

First Session of the Forty-Fourth Parliament of Canada

Speech from the Throne

What if? The most Disability-Centred Speech from the Throne in Canada's History



Introduction

It is an honour for me, an Inuk, to open this First Session of the Forty-Fourth Parliament of Canada. I am delighted that this will be the most accessible Speech from the Throne in the history of our Commonwealth, delivered to you today on the unceded lands of our country's Indigenous peoples.

Many Canadians have already submitted their requests for accommodations and those have been provided for. Parliamentarians, for your knowledge, those include but are not limited to:

- Plain language
- ASL, LSQ, and Indigenous Sign Language (ISL)
- Large print
- Braille
- CART/Captioning
- And Easyread

May you remember that democracy depends on inclusion and accessibility.

You may notice that I am delivering this speech from the foot of the throne, at ground level in the house of commons. This is a symbolic gesture. No position of power should be physically or otherwise inaccessible to Canadians. Including my own.

Opening

Let us begin this day by honouring in silent reflection those whose lives were forever changed and those stolen from families never to return from residential schools across the country. We must learn from the past, reject colonial violence, and seek the guidance of Indigenous peoples on how to address the horrific actions of the past and build for a better tomorrow.



Parliamentarians, you gather today at a time of uncertainty for Canadians. You have been tasked by the electorate with a pressing responsibility: recovery. Recovery for all.

Elected officials, Senators, our country stands at a threshold of a new era. It has been twenty months since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic. The advocacy of the

disability rights community, a true constant in our nation's recent history, lands differently now. Disability justice, once dismissible, can longer be ignored.

10 to 20% of people hospitalized with COVID-19 are going home with a new disability. The pandemic has lifted a veil. The reality is that we can all acquire a disability for a season or for a lifetime. It is in our collective best interest to ensure that Canada is a truly inclusive, accessible, and equitable nation. Inclusion, accessibility and equality knows no party line or affiliation, it is a right of us all.

In the months that have passed, people with disabilities have experienced and been witness to many adversities-- discriminatory triage protocols, next level social isolation, higher than average job loss, and increased risks of COVID-19 infections, to name a few. But now, in part, as a result of the pandemic, and the persistence of everyday People with disabilities in Canada, significant changes are taking place. Disability is making its way to the forefront of Canadian consciousness.

Canadians have entrusted the 44th Parliament with recovery. Government will move beyond recovery.

We will have recovered when everyone is considered equal.

We will have recovered when everyone has a home.

We will have recovered when everyone has unfettered access to healthcare, supports, and services .

We will have recovered when everyone has been lifted out of poverty.

We will have recovered when no one is left behind.

We will have recovered when we have reconciled with Indigenous communities, including those with disabilities.

We will have recovered when we **all** have recovered.

An Equal Canada

We must move beyond GBA+ to ensure equality for all.

The Government will apply a disability and inclusion framework to all decision making. By placing persons with disabilities and their families, in all of their diversity, at the centre of decision making, the Government will identify and rectify systemic barriers that will prove to be beneficial for all people living in Canada.

Parliamentarians, you will consider the impact that all policy decisions will have on persons with disabilities. And as a best practice, you will work alongside grassroots communities and organizations, trusting their expertise and knowledge.

Today, people with disabilities are twice as likely to be homeless, to be living in poverty, and to endure violence. People with even mild disabilities are six times as likely to be unemployed. May this be no more. Canadians voted for progress.

Parliamentarians, you will uphold Canada's commitments to human rights. You will work with renewed vigour to entrench intentional conventions into Canadian law including in particular the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. You will resource an ambitious and collaborative agenda for realizing disability rights. This will provide much needed change for millions of Canadians and distinguish Canada as a true leader worldwide.

You will rise to the occasion, and satisfy Canadians' demand for equality of opportunity so that prosperity can be shared by all Canadians including those with disabilities.

We will have recovered when everyone is considered equal.

A Home For Everyone

Government will ensure that all Canadians have a home of their own. You will make history by introducing legislation that recognizes a right to adequate and accessible housing.

Accordingly, the Government will continue down the path to deinstitutionalization. Parliamentarians, you will recognize an institution as any place in which people who have been labelled as having an intellectual or other disability are isolated, segregated and/or congregated. An institution is any place in which people do not have, or are not allowed to exercise, control over their lives and their day to day decisions. An institution is not defined merely by its size.

This new legislation will indeed provide all people with disabilities with substantive and procedural rights to live independently within the community, in accordance with our renewed commitment to the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*. The Government will adopt a rights based approach to disability supports.

When searching for housing, people with disabilities often have fewer options that meet their needs. With a smaller pool of suitable housing to choose from, many people with a disability must accept higher rents.

To ensure that accessible housing is affordable for all, the Government will provide many more Canadians with more portable rental supplements. A disability component will be added to the Canada Housing Benefit and made available through federal / provincial / Indigenous agreements. Further, Government will permit people with disabilities to withdraw funds from their Registered Disability Savings Plans to use as a down payment when buying a home.

We will have recovered when everyone has a home.

Better Healthcare. For Everyone.

Government will radically reconceptualize long term care. Long term care will never again be the only option available to Canadians who require support. Further, you will work with provinces and territories and all interested parties to respond to claims that our medical system has an over-reliance on seclusion, restraints, and involuntary hospitalizations.

You will build a comprehensive plan for mental health care across Canada in consultation with and incorporating the directions of marginalized groups. The plan will include training for therapists so that all Canadians can readily receive mental health care. Disability will no longer overshadow mental illness. Affordable, accessible, appropriate, and community based mental health care will be made available to all.

You will repeal Bill C-7 and in doing so acknowledge that disability is not a fate worse than death, nor deserving of death. You will also ensure that an array of services and supports are available and accessible to persons living with disabilities so that all Canadians can thrive. The Prime Minister will apologize to People with disabilities in Canada for having passed such discriminatory legislation.

Ableism is the belief that it is normal to not have a disability and that “normal” is preferred. Ableism is pervasive in healthcare - and with far reaching consequences. Government will begin to address ableism and other forms of systemic discrimination in part by implementing Article 8 of the *CRPD* which tasks countries with raising awareness about people with disabilities, their rights, capabilities, and contributions, and with combating stereotypes, prejudices, and harmful behaviours, all in an intersectional manner.

Canada will collect better data from those living in “collective dwellings” such as hospitals, long-term care homes, group homes, penal institutions, and homeless shelters. Existing gaps make it difficult to understand the nature of support and its nexus with disability and long-term care, and the general gaps in support across Canada.

We will have recovered when everyone has unfettered access to healthcare, supports, and services.

A More Resilient Economy

The Government is committed to lifting Canadians out of poverty. You will re-introduce and implement the Canada Disability Benefit Act, which will create a direct monthly payment for working-aged people with a disability. You will ensure that the benefit prioritizes dignity and ease of access, and that it will not interfere with, nor create barriers to, meaningful and equitable employment. It will combine with provincial and territorial benefits so that people with a disability don't have to live in poverty.

You will also develop and implement an employment strategy focused on supports for workers and employers, creating inclusive and welcoming workplaces. This strategy will include a significant investment in the Opportunities Fund and Workforce Development Agreements to substantially increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities. In addition, this strategy will find permanent funding for successful programs that achieve outcomes of employment for people with disabilities. The strategy will support people to enter the workforce, do real work for real pay, and advance in their careers.

Parliamentarians, with an increased reliance on the internet to access services, work remotely and attend school, rural communities and people with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the digital divide. You will ensure that companies accelerate the roll-out of their broadband projects and of accessible communications initiatives, contributing to economic growth and the wellbeing of Canadians.

Government will modernize eligibility for the Disability Tax Credit and other federal programs by adopting the Accessible Canada Act definition of disability, streamlining the application processes, and reducing other barriers to access. Access to federal programs and benefits will not be dependent on filing an annual tax return, and all application fees to access federal benefits will be paid by the government.

You will enhance the Child Disability Benefit by increasing the benefit amount, raising the threshold at which the benefit starts to be reduced, and working with provinces and territories to prevent clawbacks.

The Government will continue to invest in inclusive and accessible childcare and fill gaps in retirement savings that build up over time when people (often parents) limit their involvement in the workforce to provide support to a person with a disability.

We will have recovered when everyone has been lifted out of poverty.

Emergency Response

Parliamentarians, when people and systems are stressed, the most marginalized fall through the cracks - including many of the 22% of Canadians who identify as having a disability.

Persons with disabilities belong to one of the most disproportionately affected populations in situations of disaster, conflict, or emergency. There is certainly international evidence that COVID-19 presents a more significant risk to this population.

While persons with disabilities legally have the same rights in high risk situations as everyone else, in practice they are often excluded from emergency responses

through lack of information, accessibility, and reasonable accommodation. In fact, these situations often result in an increase in disability.

We know that during situations of emergency, negative attitudes and violence towards persons with disabilities can escalate.

Going forward, the government will learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and will ensure that hospital triage protocols and guidelines are inclusive, equitable, transparent, and grounded in an ethical process that is based on human rights and informed by lived experience. Health care providers involved in the critical care triage process will also receive training to reduce the risk of discriminatory bias.

Government will also ensure that transparent and clear information is provided to all people in Canada in accessible formats including but not limited to plain language, ASL, LSQ, and ISL, Cart/Captioning, and braille.

We're living through a global emergency and this will not be the last. Government will put in place frameworks to manage future emergency scenarios that are inclusive and attentive to this reality. Indeed, as we work to prevent climate change, the Government will also prepare for worst case scenarios by working to ensure that people with disabilities are never left behind.

We will have recovered when no one is left behind.

Conclusion

Honourable Members of the Senate and Members of the Commons, we know that COVID 19 has had serious impacts on people with a disability and their families. The pandemic has greatly exacerbated problems that already existed - problems like discrimination, isolation and segregation, gaps in inclusive education, unemployment and poverty, and barriers to healthcare.

Parliamentarians: Canadians are counting on you to fight climate change, strengthen the middle class, walk the road of reconciliation, keep Canadians safe and healthy, and position Canada for success in an uncertain world.

You will finish work on the Canada Disability Benefit.

You will build an employment strategy for People with disabilities in Canada . You will consult on and fully implement a Disability Inclusion Action Plan.

You will hire 50,000 personal support workers and raise their wages and you will work quickly to finalize National Occupational Standards for Personal Care Providers.

You will purposefully build accessible spaces and communities.

You will deliver \$10 a day **inclusive** childcare within five years.

And you will make the Canada Caregiver Credit refundable and tax-free. Because we will only have recovered when we **all** have recovered.

Honourable Senators and Members of the House of Commons, you are the holders of a profound trust reposed in you by Canadians.

May you be equal to that trust in all things and may disability inclusion guide you in your deliberations.