

Speech

for

the Honourable Carla Qualtrough,  
Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities,

for the

Canadian Vision Teachers' Conference 2016

May 6, 2016

Sheraton Vancouver Airport Hotel  
Richmond, British Columbia

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*(2016 PASRB 002021)*

## Introduction

Good morning everyone.

Let me begin by thanking the British Columbia Vision Teachers' Association for inviting me to speak this morning.

I saw John Rafferty earlier this week and he said you had cut down his time due to a special speaker, so I'm very grateful for that.

You know, some people come into our lives who leave a lasting impact and fundamentally change the person that we are. Of course we don't always know it at the time. They make us better people, and as children they prepare us for life.

For me, I met such a person when I was 7 years old. Her name was Angelina Minto, and she was my itinerant – vision – teacher. For 10 years, she shepherded me through the public school system, helping me learn valuable skills and lessons that have stayed with me until this day.

## **The Right to be Accommodated**

I remember my mom sitting me down when I started Grade 2 – 38 years ago now in 1978 – and explaining that I would be getting my very own teacher to help me learn to do things in different ways. And to be honest, I wanted nothing to do with this. I was afraid of being singled out – of being taken out of my classroom and away from my friends. I didn't know what to expect – I thought that I was doing just fine and didn't need my very own teacher, whatever this person could teach me.

I can tell you what Mrs. Minto was wearing the first time I met her. I remember her green dress with white polka dots. I remember her cat-like glasses, and the smell of her perfume. I also remember her soft voice.

And what did she do that first day? She asked me to choose a friend, and told me that the two of us would get out of class for a couple of hours, and she would teach us to type. And we are actually talking typewriters here.

Well, I went from being worried about being different to being the coolest kid in class – getting to pick each week who would get out of class with me to learn to type.

This led to a wonderful relationship with Mrs. Minto. I cannot tell you all of the skills I learned – to type, to read maps, to do calligraphy, to use a compass and a protractor.

But I can tell you that I learned some of the most important lessons in my life. I learned that I had a right to be accommodated (although of course I wouldn't have called it that then). I learned that asking for help was not a weakness, in fact it was a strength. And I learned that there was always another way of doing things if you couldn't do something the way that it had always been done – today we call this innovation.

I graduated grade 12 with straight A's and got a full entrance scholarship to university. I was confident and prepared to succeed – and to ask for the things I needed to succeed. And I never looked back. I saw Mrs. Minto several times after I graduated, but I am not sure if I every truly said thank you.

If she were here today, I would say thank you. In fact, I thank all of you for the impacts that you have made in the lives of so many – for the lessons you have taught us, and for the confidence you have instilled in us.

Rest assured that you have made a real difference in our lives. The work you do is so very important

## **A Mandate Combining Sport and Advocacy for People with Disabilities**

As you've heard, another big influence in my life has been sport. I'll never forget the day I took my place on the podium in Seoul during the Paralympic games in 1988. At 17 years old – I won my first bronze medal. Four years later – I won two more medals at the Paralympic games in Barcelona.

I cannot describe the exhilaration – the excitement and the sheer joy of those moments. I believe every Canadian should have the opportunity to find their passion to make their dreams a reality and feel that same exhilaration in their lifetime.

After my athletic career ended – I finished up my undergrad in Ottawa and eventually came back to B.C. to become a human rights lawyer. I had the opportunity to practice at both the provincial and federal levels and became Chair of the Minister’s Council on Employment and Accessibility in British Columbia.

These experiences only further fuelled my passion for advancing equality and inclusion. That’s why I’m so thrilled to be Canada’s first-ever Minister dedicated to people with disabilities.

When the Prime Minister gave me responsibility for my two life’s passions, he told me to go out and change the world. I take this responsibility very seriously.

## **Federal Accessibility Legislation**

As Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities – my main priority is to lead an engagement process on federal accessibility legislation.

The goal of the legislation will be to increase the inclusion and participation of Canadians in society – and promote equality of

opportunity by improving accessibility and removing barriers in areas of federal jurisdiction.

To help reach this goal, our Budget 2016 announced \$2 million over two years to support the full participation of Canadians with disabilities in this process.

This is an enormous undertaking – and it will be the first of its kind in the country.

There's a significant legislative gap in Canada around accessibility and inclusion. While we have very strong anti-discrimination laws, you have to wait until somebody's discriminated against in order to help them.

What we need to do is create a legislative tool that helps us avoid discrimination and exclusion from the beginning.

This kind of legislation will be transformational if we do it right.

That's why we will consult with provinces – territories – municipalities – stakeholders and Canadians of all abilities.

Together, we will make history.

## **Marrakesh Treaty**

In Canada – we're embarking on a new era of leadership and collaboration. The Government of Canada has taken concrete steps towards improving access to information in accessible formats.

I had the opportunity recently to introduce legislation in the House of Commons to amend the Copyright Act.

Once passed, this Act will also enable Canada to be one of the first G7 countries to join the Marrakesh Treaty and to help the Treaty come into force.

The Marrakesh Treaty is an international treaty administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization that was adopted in Marrakesh in 2013.

This treaty will facilitate the production and global exchange of accessible materials for people living with visual disabilities. It will

open up the exchange of print material around the world in a variety of languages.

The Marrakesh Treaty is ground breaking.

And the CNIB led the charge in ensuring that the Marrakesh Treaty remained a government priority.

I actually did a tour of the CNIB in Toronto this past Monday. I was able to see firsthand the technology available today to help the visually impaired access a whole range of information.

I want to thank the CNIB and their entire volunteer network for the important work that they are doing for the visually impaired in Canada. You are so important to so many families, including my own.

Ensuring greater accessibility and opportunities for Canadians with disabilities in their communities and workplaces is a priority for our government.

We are breaking down one more barrier for Canadians with disabilities by allowing greater access to reading material, especially in our schools and libraries. It will permit the making of large-print books; reduce the restrictions on exporting accessible materials; and introduce safeguards to protect the commercial market for materials in accessible formats.

Students will have better access to print materials – helping them continue with their studies and better engage in the Canadian workforce.

Schools – libraries and charitable organizations will benefit from reduced duplication in the production of accessible works.

As a person with vision loss – I know how important the Marrakesh Treaty is.

## **Conclusion**

May is Vision Health Month – and I am thrilled to stand here in front of a room full of so many inspiring people; people whose hearts are in the right place and who are making a real difference.

This conference's theme is Seeing Beyond the Horizon. And that's what you have accomplished. As experts in the field – you have shared personal experiences as well as best practices in new tools and methods.

Thank you all for making sure all children have a great start in life and have an equal chance to succeed – for helping us reach our potential.

Congratulations to the British Columbia Vision Teachers' Association for everything that you're doing in support of young Canadians with vision loss.

And congratulations on this great conference.

Be proud of the work you are doing. Know that you are making a difference in many lives.

Thank you.