Fletcher’s presence in Parliament has been an ongoing education both to his colleagues and the public.

Following his accident and a long recovery, it was Fletcher’s experience with the health care system that led him to public service. “I was struck by the fact that in Canada, on one hand we save people from catastrophe, but on the other hand, we don’t provide the resources to allow those people to live meaningful and dignified lives.”

He recently helped bring about a \$30 million federal commitment to an SCI initiative spearheaded by the Rick Hansen Foundation. (Hansen is probably the best-known disability advocate in Canada.) He helped craft a wait-time guarantee — the length of

Steven Fletcher:

SUCCESS ON AN UPHILL CLIMB

BY LAURA
KAMINKER

time people wait to access specialized health services, a central issue in Canada — and has championed national strategies for cancer, cardiovascular disease and chronic disease management, among other health-related proposals. Fletcher believes he brings “a perspective to health care that had not existed at the federal level before.”

Yet, Fletcher points out, “I am one level of government removed from what I faced in the hospital,” says Fletcher. The famous Canadian public health care system is administered by the provinces. Although the federal Canada Health Act mandates standards and guidelines, health care is paid for and delivered at the provincial level [see sidebar for more on the Canadian political system].

You can't really all stand up, can you?

After his election to Parliament, Fletcher quickly realized that other members of Parliament, and the media, had very little personal experience with disability. “The people who are passing the laws, and the people reporting on those laws, have no first-hand knowledge. And we wonder why there are so many barriers for people with disabilities.”

Fletcher's stories about the ignorance he encountered veer between comical and pathetic, and sometimes border on surreal. There was the time he took his family on a tour of the House of Commons, then emptied for summer. It's hard to imagine a prouder moment. A senator, recognizing Fletcher, came over to greet him. “When he saw that I couldn't shake hands, he patted me on the head. Right in front of my parents.” Fletcher immediately adds, “He meant well. I don't think he realized what he had done.”

During the 2006 election campaign,

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, then the opposition leader, chose Fletcher's office for a pivotal campaign announcement on the wait-time guarantee. The national media corps was assembled for the speech, the roomed decked in blue banners emblazoned with the Conservative party's slogan: Stand Up For Canada. When Harper finished speaking, a reporter asked, “Your slogan is ‘Stand Up For Canada’, but here's a quadriplegic. So you really can't all stand up for Canada, can you?”

Fletcher describes it as a “jaw-dropping moment. Everyone was just speechless. This is part of the national press corps! And that's the world in which we live.”

As much as these incidents — and there were many of them — stung, Fletcher understands his colleagues' ignorance. “Before my

‘What makes you think you can win?’

The road to Parliament was long and decidedly not quad-friendly. Fletcher fought his way through a protracted election process he calls “grueling,” a significant word coming from a man who speaks in measured, understated terms.

There were several nominations within his own party, each contested and hard-fought. In the general election, he faced a superstar candidate with deep political roots — the former mayor of Winnipeg — in a district the Liberal Party had held for as long as anyone could remember.

At each step, people questioned his ability and predicted failure. How will he get to Ottawa? *By plane.* How will he campaign

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accident,” he says, “I didn't give people with disabilities much thought. I didn't know what home care was, I didn't know about the costs associated with having a disability, or the systemic barriers that exist, both physically and through stereotypes. And I was an educated person, I had taken a lead role in many community organizations. Yet I had no idea what reality is for so many people.”

Fletcher connects this back to the institutionalization he was facing. “This is why it's so important that people with disabilities can live in the community. Working, volunteering, going out with their families — participating in ordinary life — that's what creates awareness.”

door-to-door? *With teams.* “And of course — everyone who uses a wheelchair has experienced this — people thought I had a cognitive impairment,” says Fletcher. “They thought I wouldn't be mentally up to the job.”

For the strength to persevere, Fletcher credits tremendous support from his parents and siblings, and his own determination. “Actions speak louder than words,” he says. “The best way to prove the naysayers wrong was to demonstrate that I could do the job, and do it better than most.” But Fletcher's words helped his cause, too. During an interview on a popular Winnipeg radio show, Fletcher created a buzz by skewering his Liberal opponent, saying, “I'd

rather be paralyzed from the neck down than from the neck up.”

‘Draw a little fish without a tail ...’

Fletcher had ample preparation for the rigors of the campaign. After his long rehab, which included regaining speech, Fletcher was told he had three options: to move back with his parents, to live in a nursing home, or to live in long-term care facility. The choices filled him with dread.

Researching other options himself, Fletcher discovered a Manitoba self-managed care program: People with disabilities receive government funds to spend on their care as they see fit. It was a tiny program, and recipients were expected to live in a care facility for several years before applying. It also had not been used by anyone requiring Fletcher’s level of care. Fletcher fought for it and became the first person in the province to move directly from the hospital to an independent living model.

But the program was rife with problems: inadequate funding, massive staff turnover, lack of training. Things gradually improved as Fletcher won his funding battles and forged relationships with personal-care assistants, but he recalls the ordeal in blunt terms. “It was absolutely terrible. I was in a one-bedroom apartment with no bathing facilities. People are coming right into your life in the most intimate ways. And to have new people all the time. ... It is very much soul-destroying. But it would have been even more destroying to be institutionalized.”

Fletcher’s struggle appears to have blazed a trail. The Manitoba managed care program has since been expanded, although home health care services, in general, are still woefully inadequate.

The next battleground was school. Fletcher decided to attend graduate school for a masters in business administration, as he had planned to do before his accident. It was, he says coyly, “an interesting exercise.”

First there was the GMAT, the MBA program admissions test. Test administrators told Fletcher they couldn’t accommodate his needs. And even if they could, wouldn’t it be better if he chose a more appropriate career?

Fletcher took the GMAT under conditions he describes as “brutal,” working with a scribe who met him at the start of the exam. Imagine describing diagrams, algebraic expressions and advanced mathematical notation — without using your hands — to a person completely untrained in the field. “It was massively frustrating, extraordinarily difficult,” he recalls. He scored high enough to attend the MBA program of his choice.

Canadian Politics

Although a national disability act was part of Steven Fletcher’s party platform — in fact, every major political party in Canada has proposed a federal disability act at some point, not just Fletcher’s Conservative party — it’s not clear what that act would, or could, do.

In the United States, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act brought disability under the protective umbrella of civil rights laws already established for most Americans. In Canada, however, disability is specifically mentioned in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Charter, as it is generally known, is the Canadian bill of rights. Adopted in 1982, it is broadly inclusive and nearly impossible to alter.

Yet paradoxically, in Canada, the issues addressed in the ADA and earlier disability-rights legislation fall squarely under provincial jurisdiction. Accessibility and availability of services vary widely from province to province, and from city to city.

It’s worth noting the word “conservative” carries very different connotations on each side of the border. Canadian politics are generally several steps to the left of those in the United States. This is manifest in many ways, but one area of interest to *MM* readers is stem cell research. The Conservative government supports stem cell research, and there is federal funding for embryonic stem cell research in Canada.



At first Steven Fletcher thought he’d vote by winking at the speaker. Instead, he nods.

Once in school, Fletcher recalls, “All my effort was focused on getting to class, which I wasn’t always able to do, because my attendant care situation was so volatile. There were all sorts of issues with equipment and transportation, and I was still weak from the accident.”

Fletcher believes his excellent prior education, especially his engineering degree from the University of Manitoba, was an essential lifeline. “I knew how to problem-solve, and I was able to relearn how to learn.” Math, at which Fletcher had been adept, was now a foreign universe. Doing higher mathematics without writing anything down or drawing a diagram became one of his most formidable challenges.

Working with scribes was the definition of frustration. “I’m trying to explain what an alpha is. I can’t show them, so I’m saying, ‘OK, draw a little fish swimming to your left, and don’t worry about the tail’ — or what a beta is, ‘OK, write a “b” with a bit of a tail at the end.’”

During one timed test, Fletcher recalls the teeth-gritting exercise explaining how to fill in the answer sheet. He says poignantly, “I was so intimidated. I’m in a class full of exceptionally bright people, and I can’t even fill out the bubble sheet.”

From his office in Ottawa, Fletcher reflects on having made it to his present position. “Someone told me that I’m the only person with this type of injury to be elected on the federal level, not just in Canada, but anywhere,” he says. Since then, he’s been joined by U.S. Rep. Jim Langevin, who is also a quad. “I was really taken aback. I mean, this is the 21st century. But thinking of all the barriers I faced, and knowing how many people lack the proper support, it’s easy to see why that is.

“I’m extremely conscious, every day, that the resources I’ve been able to bring together make me unique. I get e-mails virtually every day, and many of them, from people who are in terrible straits, through no fault of their own. We have to make sure the attendant care is there, that the transportation is there, that insurance coverage is adequate to deal with catastrophic injury. It all has to come together before people can live independently.”

‘It would take a very special person’

In my experience as a writer, I see people with high-level injuries who often seem almost relentlessly determined to present a positive picture: always striving, always forward-looking. Steven Fletcher, refreshingly and heart-breakingly, is willing to address loss.

Pre-injury, Fletcher had been an avid wilderness canoeist. Driving a few hours from his Winnipeg home, he could put his canoe in

the water and stay away for days or weeks. “That was my passion,” Fletcher says, his voice thick with emotion.

Fletcher has competed in sip-and-puff sailing and has used a TrailRider, an adaptive vehicle that allows wheelchair users to go backcountry hiking [developed by fellow Canadian quad and mayor of Vancouver, B.C., Sam Sullivan — see “Sam Sullivan: Still Reaching,” August 2006]. He’s helped bring both disabled sailing and the TrailRider to Manitoba. Despite this, he says, nothing fills the void. “To this day, I get teary-eyed when I see photographs of people experiencing the joys of the Canadian wilderness. I’m very grateful that I have those memories. A lot of nondisabled people don’t take advantage of the Canadian outdoors. But for me, it was a major blow.”

Fletcher also wonders about his ultimate life goal, which has nothing to do with politics. “If one day, I could be half the father to my own children as my dad was to me, I would consider my life a success.” Fletcher, who is single, doesn’t see this on the horizon, at least not now. “It would take a very special person to voluntarily enter this world of quadriplegia. Those people exist. I know people with similar injuries who met their mates post-injury. I just haven’t been that fortunate.”

‘Tell them brain waves ...’

In the Canadian Parliament, Members vote by standing, in the British tradition. When I tell Fletcher that a friend wanted me to ask how he votes, he replies, “People ask me that all the time. Before I was elected, I thought I would wink at the speaker. But then I found out the speaker doesn’t like to be winked at.” So he nods.

When I ask him how he controls his chair — sip and puff? tongue-touch keypad? — he says that’s a familiar question, too. “Tell your readers it’s brain waves.” When I tell Fletcher that *NM* readers won’t fall for that, he replies, “I’ve gotten a lot of mileage off that joke. I’ve had world leaders say, ‘Really?’”

That humor, quintessentially Canadian, has helped keep Fletcher afloat.

My favorite story takes place in Health Committee, during the previous Liberal government. Frustrated that then-Minister of Health Ujjal Dosanjh wasn’t answering his questions, Fletcher challenged Dosanjh to “take it outside.” Rising to the occasion, Dosanjh quipped in return, “I’m not a physical kind of guy.”

To which Fletcher responded, “Neither am I. But don’t be surprised if you find yourself with tire marks.”