

**Presentation to the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development
Regarding Bill 26, The Accessibility for Manitobans Act – October 29, 2013
Rob McInnes, Partner, Diversity World**

My name is Rob McInnes. As Bill 26 is in this final stage of revision, I am thankful for this opportunity to share these reflections with you. In making this presentation, I am speaking on behalf of Diversity World - a small training and consulting company that my wife and I established about a decade ago. While residing in Winnipeg, we are engaged in workforce diversity issues, particularly as they affect people with disabilities, throughout North America.

Primarily, I want to address what I perceive to be some hesitancy in the Bill as it stands, some reluctance to stand tall, some posturing to avoid feather-ruffling some giving in to "politefulness" instead of "rightfulness". In that context, I want to encourage you, rather, to truly "seize the day". Bill 26 is enjoying a unique point in history where brilliant, well-positioned and committed Manitobans, both within the government and from the public, have been able to work long and hard to craft it – and where it enjoys strong non-partisan support from all major parties. This moment in time, this "perfect storm", has not been seen before and may never be seen again.

It is imperative, and incumbent on all who have any remaining degree of influence, to make the very most of this occasion, to take full advantage of this once in a lifetime, perhaps once in a century, opportunity.

If passed as it currently stands, Bill 26 will assuredly earn a place in history as a memorable event in the advancement of human rights and the human experience of Manitobans with disabilities. However, the important thing for us to consider today, at this time and place, is that this is not all it can be. It can be more and we should aspire for more. We have an obligation make Bill 26 as strong and impactful as we possibly can. Strengthening Bill 26 with purposeful timelines and non-compliance penalties can position it not just as a "contributing factor", but as The defining act, The watershed event that effectively turns the tide in what Manitobans with disabilities can expect from living a life in our province. We are toying with legislation which, enhanced only slightly, could well stand as the de facto emancipation Act for Manitobans with disabilities.

While the Accessibility for Manitobans Act is a fine name, Bill 26 is much more than simply an "Accessibility Act", it is a Citizenship act. In effect, it is fundamentally redefining how Manitoba views its citizens with disabilities. It is a radical reframing of the social contract that underpins the lives experienced by Manitobans with disabilities. It is a bold about face - from exclusion to inclusion.

We need to get it right the first time. Too many lives are in the balance. It will likely be many years before this Act will be revisited in a meaningful way. What we do

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now, what we put forward now and what is passed now will govern the life experience of thousands and thousands of Manitobans for years to come – those of us living with a disability now, those of us who will be acquiring disabilities, and those who, with disabilities, will be born into our families.

I lived in the United States for over a decade and saw first-hand what real social change can be brought about by effective legislation. The Americans with Disabilities Act was not apologetic. It did not ask for change, it demanded it. And change happened. Those businesses and institutions that welcomed change, welcomed the ADA - and made changes. Those businesses and institutions that resisted change, opposed and resisted the ADA – and made changes. Welcoming or resistant... it didn't matter. They all made changes. The ADA was not designed to encourage change. It was designed to make change.

Let's design the Accessibility for Manitobans Act to make change!

The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law on July 26, 1990. That was 23 years ago. After more than two decades, the ADA is still widely-celebrated throughout the United States every July - through gala events, public gatherings, award ceremonies and more. A Google inquiry for "Americans with Disabilities Act-celebration – 2013" resulted in 288,000 references. Why? Because whatever had taken place before and whatever has taken place since, the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act is still seen as the "defining moment", the game-changing event when Americans with Disabilities won full and equitable citizenship. Almost a quarter of a century later, it still calls for dancing in the streets.

As some of you know, Justin Dart, Jr. was the visible champion of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In his trademark Stetson, cowboy boots and wheelchair, he sat beside George Bush Senior as the ADA was signed into law. His vision for justice and human rights, however, extended well beyond the borders of the United States. Several months after the ADA was signed, I had the honour of hosting an event in Toronto where Mr. Dart spoke to representatives from many of Canada's leading corporations. In a profound speech that brought most of us to tears, he invited us to be bold, seize the moments, and make change happen. Mr. Dart has since passed away, but I know that his invitation is still open to all of us in this room, and I want to read a small part of it...

"Now colleagues, the gravity of the challenges we face, the magnitude of our opportunity, and of our responsibility, is almost beyond comprehension. There is a public passion for profound cultural change that is unprecedented in all human history. This historic window of opportunity will not remain open

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long. Our aggressive leadership can create a dynamic momentum for civil rights and empowerment in every nation. Our inaction, simply pursuing advocacy and rehabilitation as usual, could condemn hundreds of millions of 21st century humans to continued isolation, poverty, and early death... We are responsible to generations of children yet unborn, in every nation, who have the right to live lives of quality. We must unite. We must struggle. We must love.” – Justin Dart, Jr.

I listen to that full speech at least once a year – and always draw important new resolve from it. I have attached a copy of the speech to my submission. However, it is also available to listen to online. This is the link:

<http://www.diversityworld.com/Disability/JustinDartAudio.htm>

Given the enormous impact that Bill 26 will or won't have on the lives of so many thousands of Manitobans and their families, I invite all Members of the Standing Committee to spend a few minutes listening to that full speech. If, personally, you need a good reason to make the Bill stronger, I can almost assure you that you will find it in Mr. Dart's words.

I want to thank everyone, particularly the folks behind Barrier Free Manitoba for getting this monumental piece of legislation to this stage. I hope my presentation will prove helpful as the final revisions are made.

In closing, as I envision life in a post-Bill 26 world, I hope that we will also see annual dancing in Manitoba streets. I hope that we will have found the courage and resolve to give Bill 26 the strength that it needs to do its job. I hope that Manitobans will not look back on it as a once-made promise of better things to come, but as the signed, sealed, and delivered gateway to a life of inclusion, equality, opportunity, and protection.

Thank you.