

BEYOND BARRIERS: ARTS ACCESSIBILITY
ARTS ACCESSIBILITY NETWORK OF MANITOBA

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Thank you for inviting me to speak tonight – it is always a treat to talk about art, about working conditions for artists, and about the presentation of their work. To do so in Winnipeg, among our artists, is a particular joy for me, as it is to celebrate the work created here and shown here, across Canada and internationally. Winnipeg has been a creative hub for the visual arts for well more than a century and it continues to be so! I applaud the many milestones and broken barriers achieved by those of you in the room, and those not able to be here tonight, both past and present!

Tonight's is a BIG topic, Beyond Accessibility: Arts Accessibility, and in the time we have one for which I can only scratch the surface – and please, I am happy to respond to questions and concerns and shift my talking points as we go.

First though – I AM here as a Manitoba Senator and one who comes from the visual arts – indeed the first to come from a gallery directorship and art history background. When asked by the Prime Minister to take a seat in the Senate he said I was to work on everything, review all legislation, was not required to vote for the government, but to improve legislation. Our job as senators is threefold: legislative, investigative and representative of our regions and for me sector. The Prime Minister specifically challenged me to do all my work “through the lens of arts and culture.” That is exactly what I do!

So tonight, among other things, I want to update you on Bill C 81. I also want to let you know some of what I have been involved in for the arts and MB, and shine a bit of a light on my work going forward. I am hoping to develop a Cultural Bill of Rights, and a program for, or awareness of, issues of the role of art, or linking art in wellness and healing – more of those projects in a moment.

First, I want to confirm that I will be re-introducing the Bill for a Visual Artist Laureate on Parliament Hill. That bill for which I was Sponsor went through the Senate unanimously. Unfortunately, it met a technical problem in the House of Commons in the last session, so it has to start all over again. Rules of the Senate preclude re-introducing a piece of legislation in the same session, and that when it is re-introduced it must be revised. I have done that revision with the law clerks and I am ready to go whenever we are called back!

I will also be pushing for the implementation of a renewed Cultural Diplomacy Policy in Canada's Foreign Affairs which came out of the study I asked my colleague members of the Foreign Affairs committee to do – They thought it would be a short study – it was a full year! We had 27 sessions and heard more than 60 witnesses and received a number of written submissions. Our report is calling for Global Affairs to be the lead, with Canadian Heritage and Canada Council being part as well. Canada's embassies and consulates have the sites and international local expertise. A day after we launched our report in June, Global Affairs held its first training session on arts and culture for Global Affairs staff. You will also be interested to know that the report also called for re-sale rights for art, and that has now been brought to the discussions on the new Copyright legislation. I will bird-dog that!

Likewise, I will be following up on the conclusions of our Senate's report Northern Lights: A Wake-UP Call for the Future of Canada, done by the Special Committee on the Arctic. It too was a year-long study and it too was released in June. It also involved the arts. Of course, you will understand that a key focus of mine are all issues affecting Manitoba and the Arctic.

Now to accessibility -- My involvement in issues of art, health, and access goes back decades – to the early 1980s when I began my ongoing monitoring of international art/wellness research, to developing a program for the visually impaired at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1982. At that time, my national colleagues criticized me and it as 'jumping on a socialist bandwagon' but after it won national and international awards the initial naysayers were in touch within a couple of years asking how to do it! Much more recently, of course, as the founding Director/Curator of the Buhler Gallery at St Boniface Hospital in 2007, my work was continuing along the same quest for access to art. I know these are small steps – but I hope each serves as broadening pathways for new endeavours and increasing society-wide understanding.

Everybody has the right of access to the arts – for artists in their practice and audiences in their participation and enjoyment. Bill C-81, the Federal Accessibility Act, moved Canada’s accessibility needle forward, but the reality is that both visible and invisible challenges continue to abound for creators, presenters and viewers.

Artists inspire. Deaf and disabled artists spark the spirit within many by pioneering new pathways in how they create and how we see and understand.

SO why am I here, and why is this such an important topic for me? What needs to be done to move the needle the next steps, and who and which organizations should be taking the lead? How do we ensure that all artists have equal access for their work and for the ability even to create their work? Excellent work and accomplishments abound, but I am concerned that both visible and invisible challenges faced daily by artists are myriad and often mask excellent work.

I applaud the goals and dedication of the MB Arts AccessAbility Network. Your patience, your true comprehension of the issues, and your tireless work in drawing concerns to the attention of the wider community is stellar. And your art is two-fold – the art created about issues of accessibility, and the art by artists, facing barriers, but whose messages may not be about accessibility.

Art needs an audience too and thus both creators and audiences are important. Ensuring accessible spaces for creating, accessible spaces for presentation, AND accessible spaces for audiences is critical. It is the connection with viewers that create the public dialogue and it is that connection which will serve to move the needle.

What does accessible mean? Accessible equates with reachable, usable, attainable, door's always open, gettable. That includes Dignity and Independence, your primary goals, and those of provincial and federal accessibility policies.

Let me quote from my speech in the Chamber on the Accessibility Legislation, Bill C 81 – I said then, and believe it now -- Je suis entièrement d'accord avec les principes énoncés dans le Préambule de la loi "que tous les individus à l'égalité des chances d'épanouissement et à la prise de mesures visant à répondre à leurs besoins, sans discrimination, notamment celle fondée sur les déficiences. ... Et, qu'il est nécessaire d'assurer la participation économique, sociale et civique de toutes les personnes au Canada, quels que soient leurs handicaps et de leur permettre d'exercer pleinement leurs droits et responsabilités dans un Canada exempt d'obstacles."

That participation for all, exempt from obstacles, enabling economic, social and civic engagement, without discrimination, meeting the needs of individuals, includes artists – those with visible and/or invisible barriers.

In the Chamber I asked how many of us have really thought about living our lives in the shoes of others? How many of us, TABPs - Temporarily Able-Bodied Persons – ever considered the impact any disability has on our energies on a daily basis, on our opportunity to partake in events, or even, as my mother used to say, ‘the mundane mechanics of daily life’? Only awareness will change societal attitudes, and that is core to my work.

As Susan Lamberd rightly said to me as the Bill was going through the Senate, “Like it or not, most people will become disabled in their lifetime.”

While I think society today as a whole IS more understanding to a degree as to difficulties and inabilities of others, I am always stopped in my tracks with what I see and hear.

According to a Stats Can survey published last November, 22% of Canadians, 6.2 million people, had at least one disability. Disturbingly, that included 38% of seniors, and over 2 million with a mental health related disability. Bill C-81 states we must rid society of all barriers, including, the “physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, both in policy and practice, that hinders the full and equal participation in society of all persons with an impairment”, including “physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairments or functional limitations”. In other words, any visible or invisible impairment.

I think Arts AccessAbility Network of Manitoba is a national leader in collaborating with community organizations, an objective in keeping with Bill C-81. Isolation is a big concern and often those people are the ones who need support networks and resources, yet their situation often precludes their involvement in extant programs, their challenges frequently neither understood and nor acknowledged.

My current work on this aspect is tied in part to a program in the UK – though I don't like its name, Social Prescribing, I do like its goals, its pick-up across England and its impacts.

Last spring, I met with all the leaders, the doctors, the academics, the social service leaders for that program and I attended a workshop. I am expecting to receive their most recent outcomes soon, and am working to have Manitoba organizations linked with them – so stay tuned going forward!

Let's look at physical accessibility -- how many commercial and alternative arts spaces are actually accessible? Even with an elevator or automatic door, does a lip or step into an entrance become an impenetrable barrier – a barrier larger than any wall – an exclusionary barrier?

How many of our theatres, though accessible for audiences, do not have accessible stages or back stage areas for performers who use wheelchairs? Remember, Bill C-81 only deals with federal buildings – so the push for private sector buildings still needs to be championed! While it might have been nice to have all buildings included in the legislation, I think it was really important to get step one enshrined before Parliament rose so the Bill would not die. Now we can work collectively to expand its reach. Grassroots initiatives will be key.

On another note, how many artists have had their art selected for international exhibitions, yet not been able to attend these important career milestones because they cannot travel alone ? For some it takes two people to travel for one and the costs are well beyond financial capabilities. Is that equal access? No! I have asked, and will continue to ask, funders how they would feel if they were one of those heralded Canadian artists, accorded with accolades, yet who was unable to attend being unable to afford to take the companion needed to make the event possible.

Distinguished Manitoba playwright, Debbie Patterson, spoke brilliantly at last June's Mayor's Luncheon for the Arts. She was inspirational, and so articulate about the insights of being disabled. I loved the comment she made to me earlier this year: "I've been fully able-bodied and I'm now disabled. My goal is to build compassion through a clear exploration and articulation of what it means to be human."

She continued:

“When we think about access, we need to remember it’s a two-way bridge: yes, disabled people need access, but society needs access to the specific skills, insights and abilities of those of us who are defined as disabled. An ASL interpreter isn’t just there for the Deaf people, they’re translating for all of us. Universal access gets us all on the same team. We all need to move forward together.” She also opined about the fear of becoming disabled and the divisive qualities of fear.

Professional actress, Elizabeth Morris is deaf. She wrote her OCAAD MA thesis on design for accessibility and has performed at Stratford, was a member of the National Theatre of the Deaf in the US, has led numerous workshops with theatres internationally, consulted in Deaf culture for live theatre and television, and this past spring performed in *The Tempest* at Banff Centre.

Given the international career of this Canadian arts ambassador, I had hoped she could be a witness for our Foreign Affairs and International Trade Committee’s Cultural Diplomacy Study. But signing, I was told, could not work with our system of bilingual broadcasting. It was suggested she write a testimony. With all her daily barriers, I could not add one more thing to her already full work and performance agenda. I spoke of that in the Chamber in my speech supporting C81.

I am really pleased that later, another committee, in our new building by this time, DID manage to have ASL in the committee room – May that be a first, not an only!

As I have said in the Chamber, we must find ways to give voice to all with disabilities, and ASL is one important way to give voice. Clearly my mantra for Bill C-81 IS open doors for all. Too many shut in our faces.

That leads me to H'ART – the Kingston arts organization which, since 1988, has been giving participants the chance to build literacy and social skills and engage in music, theatre, visual arts, dance, media arts, and literary arts, all in their fully accessible building. Their energy and positive results are infectious.

Last year I was fortunate to attend their multi-disciplinary performance of *A Gift From Martadela*. Working with professional artists, musicians and actors, the participants presented a truly touching and inspirational performance. Those involved in the visual arts did the sets. Some acted on stage; others participated digitally having been filmed putting toppings on pizzas in the local pizza restaurant. Some danced; some sang; some had significant lines; and others played in the orchestra alongside professional musicians.

Their artwork is uplifting, colourful and joyful; the performance was excellent. That performance will be with me forever.

Many organizations are worthy of mention and the overriding message of them all is the same – More is needed to advance accessible arts for artists and audiences – financially, attitudinally, and physically. We MUST fix those barriers, shift attitudes and level the playing field, ensuring accessibility for all, those with visible and/or invisible disabilities. The impetus for change is societal, not individual. Disabled persons must be considered normal and be accepted and supported.

Senator Munson noted in bringing Bill C81 forward, the cost will be more than overcome by the economic participation of all and their contributions to the GDP. How many brilliant minds have been curtailed by society's inability to give access? What is the real cost of excluding people from contributing? I believe the resulting wellbeing and sense of worth of our citizens will more than repay society.

We MUST, as a society, find a way for all artists' work to be counted as regular employment with relevant benefits, and ensure they have safe, accessible working spaces.

Back to two key issues I am working on – first the development of a Canadian Cultural Bill of Rights, now in draft stage and which I discussed with arts groups the other day and about which I will have another session in the spring. In fact, I wrote it a number of years ago and put it away, not sure how I would use it. I now know! The group the other day supported the initiative. That in turn has inspired me to rework my initial draft and make it stronger and more comprehensive. To that end, I am keen to receive input, so please give me ideas and I will share my updated draft with the arts community here, hopefully in March. The group the other day agreed on some Friday afternoon. I hope to present the Bill of Rights formally in the Chamber before we rise in June, after the Visual Artist Laureate bill is in place.

My other initiative is my work with the medical community, drawing from the UK Social Prescribing program which I mentioned earlier. It is too early for me to detail it, as my research is ongoing, and discussions with a couple of Manitoba organizations are in the early stages. I have also met with groups in Ontario who share the same goals and they have their own study underway. In addition, I am sure you are aware of doctors in Montreal prescribing visits to the Musée des Beaux Arts. All these initiatives will tie together.

From the Senate perspective, however, they must do so from the national perspective, with a national benefit, as health is a provincial responsibility.

I am hoping that as of last week we have the roots in place for a Manitoba pilot project building on various extant programs and soon, I trust, we will tie down our international partnerships on the governance and academic levels. The British powers at be are keen, and the potential partners here are interested. They want to pair me with a member of the House of Lords – a Paralympian, colleague and friend of Senator Petitclerc, our Paralympian chair of our Social Affairs Committee. The concept is exciting and complex and the initial British results are inspiring. They underline many positive impacts, especially for those who are isolated and suffering from depression and/or mental health issues.

The understanding and importance of that vibrancy and of the arts throughout society as a whole is the larger picture I seek to convey through my work in the Senate –along with fair and equitable access for audiences of all backgrounds and diversities, and with fair and equitable support for artists, financial, safe working conditions, benefits and training. That is exactly what I was in Cape Dorset 2 weeks ago.

I think many of you have seen my octopus showing the key societal issues at every level of government and the essential role the arts play in dealing with each of them. My research over the decades proves that role both anecdotally and statistically.

SO what next? How do I intend to follow up with the next stages of C 81? I will continue to present the issues whenever I can – I will continue to develop the art and health piece, and the Cultural Bill of Rights – and I will continue to press for physical access to studios and buildings for both artists and audiences, and I will continue to press for funding to deal with the inequities faced by artists facing barriers.

I need your thoughts, concerns and insights though. Please continue to feed me with your ideas and the areas to which I, as a Manitoba Senator, might be able to give voice on your behalf. Also encourage your colleagues from across the country to be in touch too – I have met with many arts groups and artists wearing my Senate hat – I hear concerns and dreams of many and every meeting I have had has been of real value to me. I should say, the only groups that I have not had representatives from are art galleries!

The Days on Hill, where organizations fan out to members of the House of Commons and Senate ARE important – they DO create awareness and the more colleagues of mine who have a sense of the realities, the easier it will be for me to bring ideas forward– so please help me!

AND MOST OF ALL KEEP MAKING ART! And as I have said ever since I began my gallery career, now more than 50 years ago, I AM keen to go to studios – STILL – Studio visits ground me in my present work! But I won't go uninvited!

Thank you all –

Now I think we have time for questions or comments – this is YOUR evening!

STATS:

So, what are those contributions? In 2008, the Conference Board of Canada concluded:

The health of that culture economy, and therefore the future economic health of Canada, depends on having a large and diverse pool of professional artists at the very heart of the economy.

For me a truly worrying continuing trend is that of income for artists and their working conditions.

- Canadian artists earn 39% less than the overall labour force average

- Sadly, 15% of artists either have no earnings or lose money on their self-employment activities; 27% earn less than \$10,000, and 18% earn between \$10,000 and \$19,999.
- The number of Artists with a BA or higher is nearly double that of the whole workforce, 44% versus 25%, and on average, they earn 55% less than other workers with the same education level
- Women artists earn 31% less than their male counterparts.
- The 2010 poverty line was measured at \$22,133.

SLIDES – these three artists' works should be on the national awareness scale – regardless of their physical and/or mental challenges!

I want to close with the work of two deceased Victoria artists – one born in Vienna, the other in Winnipeg. Both had several mental health issues which were not understood, or perhaps if understood, at the time there was not the openness or supports to deal with them. The work of both artists should, in my view, be acclaimed nationally, as should the work of many members in Arts AccessAbility Network – The two are Richard Ciccimarra, and Bob de Castro. They both suffered

from depression – the former committed suicide; the latter had long periods of self-imposed isolation.

Of course, our own Ted Howorth, just one artist with physical challenges -- now wheel-chair bound he is certainly one of Winnipeg's art stars ---

What has to be done to ensure accessibility for and to their work? Pat Bovey's lecture will celebrate positive action and the transformative power of artistic achievement.