

Mike Harcourt

Federal Commissioner on the British Columbia Treaty Commission; Honourary Chair of the International Centre for Sustainable Cities; Co-Chair of the UN-HABITAT World Urban Forum III Advisory Committee; and Chair of the Spinal Cord Injury Quality of Life Advisory Group

CLASS OF 1968



Some say it was after a spinal cord injury that left him bereft of virtually all physical capabilities that American actor Christopher Reeve became a real-life Superman. His personal journey inspired thousands of others, and his public activism helped convince the US government to pass legislation on behalf of America's disabled community.

In 2002, Michael Harcourt fractured mid-neck vertebrae C6 and C7 in a 20-foot fall from the deck of his Pender Island home. The accident left him a partial quadriplegic, but because the fractures were incomplete, six hours of surgery meant he might not have to spend his life in a wheelchair. His first question to his surgeon when he awoke was how he could use the experience to help other people. The question has made him an unlikely superhero, both before the accident and after.

After winning a seat on Vancouver's city council as a candidate for the Elector's Action Movement Team in 1972, Harcourt held some form of office for most of the next 25 years. He was a Vancouver Alderman for four terms from 1972-1980; Mayor of Vancouver for three terms from 1980-1986; and Premier of British Columbia from 1991-1996. In that time, he stopped the construction of a freeway that would have wiped out Gastown, Chinatown and several thousand homes; he became "an apostle for transit, green zones and wilderness reserves" in the words of a correspondent for the New York Times; and he ensured the building of the Creekview Co-op, which included units specially designed for people with spinal cord injuries. He is one big reason Vancouver is consistently voted one of the world's most livable cities.

Harcourt left civic politics for provincial because "the Aboriginal issue was eating away at the soul of British Columbia,"¹ and in 1992 signed the agreement establishing the BC Treaty Commission, of which he is now Federal Commissioner. To his way of thinking, the seemingly disparate issues of urban sustainability, wilderness protection, equal access for all citizens and Aboriginal rights were part of the same big picture, and he had the imagination to be able to envision a better one.

Unequivocally happy to be out of politics, Harcourt nevertheless admits, "I don't think I could be having quite the influence I have now if I hadn't put in my time. Before, I used to have power and immense aggravation. Now, I have influence and no responsibility. Perfect." Harcourt was often criticized by the media for his tolerance of differing viewpoints. But as he says, "It's not enough to have a good policy if it just sits there gathering dust. You've got to make it come alive by influencing others to make the changes and do the transformation. I've seen a lot of good ideas actually happen."²

Harcourt believes that "making things happen" is the basis of being a good citizen, and he started young. He was a student of political science before coming to the conclusion that law school was the crucible that would help him be the change he wanted to see. "I decided in the wild and radical times at UBC in the late '60s that change was going to come in Canada through peaceful democratic rule-of-law ways, and you better know the rules of the game to change them, if you were going to be a reformer."

¹ From *Plan B: One Man's Journey from Tragedy to Triumph*, by Mike Harcourt and John Lekich (John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2004), p. 209.

² Harcourt and Lekich, p. 185.

By second year, he realized that “the laws were stacked against the poor and marginalized and minority communities...and most of the people before the criminal courts were poor people with serious problems.” With the blessing of then Dean Curtis and the help of Professor Jerome Atrens, Harcourt began to research community law programs that existed in the United States as a result of Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty. He returned from a trip to one such office in east Seattle convinced that what Vancouver needed was a proper legal aid system, community law offices and the assistance of the UBC law school. Dean Curtis provided support for all three. After articles, Harcourt set up free storefront legal advice clinics in neighbourhood houses and community centres, involving the services of about 100 volunteer lawyers as well as hundreds of law students. The 10,000 cases they saw each year—and the patterns that emerged—guided their research as well as their agitation for reform, and allowed them to take appropriate measures to correct the law so that it was not so imbalanced against the poor.

Harcourt entered politics for the same reason he entered law school, and then he left politics to do the same work “without all the hassle.”³ He now spends about half his time watching over the BC Treaty process, something he would like to see completed by 2010. Apart from the benefits inherent in addressing Aboriginal rights and land claim issues, resolution could lead to a \$100-150 billion increase in BC’s GDP over the next 20 years.

Harcourt will report to the Prime Minister this spring on long-term strategies for the sustainability of 4,000 Canadian cities and communities. Sustainability comprises “a prosperous economy combined with a healthy environment, social justice, and cultural creativity and innovation,” says Harcourt, and with the global move to knowledge- and service-based economies, the cities that

get there first are going to have the competitive advantage. It’s not just about economics, however; Harcourt warns that “if we don’t act quickly our cities are going to turn into hellholes.”⁴ In Vancouver—just four years away from hosting the next Winter Olympics— it means reorienting the legal system’s approach to drugs and crime by treating addicts and assisting them in finding their way to a productive life; it means integrating an expanded public transportation system with more compact development in order to accommodate population growth; and ensuring that low- and middle-income citizens can still afford decent housing.

Working with longtime friend Rick Hansen, Harcourt will help expand access and improve treatment for the disabled community in BC through I-CORD, the International Collaboration on Repair Discoveries Centre that will be built this year at Vancouver General Hospital. I-CORD will connect several hundred of the best researchers in the region with the international spinal cord treatment community to work together on everything from clinical rehabilitation to reintegration issues.

When we do start handing out medals to our Olympic heroes, Harcourt, Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan and others in the disability community intend to see the gold, silver and bronze going to cities as well—for how accessible they are to people with disabilities throughout the Olympics and Paralympics in 2010.

“He’s making more of an impact now than when he was in elected office,” says Beckie Harcourt, Mike’s wife. “You would think that his time as mayor and premier would be the pinnacle of his career but, in retrospect, I don’t think so.”⁵

³ Harcourt and Lekich, p. 175.

⁴ Harcourt and Lekich, p. 196.

⁵ Harcourt and Lekich, p. 184.

Imagine no possessions, I wonder if you can,
No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man,
Imagine all the people sharing all the world..
