Grassroots Politics in Parliament[*]

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I did not know Grace MacInnis personally but had a pivotal moment in my earlier years that was formative and very important to me. I did not know it then but like many things in life, you do not know at it the time, it is only later when you think back do you realize that it was a lesson learned.

In 1972, at 19 years old, I first started in the Downtown Eastside by working in a low-cost food store. That was a year before the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) started. At the time, this community we call the Downtown Eastside was called Skid Road, and it was an unknown area in Vancouver. It was not considered a neighbourhood. This place, the rooming houses in particular, was where the alcoholics, drunks, and down-and-outs hung out when they came into town from the lodging camps, mining sites, fishing boats, and so on. The Downtown Eastside, in this sense, was kind of like a non-entity. I got involved and started working with DERA in 1973 through a summer project called Opportunities for Youth. We started a newspaper called the *Downtown East*, which we delivered door to door in every hotel and rooming house. When I look at those old papers, which are all yellowed and torn, I think not only about how crazy the paper was, but also that it was a great tool for organizing.

DERA had what was then considered a radical idea, that people who live in a neighbourhood have the right to be heard. With this aim, we started organizing, and it was like a

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union. My partner, Bruce Eriksen, is very much an influence in my life politically and otherwise. He lived in the neighbourhood and was integral to building the vision and idea of working with people on their rights, and more specifically, having people speak out for their rights through their own experiences. This is something that sounds very commonplace and easy today, but back then, unbelievably, it was considered radical because we were going up against all the norms, traditions, and power structures in Vancouver. DERA itself was a grassroots organization that had incredible influence on the politics of Vancouver civically; however, this is another story.

When we were starting DERA, our first office was in the First United Church at Hastings and Gore. We had to fight tooth and nail for a big federal grant, and we used the media to embarrass the government until they gave it to us. When we finally received the grant, we moved to our new office, located on East Cordova at Princess Street. One day this young guy, Takeo Yamashiro, and his co-worker, Jun Hamada, walked in and told us that they were working with elderly Japanese seniors. These seniors were returning, after being evicted during the war, to the neighbourhood around Powell Street or what was then called Japan Town. We began to work with what became known as the Tonari Gumi. It was the connection with the Tonari Gumi and their drop-in centre that led me to first become acquainted with Grace MacInnis and her work. I went to their events, and it was there I met Grace MacInnis. She was an absolute hero to them because they remembered that during the war she spoke out against the internment and segregation of Japanese Canadians. She spoke out against their property, fishing boats, stores, and businesses being stolen. At the time, that moment had such an impact because I remember meeting this woman, ever so briefly, never knowing, never dreaming that, like her, I would become a member of parliament 20 years later. She was a very remarkable woman.

The topic I aim to explain today is grassroots politics in parliament. I do want to say that I never planned on being elected. For some people, it is a career thing that they plot out by getting involved in the party and working their way up, but it was never like that for me. It was really more of an accident, and my experience in electoral politics came about because of my involvement as an activist in the Downtown Eastside. When I look back on those early years, from 1972 to 1982, we were fighting on all fronts, and we were fighting life and death issues. The issues that Grace MacInnis worked on are still some of the issues we work on today. This is because we meet obstacles as we make progress and we end up working on the same things as a result.

In those early years, we were working on trying to force city council to enforce its own fire bylaws. People were dying in fires every year because the old rooming houses were like chimneystacks. They had open stairwells, single rooms, illegal wires going into the light bulbs, no way to cook, and all-around deplorable conditions. We were losing five to seven people a year in fires. I learned an important lesson working with DERA back then, which was that a large part of organizing and learning about people's rights is actually understanding the law. There are laws that just sit in the books, but if they are not implemented, then they are useless. Our mission and campaign was to enforce these laws. It was very straightforward.

In reaction to our attempts to enforce the fire bylaws, the slum landlords threatened to close down the rooming houses. They would argue that the rooming houses were not making them any money, and they would threaten us by stating that they were going to close down the hotels and throw people out. We then realized that all the beer parlours—there are many—were all categorized as "class-A beer parlours." The old class-A liquor license states that rooms have to be attached to the beer parlour. Once we figured that out, we knew that they could not close down the rooming houses if they did not want to lose the beer parlour, which is where they made all their money. We had many campaigns to enforce the fire and the maintenance bylaws, to upgrade these buildings, and to maintain a very basic standard of living.

These were very basic issues, and I can tell you that nobody trained us; it was totally by the seat of our pants. We alienated a lot of people, but we also had a lot of allies, and not just in the Downtown Eastside. It was a very interesting decade. We had periods where we were funded by the city. We got some money to hire organizers, but most of the time we shared a wage through unemployment insurance. We continued to battle with city hall and they did not want to fund us: we were too political. The reason I explain my involvement with DERA is because it is where my politics came from. My political views did not come from the NDP per se; they came from working in the community, learning how to be an organizer, and understanding what it means to be in alliance with people, which sometimes results in having enemies too.

Soon after, I became a city councillor, which was also not something that was planned. I remember sitting in Harry Rankin’s living room in 1976 with COPE, and he pointed his finger at me and said, “you're going to run.” I did not dare say no. I remember being on my first media panel with Jack Webster and George Puil, and I was terrified. I was 23 with no training. It was terrifying to just get out there and do my thing, but somehow when you are young you just go out and do it, maybe because you do not know what the rules are.

I certainty learned a lot both in the Downtown Eastside and being on city council. The political experience of being a city councillor is very hands on. It is a much more egalitarian process compared to the legislature or parliament. Everybody has a voice and you could get up and speak because there are not so many rules. However, what always fascinated me is the connection between social movement politics and electoral politics. As I became more involved in electoral politics, I was still very much connected to grassroots politics, community politics, and social movements, yet I could see the big disconnect between grassroots movements and parliamentary politics.

Something that has always concerned me and what I think is a contributing factor to the disconnect between grassroots movements and parliamentary politics is that it is so easy for people to become cynical and to be turned off politics when we are continually fed the message that politics and politicians are simply self-serving. This is mostly by the media, who I think by and large have a vested interest in ensuring that average people do not vote. For example, recall Stephen Harper's actions surrounding voter suppression, which bears striking similarity to what they did in the United States with the so-called "fair elections act." I have always been concerned that there has been an undercurrent of disempowering people, and the poor and marginalized are most affected. The message perpetuated by the media reinforces the perception that nobody out there is really doing anything or cares about the public, especially the already marginalized, and this plays into fear and public cynicism. In contrast, if you are wealthy, you know your class interest and you do not even think about not voting.

When I was running civically, Bruce and I used to top the polls in East Vancouver— every bloody poll. People would cheer. Of course, voter turnout was only 30 percent in East Vancouver. In contrast, in the southwest corner of Vancouver, the voter turnout was 70 to 80 percent. George Puil was topping those polls. He was getting 3000 votes when we were getting 300. This is yet another outcome of an at-large system. It led me to understand that even the notion of voting, which should be a basic democratic understanding and principle, is something that people have become very alienated from. It is partly their own experience that they are marginalized and feel unrepresented, but I think it is also a system of power and democratic practice. The media also contributes to this growing alienation, which seeks to silence people. The media reinforces the message that all politicians are the same: rotten. Of course there are people that are rotten and there are things that are thoroughly and fundamentally wrong, but if we walk away from it all we are giving more power to people who understand how to use it without blinking. We just give the powerful more of a voice.

Social movement politics is very much alive in this country. I have watched it over forty years. Whether it is feminism, anti-racism, LGBT, or environmentalism, social movement politics is growing, and young people are engaged. But to make a connection from these social movements back to political parties and the electoral process is, for some people, a struggle. It is not like political parties and the electoral system are blameless. All political parties, including the NDP, want to win. As a result, these parties have to put all their effort into an election campaign. The challenge is to find a space in the middle and to figure out how to use our influence, our voice, and our experience in the electoral arena, and we have to make those connections back to the community so we can see the community as us and not as them.

When I was elected in 1997, 18 years ago, there was a crisis beginning to unfold in the Downtown Eastside: people were dying of drug overdoses at an alarming rate. When I first started working in the neighbourhood, nobody was dying of overdoses. If there was an incident, it was very rare, but not hundreds or even thousands over the years. I was elected on 2 June 1997, and one of the first events I attended was an event in Oppenheimer Park. It was called One-Thousand

Crosses, and was organized by the Portland Hotel Society and others. I remember walking from Main and Hastings, up Hastings Street, turning left, and going into Oppenheimer Park.

This park, by the way, has its own interesting history. Oppenheimer Park is a very historic place when considering grassroots movements. It was called the Powell Street Grounds back then, and it was one of the main organizing venues during the 1930s for unemployed workers in the beginning of the On-to-Ottawa trek. I have a great book on the first woman city councillor, Helena Guttridge, who was elected in Vancouver in 1936. She was part of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and was also a labour organizer for the labour council. There is a great picture of her, with her black hat, looking very severe and literally standing on a soapbox in Powell Street Grounds speaking to the unemployed.

When I walked down these historic streets, I saw one thousand wooden crosses that had been put up in the park; each cross-signified the death of someone who had needlessly died from an overdose because the drugs that they were taking, either for self-medication or addiction issues, were illegal. Through the criminalization of addiction, people become victims because there are no regulations in place regarding the quality of the drugs. As result people were dying every day because the drugs in circulation were extremely harmful.

In September, I went to Ottawa for the first day of Parliament and for the “speech from the throne.” I had no idea what this was. We all gathered in the House of Commons. It was a very beautiful place: a large room with huge stained glass windows. We were directed to walk down the hallway to the Senate, where we would hear the speech from the throne. I followed everybody out—all 300 of us. While walking down the hall, I noticed that the guy next to me was Allen Rock, the Minster of Health. I introduced myself to Mr. Rock, then told him about the alarming rates of drug overdoses in East Vancouver. I asked him if we could meet and attempt to rectify the crisis unfolding in the Downtown Eastside. He replied positively. I walked away feeling great about the fact that I had just met the Minister of Health, and he wanted to meet with me regarding this problem. I followed up, wrote emails, and phoned his office only to be told that the minister was busy. That went on for two months.

So I thought: what will I do now? As a new MP, I was not really aware of the dynamics and processes of parliamentary politics, but I knew what I would have done if I was in the Downtown Eastside. So, I went down and sat in his office very politely. I said to the receptionist that I was Libby Davies, that I sent emails, letters, and calls requesting a meeting with the Minister, and that I was not leaving until I got an appointment. I also stated that I had all the media outside, but in actuality I had only one reporter from the Vancouver Sun who did a very good story. They looked at me apprehensively, but I was very polite. I have learned that when being confrontational, always be polite and smile. I sat there for a while, and finally they said, “Well Ms. Davies, we’ll be happy to give you an appointment on such and such a date.” That is how I got my meeting with Allen Rock. I started talking to him about what was happening in the Downtown Eastside, and he was interested but did not know anything about it. He had been the Minister of Justice, so he had a very justice-like lens on the issue. The objective was to move drug use away from a criminal justice issue, where you criminalize drug users, to a health issue. That was the big thing to move. I have been reading over some of my old letters to Allen Rock and all the other Ministers that followed him. My letters were especially intense when we were waiting for Health Canada’s response to establish INSITE.

I was starting to learn my role, which was in part bringing activism into parliament. What I learned was that the better connection I had with people in the community, the better I understood what I needed to do. This was a very important lesson for me in parliament, because parliament is a long way away from people in the community. I have to confess that when I first started as an MP, I did not know what to do; no on tells you what to do or how to go about doing the work. All I was really aware of was that I was an MP, in a party and a caucus, and that within these arenas there were all these rules, and it was extremely hierarchical to the extent that members are told when to speak. How was I to accomplish what I believed I was meant to do? I really struggled with this. Svend Robinson helped me a lot. He has been an MP since about 1979. I figured out that what drove me was what was going on in the Downtown Eastside, and I was always moving forward as long as I could keep that in my head and keep those connections. I learned—and this is unfortunately the bad side to politics—it is kind of easy to get sucked in. Ottawa is a beautiful city, but Parliament Hill is a very weird place. It is in its own little world, like a bubble, and in there it is all about who knows who and the politics of what is going on. It is important to keep focused on the reasons for being there, the people you represent, and what needs to be done. At that point, the NDP caucus was quite small, and Alexa McDonough was the leader. I was fortunate that they left me more or less alone because I was from the west coast. Within this context, I realized that I just had to get on and do what I believe needed to be done.

The reason I had decided to run was because of housing. I was so angry that Paul Martin had dismantled the national housing program that we had in 1995. He literally dealt with the deficit on the backs of poor people. He is now lorded as this great Finance Minister who eliminated the deficit, but he accomplished this by slashing the social and health transfers, and ultimately cutting out Canada's housing program. I had been a city councillor who saw the incredible value of those housing programs here in Vancouver that resulted in the development of Co-ops and social housing. When I was in city council we used city land, long-term leases, and federal mortgages to develop social housing. All that came to a crashing halt. When I started working on the Downtown Eastside, homelessness was not to the extent that you see today. People were poor, but they still had enough money to go to the Ovaltine Café and buy a coffee once in awhile. It was not like how it is now where people are destitute because welfare rates are frozen and housing has not kept pace with gentrification. These are still huge issues today.

I decided to do a national tour across the country on housing. I have to admit that I was a little bit arrogant because I was from the east side and thought I knew it all. I thought I knew a lot about housing because I had worked in the Downtown Eastside for a decade and I had been in every rooming house and filthy place. I went across the country and up north into small remote communities where I saw Aboriginal people living in houses that have been built by CMHC, and you could see the spaces between the planks in the wall. They had no plumbing, water, or electricity. I was stunned. At that time, there was also the homelessness crisis in Toronto. The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee was formed, and they called it the unnatural disaster of homelessness because people were dying in the streets. I went across the country and produced a report, and I became part of a movement to pressure the Liberal government who would never admit, by the way, the catastrophe of their decision to eliminate social housing. What the federal Liberal government did was appoint Claudette Bradshaw as homelessness minster, and I will give her the credit for providing the money for shelters. It was the only way the Liberal government could justify their decision to cut funding to social housing and win back community confidence. Becoming part of a movement that pressured the Liberal government on social housing was one of the first things I did in 1998 and again in 2001.

I would like to share some lessons I learned while being in politics over the years. I have learned that there is a role inside and outside the party. Of course, a lot of people would not see what goes on inside, and I learned very quickly that the politics inside, in some ways, are more important than what goes on outside. The internal influence, and the use of that influence is critically important. This is a facet of politics that most people do not see because it is secret; caucus meetings are in camera, and they have to be. However, it is difficult to navigate grassroots politics within internal caucus politics. For example, there are instances where you may not agree with what is going on around you. At this point, you have to ask yourself how to best proceed and to reconcile the urge to speak and the overall well-being and reputation of the party and your colleagues. I can speak on many different issues where I had that experience, and this is probably the hardest aspect of politics that I have learned. In activism, activists are able to go for it all, and if you do not want to compromise, then you do not have to. However, in a political party and a political caucus, there are compromises and differences that have to evolve constructively. You need to know how to live within this context or to get out if it is not something you can stand. I felt that I could be a voice both externally but also internally within the party.

One of the more interesting things I did was organize and conduct citizen weapon inspections in the US. This occurred when the weapons of mass destruction in about 2002 to 2003 were discussed, and Bush was just whipping up the frenzy about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Steve Staples, a great activist in Vancouver then Ottawa, came up with this fantastic idea of doing citizen weapon inspections in the United States, where the most weapons of mass destruction reside. So, we organized this little team, hired a small airplane, and flew over Bangor, Washington, where all the nuclear subs and the cruise missiles are. They would have shot us down today. We initially had clearance to visit the US Navy Pacific Command base, but as we were driving down

Highway 5 to Seattle, they revoked our clearance and said we could not go into the base. So we decided to take this little airplane to conduct our own inspection for weapons. We even had blue hats on like the UN inspectors. We got this huge amount of media, which was mostly terrible because people were really angry. We had touched a nerve. This is where I learned another very important lesson: when doing something controversial and in your face, you have to be very low-key about it. When we showed up at the base, they were all in uniform, and all the higher-ups were standing there. I think they were expecting us to climb the fence. I was the spokesperson because I was the only MP. So, I put on my best smile and said, “We are here to do weapons inspection. Could we come in please?” They looked at us like we were crazy, yet we remained very polite. We knew that they were going to say no, but we made our point. We did it twice after that. We went to two places in Washington to do the same thing, and it was again very controversial. Part of my role as an MP was working within the party, and part of the role was also using my position as an elected member to work with people to get their message out. I felt that I could use my voice and credibility because I knew I was working with people that I trusted. But you have to be careful about the way you go about it. I was very fortunate that the leader at the time, Jack Layton, was wonderful and supportive, and he gave his consent for me to participate in the citizen weapons inspections. However, you can get mixed up in crazy stuff. You may find out that you have been used. You have to be smart about it.

Being in the caucus while keeping connections to the community is a very important part of what I do in terms of grassroots politics in parliament. Building relationships is fundamental in whatever work you do. What I learned in politics is that, if you are honest and straightforward with people even when they do not agree with you, they will trust you and give you space to work. When I first got elected I started by working on the controversial issue of drug use, which was then governed by the politics of fear. Law and order prevailed through the images of drug deals in schools, and the “Harperites” excelled at reinforcing this image and subsequent retributive response. To increase police presence and implement rigid law and order is a traditional response. To go against that, which is not so difficult now, was not a very popular stance back then. I had people in my own campaign saying that I would never get re-elected. I actually did think about that, and I decided if that was to be, then that was to be. But I think that even when it was controversial and there were people yelling and writing nasty emails, it was the relationships that I built with people that continued to give me some space to work.

Another important thing to do is work in alliance with groups. One particular group that I want to mention is the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), which first emerged in 1998. Working with VANDU was a pivotal moment for me in terms of hearing directly from drug users, who were my constituents, about their experience. Hearing these experiences gave me the fortitude to go into those other arenas and speak truth to power. This is what bringing grassroots into politics is all about: bringing the voice of the community into politics and having their experiences inform policy.

A lesson on building support within the party is exemplified in one of the issues I worked on over the years: the missing and murdered women. My first interaction with this issue was in the early 1990s, and Margret Mitchell was still the MP. A woman’s body had been found in the dumpster on Dundas Street. In an attempt to establish awareness we gathered at that dumpster and marched down to the Carnegie Center where there was a smudge ceremony. She was an Aboriginal woman from Sechelt, and her family came down. It was the first time in the community that there was public acknowledgment that sex workers were going missing and were probably murdered.

We began calling for a police investigation on a serial murderer, but the police dismissed it. If these were students or nurses, there would have been an outcry, but because they were sex workers and Aboriginal, it was like they did not exist. They were missing people.

When I started working on the issue of the decriminalization of sex workers within the NDP, it was very controversial. People did not want to deal with this problem because it was not exactly a mainstream issue, and it was not very popular when I started talking about the need to decriminalize sex workers. This was another lesson in how to work internally and not necessarily fight the party but find ways to bring the issue forward. We were confronted by such internal political disagreement as recently as the last NDP convention in 2013, when we drafted a resolution, put it to the floor, and then learned that it was going to be defeated because there was opposition—it is a highly contentious issue. There are some folks that do not support decriminalization, and I recognize that as a controversial issue. So, we faced the possibility of the resolution being defeated. As a result, we decided to withdraw and refer the resolution to what is called the federal council, which is the governing body of the NDP between conventions. We re-drafted the resolution, taking into account some of the concerns that were made, and then we took it back to the federal council where it was passed unanimously. This is because we talked to people, worked with our Aboriginal commission, spoke with our women’s commission, consulted with our justice critic, and crafted the language. I use this as an example to show that we all have different roles. I am believer of rallying on the streets with large demonstrations, but there are these other elements that, unless you have them all together, unless you are working at every level, you are not necessarily going to be successful.

In addition to reconciling the voices and influences within and outside the party, I have also learned that it is important to understand how to implement the rules within the parliamentary process. If you are going to be a successful parliamentarian and you want to get your controversial grassroots issues in, you need to know how to use the rules. I am still learning. As recently as last December, we learned about the issue surrounding the thalidomide survivors. These are people whose mothers had taken the thalidomide drug, and they suffered terrible deformities and health conditions. They had been trying to get the Minister of Health to provide compensation, but the Minster of Health did not reply to them. The lack of attention by the Minister came to my attention, and I was the health critic for the NDP at that time. We could have gone two ways on this issue: we could have blasted the government and made a big political issue or we could have worked within the parliamentarian structure. I decided we needed to find a way to get the resolution through parliament in a unanimous motion. The first thing we needed to do was set the stage within our own party to get us to agree and to follow the necessary procedures needed to develop the motion, because we have only certain days where we can bring a motion forward. We did that. Then I lobbied the Minster of Health and reinforced that we wanted to work with the Minister on the language with the hope of getting this motion through. The Minster was open to the suggestion, and we got the motion through, resulting in a settlement for those afflicted with thalidomide-related suffering. This is an example of how members of parliament can work individually as MPs along with their colleagues elsewhere in the system to get something done.

A lot of work that I have done in parliament on the outside has been lobbying. I lobby the ministers all the time. What I learned in my experience as a member of parliament is that most people have very little interaction with the people in the system, and do not know how it works. Over the years, I have done a lot of lobbying workshops for community organizations to talk about the process and effectiveness of lobbying. I think there is this myth that politics is static or immovable, especially if you are dealing with a conservative government. That is not true. Politics is dynamic, it is always changing, and public opinion does play a role. Mobilizing is done on the street, but influencing members of parliament can also happen with lobbying.

One of the groups that I did some work with was Students for a Sensible Drug Policy. They came to Parliament Hill for several years. We would do our workshops, and they would speak with the MPs afterward. They would talk about their own experience as students with drug policy and why criminalization of young people for drug use was ridiculous. It was their voice, which was so important. A pivotal thing that I learned was that, whether it was the voice of drug users, VANDU, students, sex workers, or people who are homeless, their voice gets carried forward when people learn how to use the processes and laws. Only through learning not to be intimidated by the political processes can you lobby members of parliament, develop relationships, and persuade change.

Finally, life after politics for me likely means more politics but in a different role. One of the most important things I want to do is to encourage young people to run. I had the wonderful experience of being with the NDP caucus from 2011, many of whom were under thirty. I feel angry today when I remember how the media trashed these young folks for being elected. For many of them, election to office was a jump into the deep end and then learning how to swim. The first challenge they met was the “back to work” legislation for the postal workers. We had forty-eight hours of non-stop debate in the house, and I watched these young people as everything unfolded. The youngest was 19, who later became the chair of the ethics committee. The opposition is usually the chair of the ethics committee, and Thomas Mulcair knew that this kid was bright, so he made him the chair. I watched this young caucus at 3am, and they were all on their computers in the lobby writing their speeches and doing their research about Canada Post and “back to work” legislation. I thought, “wow,” this is going to be a really remarkable caucus; they are up for it. I was very inspired by that caucus from 2011.

I hope we can move beyond the cynicism that continues to alienate people. The 2015 federal election is a historical election, and I am not being partisan here. Have your own political opinions, and I will have mine. As we examine the direction this country has been going, I would like to reinforce that we have an opportunity to change the direction and to be part of that change. This comes full circle to my main message: grassroots politics in parliament is really about reaching out, making connections, and forming policy that reconciles community experience with the political process. This is not achieved by forcing people to vote—that does not work. Voting is an outcome. Voting is only the outcome of people who feel a vested interest and a belief that their vote can count for something. I hope as I continue my political life in whatever way that I will also continue to build trust with people and the activism we need. I want us to move beyond cynicism and to empower the voice of people to become engaged in the political process in whatever way. I want to help people understand that they can influence and change the outcome of what happens.