

## Justin McElroy Pt.1 | Discover Stories Episode 63

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### **Jasper Chu** 0:53

So for our audience, could you explain your role as a CBC web writer?

### **Justin McElroy** 0:58

Sure. So, I was hired by CBC seven and a half years ago as a web writer, and since then, my job has sort of evolved where I'm the Municipal Affairs reporter for CBC Vancouver, and that means basically I cover local politics, so city halls, mayors, councillors, rezonings, all that. Sort of stuff. From, you know, the biggest cities, Vancouver and Victoria, to when small things are happening, even to smallest like little Zeballos, which has just 140 or so people on the west side of Vancouver Island. So I report on that, and I do so for online, for web stories that you read at [cbc.ca/bc](http://cbc.ca/bc), for radio, if you're listening in your car, whether you know a news story or where I'm talking to a host for seven or eight minutes at a time, on TV as well. And then, you know, on TikTok, Instagram, you know, the website formerly known as Twitter, anywhere that people are you know, you try and reach out and tell people stories about what's happening in municipal politics in this province that they should know about.

### **Jasper Chu** 2:11

And why do you feel that your role as a Municipal Affairs reporter is especially important because, like I mentioned in the earlier attempt. We have federal reporters, we have provincial political reporters. But why do you think it's important to have Municipal Affairs covered as well? And how often do you think that gets overlooked compared to the other two levels of government?

### **Justin McElroy** 2:33

Well, it's one of those difficulties of just the very nature of local politics, right, where we have one federal government, so one place that you can go to report on it, on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. And so we have, you know, more than 100 people there in provincial politics, there's, you know, there's 10 provinces, and all of them have plenty of people there as well. Not 100 obviously, but people from you know, every large station. But in BC, we have 160 different municipalities, and there's just not the resources available to make sure that there are dedicated reporters in each and every one of those city halls. So number one, I, you know, find it important and a responsibility to take seriously just because there's a lot less people doing it, and it's a place where a lot less stories get covered than on a provincial or federal basis, simply because there's less people around. But the second part is just the things that you're dealing with right? Municipal nerds and mayors and councilors like to say that local politics, it's the form of government closest to the people. You know, federal political issues, you know, defense, environment, the economy, they're very broad, and they affect everyone, but in a very disparate way most of the time. Provincial politics, more direct, schools, hospitals and so forth. But there still is that distance. There it's these hub activities. Local politics is very granular. It's literally what's happening on the land next to you, whether a building can be two stories or four stories or 10 stories, whether a park is going to be renovated or sold or staying as is, or expanded, how the police is operating, and the priorities that council is trying to put on them or not. So it's all this stuff that is really close to how people live and directly affects them in a way that I think is really important and interesting to be able to be at the ground level and see and tell people what's happened and how that will directly impact their lives.

**Jasper Chu** 4:49

Awesome. So what was your experience like growing up with autism until you finished post secondary education?

**Justin McElroy** 4:58

So it was interesting and, you know, it's a little bit of a complicated story, but it's important to give context for folks. So when I was, you know, two, three, four, years old, and my parents took me to a lot of doctors to try and figure out, you know, why I was, quote, different. You know, there were some things that I could do very well, and other things that I had challenges with relative to kids my age. And at the time, you know, my symptoms were thought of by doctors as, you know, not autism, but something that was being, you know, explored, known as Asperger's. But at the time, that still wasn't a clinical diagnosis. That didn't come until I was about six or seven years old, so when you know I went through this as a kid, the doctor said, "Well, this is sort of what it is, and this is how we're starting to understand it as part of this wider spectrum, but we don't have a formal diagnosis yet."

So my parents, you know, raised me and put me into programs and into opportunities that, you know, were adjacent to sort of programs explicitly meant for autistic children. You know, lots of hand eye coordination, speech therapy to fine motor skills and so forth, but without me knowing, and you know, for their own perfectly defensible reasons, they didn't tell me about the conversations they had and the way that they were, you know, informed to raise me until I was in university. So growing up, I sort of, I knew I was, you know, different than the other kids, and I knew that there were, you know, some things, you know, I could memorize textbooks and be the best at spelling and chess and figuring out the transit system for greater Victoria, and knowing all of the stats for the 1996 Seattle Mariners in baseball. But could I pronounce words, or, you know, make friends as easily as the other kids in school, or understand when a teacher was particularly angry with me because I was, you know, prattling on and on about something I found interesting? No, I didn't. And so, you know, sometimes that caused difficulty, but, you know, I managed the best that I could, and was a happy kid, and was well raised, and had, you know, enough of a support group around me. You know, my first couple years of university were a bit of a challenge, not knowing, because suddenly there's a whole bunch of new things that you're learning all at the same time, and new ways that you're realizing that, you know, you're doing things differently or figuring things out at a different step than other people. And it was during university that my parents told me, Hey, this is, you know, what we did when you were a kid." And when my mom said, "You have autism," I describe it as sort of the longest blink in my life where I just sort of like, I closed my eyes for a second I thought about my entire life and just, you know, and it's like, oh, all these things and questions I have immediately make more sense now, with that as a diagnosis or with that guiding them. And so I went, "Oh yeah, okay, a lot of these questions make more sense now. This is helpful and good, and now I can build a better structure for understanding certain things about myself and the places that you know and situations that I thrive and the ones that I have some discomfort." So the answer to your question, you know, it is like it was a bunch of different steps, right? Such that by the time I got out of university, I had a pretty good grounding and understanding of who I was and how, you know, being autistic, you know, impacted the way that I lived my life and interacted with people and the opportunities and challenges. It gave me relative to other folks in terms of going through the same things that we all have to go through as humans.

**Jasper Chu** 9:27

And would you be okay describing a little more of some of the challenges you faced interacting with other people in school? Or is that something you'd rather not share?

**Justin McElroy** 9:38

No, I mean, like, you know, it's one of those things where, like, you know, you—

**Jasper Chu 9:44**

Or just interacting with people, when compared to everyone else.

**Justin McElroy 9:48**

Like, you know, like the, you know, the classic sort of one is, like, making friends, right? Or sort of, naturally getting along with people better. And I was always, you know, struck as a kid going as like, "Oh, they're able to bond so quickly, whereas I feel this sort of like emotional distance where I can't figure them out quite as quick or I'll say something, and they'll sort of react awkwardly. And why is that?" Whereas, for you know, neurotypical people, you sort of figure that out intuitively, right? You're on the same wavelength, whereas for me, I sort of had to like reverse, you know, reverse engineer, where it's like, "Alright, what do people like to do? They like funny people. The funny people have lots of friends. So I'm going to try and figure out humour." And so when I would be watching, you know, sitcoms, you know, "Seinfeld," or "NewsRadio" or "Friends" or whatever, I would go, "Oh, like, that's a way that you can be funny," And so, you know, I would do things like that, right? Or when people are annoyed with you, right? And you're trying to figure out, why is that? And this was one that I struggled more with before, you know, learning I was autistic, and then you search for symptoms. Autistic people often sort of have tunnel vision talking about their own interest. And so once I learned that, it's like, oh, so maybe if some of those times where, when I just go on for four minutes about the thing that I find interesting, I look up, you know, after a minute and try and read their face, and if they're not engaged, move on right, or wrap up the story or try and relate it to them right, which does not come naturally, so you have to, you have to overthink and sort of build up that database in your brain in order to make those interactions work better, or at least that's been my strategy.

**Jasper Chu 9:56**

I see, and you mentioned earlier that your parents didn't tell you you had autism until you were in university. Would it be okay if I asked more about what their reasons were? Is that something you prefer to keep confidential?

**Justin McElroy 12:07**

No, that's fine. Um, basically, it was a, like, a combination of, like, in the night, you know, in the 1990s there wasn't a heck of a lot of support systems available that were sort of, you know, specialized. The issue for the school system is the combination of you only have so many resources, and everyone is on a spectrum, right? Everyone has their slightly different needs and places where additional help would be helpful, and it's hard to craft a system

around that with limited resources, and particularly in the 1990s when, you know, a lot of this was still being figured out, and we didn't have quite the amount of research and language to understand this. So they went, "Well, we'll do the best we can. But like telling Justin won't particularly be helpful because there just isn't, you know, a next step after that that's particularly helpful." And then the other one was, you know, simply to just a little bit of stigma, right? They went, "Alright, well, us knowing this is helpful for, you know, knowing when he, you know, gets passionate about something, you know, we're going to really enjoy that, you know, indulge that and give all the resources. Or when he doesn't quite understand things in a way that we expect a kid should. We can think about it this way, but we don't want to burden him with that, and everything else that might come," which I fully understand, I don't know what decision I would have made in their situation. So, you know, I go the time that they told me, sort of, you know, that midway through university, I go, "Okay, well, maybe you could have told me a few years earlier, or you could have waited, decided to wait a couple more years. Or, you know, in a couple more years, I might have figured it out myself, right?" But, like, it's interesting as an adult, having read a lot of people talking about their experiences of sort of, you know, coming out as autistic, in a sense, or realizing that they are autistic, and like every front and story is different, but a lot of it, you know, there's a lot of common denominators. There wasn't a lot of knowledge. There was a lot of stigma. My parents did the best that they could, and then, like, how it comes out. It comes out of a random way.

**Jasper Chu 15:12**

Yeah, and I think that there is still, like, from my experience in both secondary and elementary education, there is still a lot of stigma around people with autism from personal experience.

**Justin McElroy 15:27**

It's definitely still an uphill battle to try and like, fit in amongst your peers.

**Jasper Chu 15:33**

Like, I'm gonna be honest, I don't really interact with many people. I have one consistent friend, but other than that, I prefer to spend time my own.

**Justin McElroy 15:42**

No, people are exhausting. But yeah, I mean, like, it's better, it's still not great, right? I think part of it is, you know, people are better in terms of, you know, not pointing and singling out in the same way to give you that immediate shame. But there's still the small, you know, the small slights that people will make all the time, or the inability to give grace or patience.

**Jasper Chu 16:14**

Oh, yeah. And like you mentioned, with the lack of resources, I also kind of, I also did feel it a lot in the education system to like there, even today, there's not enough resources to go around to like, make sure people are strongly equipped for the future. One of my colleagues when I was at BCIT actually they did an investigative piece for BCIT News where the whole system of accessibility for post-secondary institutions, especially at BCIT needs to, needs a complete ground up overhaul. You can't just have something separate to accommodate to one person. You need to, like, rethink the entire educational system in those areas.

**Justin McElroy 16:52**

It's, you know, a challenge shift. If it was an easy fix, it would have been done. Yeah, right, yeah. But it's the from a government level and politics level, we're constantly as societies, making judgment calls on, you know, what supports we should give to what people and how much and why? And you know, you look at some of those battles, particularly on in Ontario, although they happened in British Columbia in the last couple of years as well, when it came to the BC government's attempted reforms around hubs.

**Jasper Chu 17:29**

Yeah, I heard about that.

**Justin McElroy 17:31**

Where, you know, people are extremely passionate because it's their sense of self, or it's their sense over their child, and sort of everyone agrees that more needs to be done. Yeah, then it is the sticky thing of, well, what does that mean and what changes as a result?

**Jasper Chu 17:49**

And especially when this, when a lot of these supports are what help people achieve a career that they find meaningful and want to pursue in the future. Which brings me to another question I have, how did autism impact your decision to go into journalism?

**Justin McElroy 18:08**

My parents told me that I had autism after I had been working for the campus newspaper for a year or so, and sort of at that point, had fully fallen heads over heels with the idea of being a journalist. And you know, once I learned that too, it's like, there's overlaps that make sense. It's a lot of compiling of information, it's telling people about that information. You're, you know, it's my new special interest for the day is this thing. It's, you know, there's a focus on both accuracy, but also on morals, on right and wrong, right? The idea is to tell

people accurately what has transpired and when someone has lied or, you know, done something deceitful, that is, you know, something that inherently makes me angry. And so there's you can, especially from a print format and when you're writing things down, right? And it's not about, you know, being able to immediately have the right response to something in the moment, you know, right, based on you know how people are going to react, but like having the time to think over, "Alright, this is how everything happened. And let me think through it and look at all the quotes and go, these are the most important things that transpired. And let me put it together in this package that makes it make sense for the general public." And so, you know, there's a lot of things of how my brain worked. And the type of activities that is inherently pleasing to it, that are helpful when it comes to a lot of the acts of journalism.

**Jasper Chu** 20:08

And the thing with journalism is that it's kind of a way to get the public to think about issues you want them to think about. Like it's not really your opinion, but you do feel, but in a way it also is because this opinion's close, this issue is close to my heart. I'm bringing you the story because I think this issue should be also close to your hearts. Take it whichever way you please, but you get what I'm saying?

**Justin McElroy** 20:31

Yeah, you're the town crier, right? Um, and you get that, you know, opportunity and that privilege to tell people, "Hey, I spent a lot of time looking into this thing, and I think it's interesting. And I hope you find it interesting too." And get to do that on a different thing every single day, I think is also one of the great joys, right? And a way that sort of balances out some of the impulses sometimes that, you know, my brain can have where I go, "I really love this one topic, and I want to do more and more on it." But I also, you know, you go, "Alright, but if you were to talk about the exact same thing for 62 days in a row, most people would probably get bored." Now, by the flip side, you know, a lot of people came to my work during the pandemic, where every single day I, you know, would recap and analyze in real time the press conference from the provincial government about the daily case counts and hospitalizations and deaths, and quickly put together a lot of charts. And some people would be like, "That must be exhausting. How can you do this every single day?" And I go, "Wow, but I'm quite happy to have the exact same routine and talk about this one thing again and again and again." And in that case, it was the thing that everyone wanted to hear information about and get information on, and so my role was particularly helpful, and my skill set was particularly helpful for that time, for telling that story.

**Jasper Chu** 22:12

Because compiling stats and sharing with the public, that's something you've been very well known for on Twitter, and that's something you actually I take, genuinely enjoy.

**Justin McElroy** 22:21

It's right in my wheelhouse, right? [Laughs]