# Episode 17 | Dan Coulter

**Sean Burdette** 0:01

Hello and welcome to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. I'm your host,Sean Burdette. Today we have a very special guest, the Honorable Dan Coulter. Dan is a current member of the Legislative Assembly for Chilliwack serving as the Parliamentary Secretary for accessibility, supporting the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. Dan, thank you so much for coming on today. How's it going?

**Dan Coulter** 0:24

Very well, and thank you so much for having me.

**Sean Burdette** 0:27

Of course. So just getting started here, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**Dan Coulter** 0:33

Yeah, sure. So my name is Dan Coulter. I'm Parliamentary Secretary for Accessibility. I'm a MLA in the BC, NDP government caucus, which I'm very excited about. I, you know, I went to, went to school in Abbotsford, which is just very, very close to where I'm living now, and I worked in the trades, and I was hurt in a work accident, and now I use a wheelchair.

**Sean Burdette** 1:07

Could you tell us a little bit more about your disability?

**Dan Coulter** 1:10

Yeah. So I'm a T3-T4 spinal cord injury. So that's a paraplegic, use a wheelchair. I was injured in 1999 on the job. And, yeah, so I've used the wheelchair now for about 22 years. And yeah, so, that's about it.

**Sean Burdette** 1:33

Following your accident, how did your disability initially change your life?

**Dan Coulter** 1:39

Oh, yeah. Well, so I was, I was fairly young. I was 25 years old. My job was a very physical job. I was in the trades. I was a red seal millwright. And all my, you know, hobbies and passions were very physical, fishing and hiking and, you know, back country camping, all

those sorts of things. So it was a huge adjustment to get used to, you know, especially in my, I guess, mid 20s. So, yeah, it really changed my life. And in fact, I probably, you know, and it's changed it in a myriad of ways, but I probably wouldn't be an elected official had I not been injured. It did afford me, you know, the opportunity to go back to university and get a lot more interested in my community and in politics and really what led me to first run for school board. I was school trustee for seven years as well, and then, now to be an MLA. So, yeah, it was, it's almost like two different lives, separated, separated by an industrial accident.

**Sean Burdette** 2:59

Wow. It really does sound like an incredible transition. Could you talk a little bit more? I mean, how did you go from someone who was in the trades to going right into politics?

**Dan Coulter** 3:10

Well, yeah, I didn't go right into politics. So I, you know, I went through all my rehab and doing those sorts of things. And, you know, I was interested in politics. We've always talked about politics around my dinner table as a kid. And, you know, I used to go and put out signs and argue with my grandparents, as everyone does and and so, you know what really got me starting to think about politics more and really caring and seeing that it does. You know, government policy does change people's lives, materially, right? And really affects people's lives. And what really made me realize that was my mom used to work at the hospital, and so she was a member of the hospital employees union, and in 2002 or three, the government of the day, they basically reduced their wages by 15%, they basically tore up their collective agreement, reduced their wages by 15% and made them pay the 15% that they had received to that date from the time they had signed their agreement. And, you know, my mom was fairly close to retirement, you know, within 10 or 15 years. And so it was quite a, it was quite a hit on her. And I could see, you know, that really got me thinking differently about politics as well. I went back to university, and I took political science and history. And so that got me really feeling, you know, thinking about politics as well. And so one day, I went into an NDP campaign office, and I never left, is the way I put it. I've been volunteering on campaigns and involved in politics ever since, running for school board, being school trustee for seven years and then eventually putting my name forward in this last provincial election.

**Sean Burdette** 5:07

Right on. I mean, it looks like it really worked out for you.

**Dan Coulter** 5:13

Well, I yeah, I guess you could say it that way. This is definitely a dream job for me. Every day, I wake up and pinch myself. I can't believe that that I'm doing this. And I get to, you know, go into the people's houses, we often refer to it, and speak about my community and my community's issues, and also about things that I really care about, like accessibility and labour rights and workplace safety. And so it's super exciting. You know, there's only 87 people in the entire province who are ever allowed to go into that chamber and speak to the issues that are important to their community. And so it's really amazing. There's, I think there's around 1000 total people that have been elected and been able to do that in the province. So it is, it's amazing, it's an incredible honour, and I'm thankful for it every day.

**Sean Burdette** 6:15

Absolutely. You touched on this a little bit earlier, about how following your disability, you know, you had to, you had to make a lot of lifestyle changes in terms of, like, the hobbies that you could engage in, what other sort of lifestyle changes did you have to make as a result of your disability?

**Dan Coulter** 6:32

I think when I was first hurt, I was in denial. So I thought I could do a lot of the same things I could do. And for, you know, for some period of the time I could, it required a lot of assistance from friends and stuff. But, you know, there were some things I could still do, you know, go fishing and do those things. And occasionally I still do that. But really, I guess my hobbies, you know, went more towards politics really. I mean, politics is my hobby and my job, both at the same time. So if I'm not, if I'm not doing this, then I'm, you know, reading about politics. I, you know, reading books about politics, listening to podcasts about politics, etc. So, yeah, I would say it's both my hobby and my job right now. And actually, no, I do, I always play it down. But I do, you know, I do have a shop, and I like to, I have a welder. I used to be a B ticketed welder as well. Well, not used to be, I guess I still have a B ticket welding certification, and so I like to go to into my shop. And even if I'm not creating, like little projects, I like to just weld bits of steel together. It doesn't sound like fun, maybe when you put it that way, but it is a lot of fun.

**Sean Burdette** 7:57

No, I absolutely get it, I can see it being very cathartic. Moving on to just the current day now, what are your current responsibilities as the Parliamentary Secretary for Accessibility?

**Dan Coulter** 8:12

Well, my current responsibilities as the Parliamentary Secretary for accessibility is that my job is to is to make sure that people understand the Accessible BC Act, as well as making sure that legislation is the most effective it can be. As you know, we passed accessibility legislation in June of this year, and so now it's enabling legislation. So now our work is to basically fill out the standards and regulations in that legislation. And so, you know, most of the work is ahead of us, but it's very exciting work, and it's, you know, it's starting to move as well as my other responsibility is to consult on the building codes. We're going to have a new iteration of the building codes. And so my my job is to consult on how to make the building codes more accessible. And because, you know, we want British Columbia to be the most accessible province in the country.

**Sean Burdette** 9:23

Absolutely. So to that and what sort of changes is the government enacting to bare the lives of individuals with disabilities?

**Dan Coulter** 9:32

Well, you know, as far as the Act is concerned, it's an enabling Act. So it only enables the province to begin developing standards and regulations, and so we're beginning that work in other jurisdictions where they have accessibility legislation, which ours is patterned off of a standard in an area says that, such as the built environment or customer service or something, can take up to two years. Us, although our legislation does have the opportunity where we can adopt standards from other jurisdictions if they make sense for BC. So you know that work's beginning, but at the same time, our government is focused on identifying, removing and preventing barriers for folks' participation, meaningful and full participation in their communities. And so, you know, we're doing things such as, you know, this year, we gave, gave Small Business BC $3.8 million to give to small businesses so that they could make their businesses more accessible workplaces. So you know, and the Ministry of Environment has made our parks more accessible. We have now have, for instance, just next door to my community, we have cabins at Cultus Lake, that are more accessible, that are actually, you know, wheelchair, mobility aid friendly. They've made accessible outhouses, washrooms just up the highway for me, as well, Parks Canada. You know, the Ministry of Advanced Education is doing great work to make universities and colleges more accessible, post secondary institutions more accessible. So our government is doing a lot of work on the accessibility front. But at the same time, we're very excited about this legislation. We really think this legislation will be transformative in people's lives and transformative to BC as a whole. You know, like 926,000 British Columbians over the age of 15, identify as having a disability, and you know they have support networks and people who support them as well as you know, everyone's going to

age at some time. So this legislation is going to be important in all British Columbians' lives, and we're quite excited about it.

**Sean Burdette** 12:10

Absolutely. Has your disability influenced the perspective that you bring to your work and how so?

**Dan Coulter** 12:19

Oh, obviously, I mean, everyone's lived experience, no matter what it is, they bring to their work. Mine is a little more, I guess, on point or on the nose, if you will, given my job as Parliamentary Secretary of Accessibility. But it's, it definitely gives an insight into, you know, barriers in our community, and barriers that can prevent people from fully participating in the community. You know, for instance, if I go someplace, wherever I go, I'll circle the building in my car to see if, you know, is there good parking here? Is there curb cuts where I need them? Where's the front door? How far, you know, all these different kind of calculations I make. And you know, in the past, I have gone places and then just turned around and went home because I could see that it was there was no curb cut, or there was no place for me to park because the parking spots were too narrow or whatever. So I do bring a perspective, a lived experience, with me into accessibility work so that I do understand it may be a lot, you know, I understand it in a way my other colleagues probably wouldn't.

**Sean Burdette** 13:40

For sure, what do you find to be the most rewarding aspect in of your line of work?

**Dan Coulter** 13:48

Oh, I just, you know, talking with different groups, disability advocates, activists, is super exciting for me, getting this legislation going is super exciting, and to see other people out in the community, excited about this legislation and excited about, you know, the work I'm doing, and excited that we have a Parliamentary Secretary for Accessibility. It's, you know, people are really excited about that. I guess that is the most rewarding aspect of my work, is just seeing the general excitement about what we're doing, and also getting to talk to as many people as possible.

**Sean Burdette** 14:26

What do you feel has been the hardest part of about your disability?

**Dan Coulter** 14:30

The hardest part of my disability, I guess, is, you know, general mobility. People who use wheelchairs will understand this, right? Like when we buy a vehicle, we can't just go into a lot and start test driving vehicles. It doesn't work that way. Vehicles don't just come with hand controls or systems in order to get our wheelchairs in them. So I'd say, you know, buying a car and getting a car outfitted is pretty frustrating, I suppose, you know, housing can be the same thing. There's a lot of different, you know, barriers and things that people wouldn't necessarily think about unless they do have that disability.

**Sean Burdette** 15:20

Absolutely. Building on that, is there anything that you've learned about yourself, or maybe about society from living with your disability?

**Dan Coulter** 15:28

I mean, I guess, and this is why I'm excited about the work we're going to do. Because I think, you know, society in the past, I'm not saying now, but in the past, has viewed disability or accessibility, making things accessible as kind of an expense or somehow different. And I think part of our legislation is going to be breaking down those attitudinal barriers in a way that people, just, you know, design or build things, or, you know, make life so that it works for everyone and, you know, and that's possible without creating extra expense, right? Just thinking about, you know, how to make things work for everyone so there are no barriers for folks to participate. And, yeah, so I think that's going to be quite challenging, but I'm excited about it. And so I think I've learned about society is that, that hasn't always been the case and so, but I'm excited, I'm excited to to remove those barriers for sure.

**Sean Burdette** 16:44

Of course. Dan, I understand that this is a very busy time of year for you and your team, so I really do appreciate you coming on. Just winding down on this interview, one last question for you, is there anything that you would like to tell our listeners, perhaps a young individual with a disability that's aspiring to become a politician?

**Dan Coulter** 17:06

Sure. So yeah, like, if you're interested in politics, I would say, get out there, volunteer, figure out you know which political party shares your values or most closely mirrors your values, and get out there and volunteer for them. Find your local constituency association or your local campaign office and give them a hand. It doesn't have to be a political party either. It could be, you know, a municipal candidate that you're excited about. And there's always volunteering opportunities for people of all abilities on political campaigns, I've

never seen a political campaign turn away a volunteer, so there's plenty of opportunity, and that's probably the best way to really get your foot in the door of politics.

**Sean Burdette** 17:56

Of course. Dan, thank you so much for coming on. I really appreciate you letting me pick your brain for a little bit.

**Dan Coulter** 18:02

Awesome. No, thank you for having me, Sean.

**Sean Burdette** 18:03

No worries. This has been Sean Burdette on Discover Stories. You guys have a great day today.