Interview with the Honourable Steven Fletcher*

DARCY MACPHERSON AND
BRYAN P. SCHWARTZ

Darcy MacPherson (DM): So, we'll start with the beginning. I didn't know, when I started reading up on you to sort of get a sense of your history, that you were born in Rio de Janeiro[1].

The Honourable Steven Fletcher (HSF): Oh, very well said, yes.

DM: Do you have any recollection of it? How long did you spend there?

HSF: Well, I do have recollection. I did my kindergarten year in Rio and I've been back since, as well, on federal government business, actually. I remember going to school. I remember the beach, obviously. There was jungle and little things that kids remember. There was our apartment, because we lived in an

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* Interview conducted by Darcy MacPherson and Bryan Schwartz. The Honourable Steven Fletcher is a former Canadian politician and cabinet minister. He served in the House of Commons of Canada from 2004 to 2015, representing the riding of Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia as a member of the Conservative Party. Fletcher made history as the first quadriplegic and wheelchair user to serve in the House of Commons and in Cabinet. Known for his advocacy work, Fletcher received the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002 and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012 for his contributions to society.

1 Rio de Janeiro is Brazil's second largest city. It is in eastern Brazil, on the Atlantic Ocean.

apartment. But most, you know, tongue-in-cheek, my answer to that question is: I remember the women on Copacabana Beach[2].

DM: Nice [laughs], nice. So, you moved back to Winnipeg … or, your family, I'm assuming, had roots in Canada?

HSF: Well, no, actually. My dad worked for a company called Teshmont[3], which worked on the HVDC transmission line from northern Manitoba to Canada. They became the world leaders in transporting electricity over long distances. So, when Brazil decided to exploit the hydro-electric potential, he was there for five or six years, as a hydro-electrical engineer, to help them with that. My dad was actually born in Malaya[4] during the war and then was educated in New Zealand, and my mom's from Alberta. So, that's how that all works out.

DM: So, your mom's from Alberta. Dad was educated in Malaysia, born in New Zealand.

HSF: Born in Malaysia and sent to boarding school to New Zealand because there was the Malayan Emergency[5], the Communist insurgency[6] in the 50s, and granddad was a POW[7] after the Japanese took the place over.

DM: Well, that sounds like quite a family history.

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2 Copacabana Beach is located in the South Zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and is one of the most famous beaches in the world.

3 Teshmont (founded in 1966) is a company focusing on advanced electric power delivery engineering. They specialize in the study and design of high voltage AC and HVDC transmission systems.

4 Malaya is one of the territories that united to form Malaysia in 1963.

5 The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) was a guerilla war fought between communist pro-independence fighters and British and Commonwealth forces during the Cold War.

6 The Communist Insurgency (1968-1989) – also known as Malaysia's "Second Emergency" – was an armed conflict between the Malaysian Communist Party and the Malaysian government.

7 Prisoner of War.

HSF: Well, it's perspective, you know. It's the story of so many Canadians that we don't ever talk – well, at least in my Anglo-Saxon family – we never talk about any of it. But really, my dad was born in Malaya and was a war orphan. They didn't know if granddad was alive or dead for the duration of the war. They were actually on vacation in Australia when the Japanese invaded. So, he went to defend Singapore – and he also had the option of leaving Singapore but he stayed to fight – and then ends up as a POW. Then in the 50s, the Communist insurgency in Malaya, you know, you come to breakfast with a pistol and go to work!

DM: Going to breakfast with a pistol! I just want to make sure I got that right: "Come to breakfast with a pistol." That's an interesting way to put it.

HSF: And it was normal!

DM: This is remarkable stuff. I mean it really is. Obviously, it had an effect on you, your history.

HSF: Well, we hear a lot about how he was always bitter about being sent to New Zealand to boarding school. That I had known for my whole life. The boarding school is eight thousand miles away, right? Malaysia to New Zealand, that's a long way, but what he doesn't realize – and kids don't realize – was that he was sent away to the closest place that he could be sent to that wasn't, you know, in an armed rebellion or have some sort of insurgence. So, his parents really sent him away for his own safety. And, yeah, you come back on holidays every so often, but he would say ... he casually mentioned to me a couple years ago, "Yeah, I was sleeping and could hear the RAF[8] bombers bombing the Communists." I was like, "What!? What are you talking about?" And, yeah, the Royal Air Force used to go bomb the Communist Insurgence and he was within earshot of that. This was in the 50s. Then we talk about growing up in Brazil and if I could sum it up in one line it is:

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8 The RAF (Royal Air Force) is Britain's military aviation force.

holy smokes, we are very fortunate to live in Canada and to live at this time in human history because you just scratched the surface one generation, like, my dad's generation and there are horrors that, you know, we can't even contemplate because we're so fortunate.

DM: Very true. Is there anything you'd want me to know about your early life before university?

HSF: I loved canoeing. I did a lot of wilderness canoeing with my family, sometimes with a summer camp, or whatever. Three weeks going out on your own with a group, and I really think that is a good thing. It's a good thing to do as a family because, you know, we would go... and actually, looking back on it, I question my dad's... I don't know, it's not child abuse but it was –

DM: His parenting style.

HSF: Yeah, parenting style. So, we'd go, you know, to Wallace Lake[9] and go, you know, 150 kilometres through portages and backwoods and places that not too many people will have been, if ever. We would do that whenever we could. So, from end of April to, once and only once, right at the end of November. We would never do that again because that was pretty dangerous, but my whole family would do it. The lesson there is you'd go and enjoy it and, yeah, there might be mosquitoes and you might be up to your hip in swamp and it might be sweaty and the blackflies will get you and you'll be thirsty and you might be really cold or whatever, but we would never complain. [laughs] Cause, like, what would be the point? So, you enjoy the moment.

DM: That's a very interesting way to look at it, because my family used to go camping, but I say camping advisedly because we never slept on the ground. We always had a motorhome or things like that, you know, or a 37-foot travel trailer. We once went camping

[9] Wallace Lake is in Manitoba, near the Manitoba-Ontario border. It is approximately 175 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg.

after Thanksgiving and it was cold and you were out in the middle of nowhere. No cable, no… and this was long before cell phones and stuff like that, and it was something that people complained about and my dad never tried again. So, the fact that you say, "Well, you just don't complain because where does that get you," tells us something about your approach to unusual and difficult situations.

Bryan P. Schwartz (BPS): Just before we get to university, where you are going to become politically active and you can tell us when and why – growing up, were politics something that you were interested in? Was it something discussed around the family or were there any particular books you read? Were there any inclinations then that you might be interested in political life or political philosophy?

HSF: Well, I read, when I was thirteen or fourteen, *Handmaids Tale*[10], *1984*[11], and *Brave New World*[12] – went through that sort of experience – all the Tom Clancy[13] books. Remember, at that time, we all thought that we were going to get nuked and invaded by the Russians, sometime, but I did score very high on my history. I think it got 100%. So, I enjoyed it and did well, but I couldn't see any economic outcome to that. I was student council president.

DM: In high school?

HSF: In high school, yeah, and that was elected and was contested, yeah. I guess you can blame all those people that voted for me in high school.

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10 *The Handmaids Tale* (published in 1985) is a dystopian fiction novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood.

11 *1984* (published in 1949) is a dystopian social science fiction novel by English author George Orwell.

12 *Brave New World* (published in 1932) is a dystopian social science fiction novel by English author Aldous Huxley.

13 Tom Clancy was an American thriller author known for his espionage and military-science plots.

DM: For the real entry into politics. That's really impressive. Okay, so, you end up in university and you decide –

HSF: Oh, one more thing, which I think is really important. I did talk with my dad a lot about current events and he had a subscription to The Economist[14] magazine, which after he finished reading, I read back-to-back.

BPS: So, The Economist in those days – I think they've gone somewhat to the left of the mark in the last decade or so – but, in those days, The Economist would have been a consistent avatar of free market economics?

HSF: That's right.

BPS: Did you kind of assimilate that to you? The Economist wrote with a lot of verve. It was this place of, stylistically, as well as crossing the world in terms of what it talked about too… Do you think that had an influence in your later political thought?

HSF: Yup. Absolutely. I told Harper[15] that, actually. I wrote a letter on behalf of the government about democratic reform, or something or other – you can probably find it online – but, I remember sending Harper a note thanking him for the opportunity to send The Economist a letter because it was just such a big part of my education growing up. Sometimes, it's what you think is a little thing, but that was one of the highlights of my time in Ottawa. I will remember that forever, because how cool is that? Then five, six years later, I was writing articles for The Economist, which was really cool.

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14 The Economist is an international weekly publication that discusses current events, business, politics, and technology whose editorial stance typically revolves around economic liberalism.

15 The Right Honourable Stephen Harper served as Canada's twenty-second Prime Minister from 2006-2015.

BPS: And that was when you were in university? You were already writing articles for The Economist?

HSF: 2015-2016.

BPS: Ah, ok. Taking us out of the chronological narrative there, but maybe we can come back to that. That's amazing. I guess philosophically it might have been different if your dad had had The Village Voice[16] instead of The Economist.

HSF: Well, you know, that's an interesting alternative history, but he would never touch that.

BPS: [laughs] Okay.

DM: [laughs] Fair enough.

HSF: Well, my dad was born in Malaya and grew up in New Zealand, so he had a worldview and he definitely got me out of the North American belt. I remember, during the Falkland Islands War[17] and so on, that we would get his big shortwave radio out and listen to the BBC[18] to find out what was happening in that conflict. I would sit there, cuddle up with them him, because I was only 10, and listen to the BBC. I was amazed to find that you can listen to broadcasts from another side of the world. Then the next day, the CBC[19] would report it and it was all screwed up and bias. You could see that there was a difference between what the BBC reported and

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16 The Village Voice is an American alternative weekly publication covering news, politics, and counter-culture. It was first established to be a platform for the creative community of New York City.

17 The Falkland Islands War was fought in 1982 between Argentina and Great Britain. It was a brief undeclared war disputing the control of the Falkland Islands.

18 The British Broadcasting Corporation is the national public service broadcaster of the United Kingdom.

19 The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is the national public service broadcaster of Canada.

what the CBC reported. You know, the CBC always gave the Argentinian point of view, which was annoying.

BPS: Just one more thing on this, you "walked the walk" or "hiked the hike" in terms of having this lifestyle in the summer where you would be out in nature and fending for yourself and being independent. It's not like you could order Skip the Dishes[20] if you had a problem in the bush. Was there some sort of resonance between the intellectual perspective of The Economist and the free-market idea that we're autonomous and we make our own choices for better or for worse and how that's important in political thinking and government organization and the experience of being an independent person traveling in the bush or were those just separate tracks there? Was there some kind of a way this all came together for you?

HSF: I think you're right. I was actually provincial K1[21] kayak champion.

BPS: Oh geeze! Wow.

HSF: So, I competed at Canada Games[22] in '89. Then, in the Western Canada Summer Games[23] I represented Manitoba. Then my siblings did the same after that. The thing I liked about… oh this is so politically incorrect, but you win or lose on your own, right? It's like tennis. My dad was an avid tennis player, but I couldn't play tennis. Tennis is a great sport because you're 100%

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20 Skip the Dishes is a Canadian online restaurant ordering and food delivery company.

21 K1 signifies an individual kayak race, whereas K2 signifies pairs, and K4 signifies four-person teams.

22 The Canada Games is multi-sport competition for amateur Canadian athletes. It is held every two years and alternates between the Canada Winter Games and the Canada Summer Games.

23 The Western Canada Summer Games is a multi-sport event for amateur Canadian athletes from the provinces and territories of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. It is held every four years.

accountable. There's a lot of intellectual stress and that and so on. Unlike, say, soccer where you're only as strong as... and it's a great sport, but at the higher levels there is no real accountability. It's like a union mentality. You know, and FIFA[24] is a corrupt organization.

BPS: Can I just ask you, I'll let Darcy get back to regularly scheduled programming shortly, but I find this, of all things, fascinating. So, you did K1, right. What sort of distances did you do?

HSF: Oh! I'm impressed that you would be aware of even asking the question. I did – at the time the shortest distance was 500 – so, it was 500 metres, 1000 metres, and then there was 6000, 10,000, and then I did the marathon, the 42 kilometres.

BPS: Wow! So, my understanding of the rowing events is that they're brutal –

HSF: Kayaking.

BPS: Yeah, kayaking, but all the rowing sports. Just, incredibly brutal in terms of the physical demands, but also mentally. Like, the first 500 yards you're dying and wondering, "Why am I doing this." You're always wondering what the other guy is doing and if he's trying to mess with your mind by going up quickly and busting you. Seems to me that what I know of it is it is a very mentally tough sport. I don't want to ask any leading questions, but what was it about you that was suited to do that because it sounds like a really, really tough endeavour; just you and the canoe, your lungs bursting, you're wondering if you can go on another stroke, and whether this guy is just bluffing you or what. Can you talk about what kind of spiritual or mental discipline suited you for that?

HSF: I don't know, but, Bryan, rowers go backward, kayakers go forward. Sorry, I just can't let that slide.

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[24] Federation Internationale de Football Association is the world governing body for soccer.

DM: I understand.

HSF: It's basically offensive to mix the two.

[Everyone]: [laughs]

HSF: But, yeah, everything you say is true and when you get to a really high level, you start making life sacrifices for half a second and I wasn't going to do that. I could have, but I didn't. It's good character building. Before school, I'd go kayaking for 10 kilometres and then go to school and whatever. I did play water polo and things like that, but, again, the team stuff you only can do as well as the weakest person. That's fine but, you know, canoeing and kayaking – in very different ways – are more spiritual, I think. Like, wilderness canoeing: you're away, there's no cell phone, no GPS units, or any of that. You have your map, you have your compass, and you go, and there's something grounding about that.

BPS: If I can say, I find that all these different parts of your experience and your intellectual and spiritual… there's some kind of convergence to it all, just listening for the first time, to me. Political process is about autonomy, responsibility, and independence and that was kind of how you lived your early life; taking on endeavours which were basically about how you were against everyone and you were against the environment. There are no excuses, no place to hide.

HSF: Well, I'm pro the environment. I was on the Board of the Manitoba Naturalists Society[25].

BPS: Well, not against the environment, but you had to cope with it. You couldn't phone when things were getting tough there or ask

[25] The Manitoba Naturalists Society is now known as Nature Manitoba. It is a not-for-profit organization that promotes the preservation, appreciation, and understanding of nature.

someone to dial down the wind. You have to deal with what you're dealing with.

HSF: Yeah, yeah, yeah. If the river ice is up while you're out, you know, you've got to deal with it. You can't turtle [laughs].

DM: [laughs] You can, but it's not going to go well. So, we will come back to your political career which started earlier than I thought, but you did an engineering degree at the University of Manitoba. You had mentioned early on in our discussions that your dad was an engineer, an electrical engineer I think you said.

HSF: That's right. Well, engineering runs strong in my family. So, my dad was the son of an engineer, who in turn was the son of an engineer, and we can trace the engineering right back to the Plains of Abraham[26] where General Wolfe's[27] chief engineer, a guy named Patrick McKellar[28], we are all direct descendants of that guy. My siblings are both engineers. One's a biosystems engineer and my brother's an electrical engineer and my brother-in-law is a mechanical engineer. So, yeah, our family dinners are really boring for most people.

DM: [laughs] Well, my brother's a mechanical engineer as well, so I'm well aware. [laughs] We could never switch jobs. Like, never, never, never, because he tries to explain centripetal force to me, and 30 seconds in, I'm done. I'm just done for, but you went to be a geological engineer.

HSF: Yeah, because it was the closest thing at the time to environmental engineering. In fact, it said "environmental" on my

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[26] The Battle of the Plains of Abraham took place on September 13, 1759 and marked the defeat of the French army by British forces, leading to the surrender of Quebec to the British.

[27] General James Wolfe (1727-1759) led the British army in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.

[28] Colonel Patrick McKellar (1717-1778) was a British army officer and military engineer.

engineering jacket, but there was also a heavy rock and mineral and earth sciences… In fact, I'm looking at all of my mineral collection right now, which is over there, and I enjoy that. It went well with the canoeing side of things. So, it seemed like a connection between the love of the outdoors and love of the environment. Mining is where I ended up and that's a recognition that you need an economic base to support all the great stuff that we have. So, geological engineering was a good fit.

DM: So, even your job choices fit your political outlook around the economy and wanting to put together the economy with the environment; your choices as to what type of engineering you might do.

HSF: If you want to protect the environment you need a strong economy and the reverse is true.

DM: That's very interesting.

HSF: It's common sense.

DM: So, shortly after you went up north to just start engineering for a mining company and you were in an unfortunate accident, shortly thereafter.

HSF: Yeah.

DM: Now, when that happened, did your political outlook change at all before the accident and after the accident? We'll talk about the accident in a minute but what I'm hearing is a great degree of consistency from you in your political outlook and that the accident had very little change, but I wanted to make sure that I was getting that right.

HSF: Well, I would say the accident challenged everything: every aspect of my life, including my politics. I remember, at the time of the accident, I was a card-carrying Reform Party member. I was in

the hospital for a year. Then in 1997 Lloyd Axworthy[29] came knocking to my apartment door – because I just living in a single apartment in River Heights[30] – and I had a conversation with him. I was really concerned about healthcare and the Liberals were making that an important issue. So, I voted liberal in that election. I was terrified about healthcare and about the future. I even went to Lloyd Axworthy's office on Osborne St. to see if they needed any volunteers. It was locked and they never called me back, but I was also very vulnerable at that time. This was the summer before I started the MBA, which was September 1997.

DM: Sorry, the MBA?

HSF: Yeah, I did my MBA at the U of M[31].

DM: Your MBA, right. You did your Masters of Business Administration at the U of M. Sorry, I thought you had started an organization. Sorry about that.

HSF: Yeah, so it shook up everything about the meaning of life, my relationships, my friendships, my purpose and it took me a long time to get reoriented.

DM: Well, let's talk about the accident a little bit. Not, the accident itself, obviously. There is a lot of people though, that if you ask them in the abstract, "How would you deal with this life-changing event?" People would say, "I couldn't deal with it." Yet, not only did you deal with it and survive, you've clearly thrived in what can be… forgive me, politics can be a brutal business to devote your life to. So, what would you want people to know about that sort of ability that you have and how you did the shift from the active

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29 The Honourable Lloyd Axworthy served as a Liberal MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) from 1973-1979, then served as a Liberal MP from 1979-2000. He served as the President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Winnipeg from 2004-2014.

30 River Heights is a neighbourhood in Winnipeg, MB.

31 University of Manitoba.

outdoorsman sort of a thing that was, I think it's fair to say, was one of the through messages of your life prior to the accident? You shifted, quite clearly, to not doing as much of that after the accident and yet, you seem to have done it quite well. I'm sure it wasn't easy, but what would you want people to know about that? How you did it, mentally. How you did it from your own approach. I suspect that the mental shift is something – and I say this without any degree of facetiousness. I'm a person who uses a wheelchair for mobility, but I never had to approach that, right? I never had to deal with the reality of a shift, right? My life as it was at the beginning, was, you know, was always, to some degree, determined with my disability in mind. Before the accident, you had a great degree of freedom, after the accident, less so. Yet, you seem to have made that transition quite well. Would you want to share with us how you did it? Like, what the mental process was for you to go from what you were, to what you are?

HSF: So, being in the wheelchair is the least of the problems. You know, the issue is getting up in the morning, going to the bathroom, not being able to scratch your forehead, not being able to drive or hug someone you love. The whole prospect of family and sex was all destroyed. They literally wanted to put me in an institution, like Deer Lodge[32] and Tache[33]. Then if I was really lucky, I could get into a place called Ten Ten Sinclair[34]. You know what? No, thank you. You know, if those are my choices, it's better for everyone that you just kill me.

DM: And you had that conversation with someone along the way?

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32 Deer Lodge Centre is a health centre in Winnipeg, MB which provides health services to adults with complex needs. It specializes in geriatric care and treatment of veterans.

33 Taché Centre is a common name for Actionmarguerite (Saint-Boniface) which as established as Taché Nursing Centre – Hospitalier Taché in 1935. It is a long-term care facility in Winnipeg, MB that provides care for adults with physical and complex health needs.

34 Ten Ten Sinclair Housing Inc. is a facility providing affordable and accessible housing services for individuals living with physical disability.

HSF: Well, no, I didn't, but that's what I was thinking. I didn't have the conversation because that wasn't going to get me anywhere, because there was nothing anyone could have done in that regard. So, I had to change the choices. So, there was a pilot project around self-managed care, at the time, which you may be familiar with, maybe not, I don't know.

DM: Well, I know it, quite well now. I don't know about the pilot project because I wasn't in Manitoba at the time, but I've been on self-managed care since I got here in 2002.

HSF: Yes, ok, so, you will have much better knowledge. So, as a C4 quad[35], there was no way they were going to send anyone out in the community on that, but that was the only alternative. I made it an alternative because I wasn't going to go to a nursing home or Ten Ten Sinclair, which was way far away and I had heard terrible things about it. So, even though I needed 24-hour care, they only provided 15 hours of care or funding. It was just a real challenge. I went into a non-accessible apartment and lived there for several years. Then, I told people I wanted to do my MBA and MPI[36] was like "sure, whatever, there's no chance you're ever going to be able to do that." I wrote the GMAT[37] and I insisted that I write it under the conditions that anyone else would, with the exception that I needed a scribe, because I can't fill in the bubbles, and there needed to be time to allow the caregiver, or whomever, to fill it in. Then, I studied and that was it, for a month. I ended up getting a very good score, which blew me away because the day I had a UTI[38], I was tired, and the person who had been asked to help me didn't know the difference between a parallel and perpendicular line. Anyways, there's a little segment on it in my book – and the time is ticking

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35 C4 quadriplegia is the result of damage to the topmost portion of the spinal cord. It generally results in paralysis in the hands, arms, torso, and legs.

36 Manitoba Public Insurance is a Crown corporation that offers public auto insurance, vehicle registration, and driver licensing to Manitobans.

37 The Graduate Management Admission Test is a standardized exam designed for admission to graduate business and management programs.

38 Urinary tract infection.

the whole time! Then, the MBA, how did that work? Well, there was no page turners, there was nothing on computer. It was one page at a time. So, I would be in bed, sit up, and go. The accounting book started at page 1. Okay. I'd get my caregiver to go to page two, or, you know, flip to the next page. I had my marker board and I'd do my thing. There is no secret. It was just being focused on a goal and putting everything to achieve that goal, especially in the first few years. It was just hard, monotonous work, and that was it. People go, "Oh, well, he did this and that." Well, that's what they see now. You know, and you may know this better but there's range of motion and there's spinal shock and there's stretching, you know. There's this fatigue too. Like, the first couple years my body was in shock!

DM: It was essentially fighting you because of the longer spending in the chair and all of those things.

HSF: Yeah, and then you have attendant care that you can't rely on and funding that you can't rely on [scoffs]. That's one of the things that really bugs me about our society; on one hand, we save people from catastrophe but then we don't provide the resources to allow those same people to live meaningful, dignified lives. That's if you're acquired disability and, too often, even if you are born with a disability. I've seen terrible things, terrible things.

DM: Yeah, I mean, I think you and I can relate. What I've seen is – and it's not just with the current provincial government, but the previous provincial government too – we can cut the budget out of the WRHA[39] or, if we've got to cut things, we won't increase attendant care. From my way of thinking, and this is just me, I look at it and say, "Attendant care is good value for money, from my way of thinking." It shouldn't be of value that one political party says, "We're in favor of this," and the other political party says, "Well, we're not," because if you keep us out of institutionalized environments and we're on our own, having one or two or three or

[39] Winnipeg Regional Health Authority governs healthcare regulation in Winnipeg, MB.

however many people you need to give you good attendant care is much cheaper than housing me and not having me have a job, and all of those things.

HSF: Absolutely. Community living is generally cheaper, but that's not who you're fighting, Darcy. When you're advocating for self-managed care, you're fighting the institutions, because they measure success by the number of people that they have and employ. You're fighting the unions; self-managed care is like an existential threat to them. You're fighting attitude, inertia from the past. There's a lot of things that –

DM: Oh yeah, there is.

HSF: You and I are benefitting from people that we don't know the name of, but whoever pushed for self-managed care, that is a big paradigm shift.

DM: Yes, it is, but it's also a very challenging thing to fight for because I call my self-managed coordinator, right, and I say, "Well, I haven't had an increase in the value that I can pay my attendants in 9 years." That's the last time they moved it: 9 years. So, what I can pay today is exactly the same thing that I could be 9 years ago. Well, the amount of money that I could pay 9 years ago bought a lot more for my attendant than it does today, just on the basis of inflation.

HSF: Well, and the minimum wage now, for federal positions, is $15 across the country. So, like, what does that mean?

DM: Exactly.

HSF: There are a lot of benefits that you and I as individuals can show and demonstrate. We pay our taxes. People see you at the University and me in… whatever, and, okay! Well, you know, life is possible in these circumstances, but, at least when I had my accident – and I forgot what question we're even on – but when I had my accident, there were no examples. Nobody, I knew was in a

wheelchair and the people I did know who were, from rehab, I'll just say, we wouldn't have a lot of common life experiences.

DM: You were challenged to look for success stories that provide the means by which you could draw. When we get down, or whatever it is, it's always nice to have people to say, "Well, this person could do it, so can I." When you don't have that, it can be very challenging. So, what I think that you're saying is, you didn't have a lot of people to go, "If they can do it, I can do it." So, I guess to get back to my question, where did you draw from? I mean, you obviously drew from yourself to a certain point. I'm assuming, since you mentioned family regularly in this interview already, you had a lot of people going, "Dude, we'll figure this out. We'll get this done."

HSF: Well, I don't know. I say my family, but I've got my parents, my brother, and my sister. There was no extended family and one of my red lines was my family would never, ever be involved in any of my care. Red line.

DM: That's a very aggressive red line to take, but I admire it, because I came at it quite differently. My parents, because I grew up this way, of course, my mother was heavily involved in my care. When I became an adult, even when I lived out here, my mother, when I came home – because my parents lived in Cape Breton[40], when I was an adult – when I came home to Cape Breton to see my parents, my mother at first insisted that I not bring a caregiver. She actually insisted on that because, she said, "I don't want to have to be entertaining them. I don't want to have to worry about them. I'd rather take care of you than deal with that." So, we did that for a few years and then I said, "Nope, because when I'm on vacation, I don't want you to have to worry about me. The attendant is coming with me. This is the way it's going to be and deal with it." She was, oddly, very thankful for that after I did it – very opposed to it when I did it – but after I did it and she saw, "Oh, so when you come home, nothing changes for me other than let's have dinner, let's go

[40] Cape Breton Island is an island in Nova Scotia on the Atlantic coast.

do this, whatever." It was the same as when any of my other brothers came home, you know. They didn't have to worry about my care. So, that was one way that you did it. You simply said, "Family members are not doing my care, it's going to be professionally provided."

HSF: That's right.

DM: How did you work it out? Did you have people around you going, "We should think about this. We should think about this," or were you on your own going, "This is the way I'm going to live this. This is the way I'm going to adapt." I'm genuinely curious, because I went through it very much with my family teaching me how to advocate for myself because I started out life with a disability. Then, I took those lessons and applied them as an adult, sometimes, not always, to my family's satisfaction. I wonder how you did it, being a professional before you ever had a disability, how you did that? Did you have a group of people that you went to to think through these things or was this, "I've got a lot of time to think as I do my rehab. I've got a lot of time to think because of my situation. So, I'm going to think about these issues."

HSF: You know, people are there for the first little while, but they slowly, you know, after 6 months, people get on with their lives. You know? What are you going to do? When you're a C4 quadriplegic, there are some real challenges. Like, how do you even kill yourself? So, that's one path. Another path is to be miserable. Then a third path is to fight. After very careful consideration of the three options ebbing and flowing, I chose to fight and challenge the assumption. You know, people always make assumptions about situations. One advantage as an engineer is that I didn't accept the assumptions. People say, "Well, you can't go back to school because no one's ever done their MBA." Well, I don't know. I'm a sample of one. We are all individuals. It turns out MPI was supportive of a lot of this, but they did it to – as the notes reveal, and some of them are in my book – to set me up for failure: "We'll let him do it, whatever. Then he'll fail, and then we're out of that obligation." Well, that didn't happen. Then there's a note – which is funny

because I hadn't even thought about it – where they were like, "Well, what if Fletcher were to become an MP? How would we mitigate our exposure if that were to happen?" That was in about 2001 or 2002. Being an MP wasn't even on my radar screen, but MPI was thinking about it.

DM: [laughs] Maybe they're omniscient, who knows?

HSF: Yeah, but I can show you those notes, like, gee whiz.

DM: It's really rather amazing.

BPS: I don't know if I can phrase this at all aptly, but I'm guessing after this thing happened to you, Steven, my sense is – first and foremost – that you wanted help with the practical difficulties; how do I get from here to there? But, you still wanted people to interact with you like you're Steven, right?

HSF: That's right.

BPS: So, if I disagreed with your politics, Steven, you didn't want pity. You wanted me to say, "Steven, take a hike," the same way you would if you were fully physically able, right? So, did you find that pity was a problem or that condescension was a problem? "Oh, I can't say this to Steven, poor guy." Was that an issue for you?

HSF: No, but condescension was, especially in the hospital. I remember a lady was supposed to help with psychological issues for patients. She would come in, bouncing happy, "Oh, how are you today? Isn't it wonderful? Aren't you glad your accident happened? You've got a whole new future!" Just a total twit, and that is their idea of helping me! But, you're right. I'm not in bed thinking, "Am I a federal responsibility or provincial responsibility?" I was annoyed that they were talking about using $10 million of taxpayer money to support the Jets[41], at the time. That got through to me and that

[41] The Winnipeg Jets are a professional ice hockey team. They were based in Winnipeg from 1972-1996. They returned to Winnipeg in 2011.

was very insulting, actually. But yeah, initially it wasn't politics, it was survival. How to get up in the morning – without burdening my siblings or my parents – and get on with things. I was planning on doing my MBA, I wanted to get my P.Eng[42], but I didn't have a plan beyond that.

BPS: Let's circle back for a minute, Steven. It kind of struck me through this interview. Your life before the accident, you mentioned one thing we didn't do was complain. You're out there in the bush, there's blackflies, you're getting eaten alive, and if the river's too strong while you're paddling you have to deal with it. Now – I don't want to sound glib because I don't know if there's a connection – did that history of just having to deal with stuff as it came along, did that help you when this catastrophe happened or are they just so radically different that your earlier life couldn't have prepared you for that?

HSF: Well, I don't think anything can prepare you, but the philosophy was the same, just many orders of magnitude worse. What am I going to do? Complain? I know nobody wants to be around a complainer and nobody wants to be with someone that's down all the time. So, I just didn't present that issue. Whining or finding constructive solutions to problems are two different things. So yeah, I found constructive solutions that would move the yardstick forward. There was a line, actually, in the MPI legislation[43] that was very inspiring for me: section 138 in the MPI legislation. It says, "We will rehabilitate someone, as much as practical, to the level that they were before the accident." Okay! I can work with that. So, that means, for me, attendant care, number one, and equipment. That was, sort of, the paragraph of hope for me: section 138. There were no limits on that and that was the basis that I could say, "Okay, there is some hope here." Now, we just have to get MPI to go from a tort mentality to a no-fault mentality. No-fault can work, but it can't work if everyone is tort minded.

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42 P.Eng is the designation for a professional engineer.

43 *The Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation Act*, CCSM c P215, s 138.

BPS: Can you just explain that, what you mean by tort-minded rather than no-fault-minded.

HSF: Well, tort is confrontational and the premise is: everyone is out to get the insurance company and milk them and we want to reduce our costs as much as possible. A proper no-fault mentality would be: we will provide everything this person needs to live as closely as practical, as they did before the accident. In my case, that's the most significant: the care, 24-hour care.

BPS: Okay. I have this theory about no-fault and how it works – I don't mean the paradigm you put up, Steven, but just why our system tends to be designed the way it is – which is, if you provide really good coverage for minor accidents (fender-benders and stuff) a lot of people would be happy because most people are only going to access the system for fairly minor matters like, "Oh, got my glass smashed." Get it fixed, get my cheque, boom, done – it's all good. The number of people who have catastrophic accidents is relatively small. There's a lot of money to help them out and there's not a lot of votes in that. So, if I was a completely despicably cynical person designing the system, I would design it so it's really good for the minor things that affect a whole lot of people and I would very cynically not do what is just and necessary for the people who have the severe problems because they are costly and there's only a few of them. Is that actually the way the system works in the real world?

HSF: I think there's a lot of truth to that. Now, there was a major change to the legislation[44] in 2010 that focused on catastrophic injury. There are a few significant areas where they came up short. Actually, I introduced a private Member's bill[45] that would fix it, but the original legislation, (the clause on rehabilitation) if they would follow that, it would be fine, but then there's caps on other

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44 Bill 36, The Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation Amendment Act (Enhanced Compensation for Catastrophic Injuries), 3rd Sess, 39th Leg, Manitoba, 2009 (assented to 8 October 2009), SM 2009, c 36.

45 Bill 225, The Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation Amendment Act, 2nd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017, (first reading 23 May 2017).

things. So, which is which? I argued at the Court of Queen's Bench[46] and the Appeal[47] with Sid Green[48] that the obligation is rehabilitation, and there's natural limits there. It's not like there's no limit in the legislation. There are natural limits. It's 24-hour care times whatever it is an hour. So, you can plan for it but not if there are no official caps. So, that went through all that and then the NDP, to their credit, saw that there needed to be changes and they made the legislation better.

BPS: I think improvements may have been the result of political advocacy by folks like you. Has anyone ever successfully litigated a Charter claim about caps and limits on compensation; some sort of Charter issue with discrimination? I'm guessing that people have not succeeded in that way, but you'd know more about it than I do.

HSF: Not that I'm aware. We tried twice to bring it to the Supreme Court and both times it was denied.[49]

BPS: These are basically economic issues: "We the courts won't deal with it by entrenching on a Charter right." It's quite a challenge because politically the system is geared against the cause you are advocating for because, again, there's not a lot of votes in that, right? It's something that takes a lot out of the fiscal interests of the government and the lobby efforts are intrinsically more difficult than most because a lot of resources are needed. It's going to pay off because, of course, facilitating people with these types of conditions – which is a point you and Darcy made at the beginning

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46 Fletcher v Automobile Injury Compensation Appeal Commission, [2004] MJ No 159, 2004 MBQB 100.

47 Fletcher v Manitoba Public Insurance Corp, [2004] MJ No 443, 2004 MBCA 192.

48 Sid Green is a retired Winnipeg politician and lawyer. He was an NDP MLA from 1966-1979. He sat as an independent MLA from 1979-1981. Green then became the leader and one of the founding members of the Progressive Party of Manitoba. He led the party from 1981-1995 which dissolved when he was unable to find a successor as party leader.

49 *Fletcher v Manitoba Public Insurance Corp*, [2003] SCCA No 273. *Fletcher v Manitoba Public Insurance Corp*, [2005] SCCA No 80.

of the interview – ultimately will pay off in the long run, but short term, it tends to be about how they're thinking in terms of managing the government budget. There's not a lot of votes in it, I don't think, and at the same time you're not getting a lot of help. This seems to me like one of the most challenging political situations that a group could possibly have. I've said this before – you've probably heard me say this yesterday, Darcy, in a different meeting – I have a sense that, politically, things are really stacked against persons with disability. Even advocating is more difficult; you mentioned, when you were first injured, a lot of folks were not visible. They were needing a lot of help to become visible. There's not a lot of votes in it. It's difficult to organize and agitate. How did you overcome all of that and actually make some progress? I'm genuinely curious about it because it really seems to me to be one of the most challenging set-ups you could have in terms of actually getting the government to do something positive, in this respect. How did you actually get some progress in this area?

HSF: Well, I think what did it was a flanking maneuver. They said that what they feared most was that I'd become an MP. Okay, well I'll become an MP.

BPS: Wow.

HSF: How to do that? Well, you know, you really have to be aggressive. You know, once I started the MBA, I had the opportunity to run for UMSU[50] president. It wasn't clear that people would vote for me because I was in a wheelchair. There was a lot of, "Will he have the energy?" But, the best way to demonstrate that is to work harder, and by the way, I am doing my MBA all of you punk undergrads.

BPS: [laughs]

HSF: [laughs] So, without actually saying "punk undergrads", the point was made. Then, the second time I ran for UMSU president,

[50] University of Manitoba Students' Union.

nobody was talking about my wheelchair. Bryan, I don't know if you were there at the time, but I had students chained to my desk and people storming fundraising dinners from The Manitoban[51]. People were flipping out because Starbucks was on campus all of a sudden; just all of those stupid things that happened on campus.

BPS: Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to ask this question earlier. It may be a naïve question, but did you have to deal with some people taking this out at you: "Steven Fletcher, how dare you be right of centre because you of all people should know that everybody needs government help! So it's galling to me –" (I'm wondering if people were expressing this) "– that you are not a committed socialist. Is that something you had to deal with?

HSF: Yeah, absolutely. All the time. Yeah, the whole time. It's in textbooks! There's a Manitoba school textbook[52] that asks that question: "Why is Fletcher a Conservative and also a quadriplegic?" That was in the Manitoba school textbooks!

BPS: Okay. I just have to say, my jaw has dropped. I haven't heard this before. To put it by a guy with a Doctorate in law from Yale, "Wow. Like, what?" You're going to have to tell us a bit about this.

DM: I mean I understand it because when I tell people what I do, in terms of being a corporate lawyer by training, people are like, "Why aren't you some sort of social justice warrior?" Well, because I believe government is a good place to do certain things, but I believe in value for money. I believe in value for government money, I don't believe in wasting it. I don't believe that everybody who has a problem can go to government to get it fixed. They look at you like you've got four heads!

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51 The Manitoban is the official University of Manitoba student newspaper.

52 See "Questions" John Ruypers et al, *Canadian and World Politics,* (Toronto: Emond Montgomery, 2005) at 234.

BPS: The textbook was not saying this as an interesting question for discussion like, "How could it be? Discuss." Right? It was like, "How dare you?"

HSF: Well, it wasn't: "How dare you?" I'm going to see if my caregiver can find it in my library.

BPS: I mean, I know people think that way, but who actually says that out loud? I can see someone approaching it that way, but I didn't think someone would put that down in writing in a textbook.

HSF: Or the media, sure, but the media aren't thinking. They'll just say, "Sure. You're with the NDP." Even though I'm a Conservative MP. Although, I will say something. When I was the president of UMSU, I did go to events of all political parties and I found the PC crowd a lot more standoffish and the NDP crowd very friendly and talkative. I found the Canadian Alliance crowd very inclusive too, but the red-Tory type, not so much. It wasn't just once; it was all the time. The NDP, they were very talkative, until later when they see you as a threat, then they're all vicious.

DM: When you're one of them, they're quite open with you. Once they don't think you're one of them, much less so.

HSF: Yeah, that might be it.

DM: The funny thing is, none of us is just one thing. None of us is just: "I'm all Conservative all the time," because many Conservatives, at least in other jurisdictions, are not as environmentally conscious as you've indicated you are.

HSF: Well, you've nailed it there. On medical assistance in dying[53], you know, you could hear crickets in all parties on that one, or

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[53] "MP Steven Fletcher to introduce 2 bills on assisted suicide", *The Canadian Press* (26 March 2014) online: <www.cbc.ca/news/politics/mp-steven-

organ donation[54]. The Conservative Party, provincially, wouldn't even talk to me for a month after I brought that forward! They wouldn't even talk to me! They didn't even say anything in the debate. Like, they were silent! I don't know what the heck…

DM: Well, the not saying anything in the debate I kind of understand because it's really hard to say to the guy in the wheelchair, "You don't know what you're talking about" when you're mentioning organ donation and medical assistance in dying. If they disagree with you, it can be very hard to say, "You don't know what that would do", right? Even for people with disabilities, we don't speak as a monolith on whether medical assistance in dying should be allowed and, if so, under what conditions and so on, but a lot of people think, "Oh, I can't say that" because it would be politically incorrect to talk about medical assistance in dying with somebody that they think, "If I was in their situation, I'd be looking for the nearest, you know, whatever." They don't know quite how to do that.

HSF: Well, every disabled organization came down on me like a ton of bricks on that issue and that's unfortunate. I wasn't talking about disability; I was talking about Sue Rodriguez[55] type people.

DM: I mean, Svend Robinson[56] was involved.

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fletcher-to-introduce-2-bills-on-assisted-suicide-1.2587179> [perma.cc/J2CJ-E2WQ].

54 Steve Lambert "Manitoba government rejects call to change how organs donated", *The Canadian Press* (31 October 2017) online: <www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-government-organ-donation-winnipeg-1.4380261> [perma.cc/TAV5-YXA2].

55 Sue Rodriguez was a Canadian right to die activist. She was diagnosed with ALS in 1991 and was given two to five years to live. She subsequently decided she wanted to end her life and sought medical assistance to accommodate her decision. This led to a legal battle where she lost her case at the Supreme Court of Canada. However, she took her own life with the assistance of an anonymous doctor in 1994.

56 Svend Robinson is a Canadian politician who served as an NDP MP in Burnaby, BC from 1979-2004.

HSF: Yeah! I actually wrote a letter of support for Svend Robinson in The Hill Times[57] about a year ago saying that he would be good for debate in Parliament.[58] I can't stand most of the things that he says, but he's good for debate and if you can't debate things in Parliament, where can you debate?

BPS: Well, you'd think maybe at a university.

HSF: Oh, I'm being ironic.

BPS: I mean that's what I always thought when I became an academic: "Where can you debate things? In the atmosphere of free exploration in a university." Let me just say that my optimism about that is not what it used to be.

DM: I would agree with that.

HSF: [laughs] Well, let's go to a pro-Israel rally, you and me Bryan.

DM: [laughs] Here we go! We're off!

HSF: [laughs] We'll sell some Israeli bonds on campus, right there in UMSU in front of the book shops. Are you in Bryan? Pro-Israeli bonds.

BPS: Yeah. I wrote an article in response to my own union attempting to ban the use of the international definition of

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57 The Hill Times is a Canadian newspaper and news website published in Ottawa, ON. It reports on federal political news, including the Parliament of Canada and the federal government.

58 Steven Fletcher, "Svend Robinson will be good for democracy, says Steven Fletcher" *The Hill Times* (18 February 2019) online: <www-hilltimes-com.uml.idm.oclc.org/2019/02/18/188295/188295>.

antisemitism anywhere, including on campus.[59] It's an issue that Darcy is familiar with as well.

DM: When I became president of UMFA[60], they wanted put a resolution before the Board of UMFA to say that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance[61] could not be on campus because it's against academic freedom to do so.

BPS: Yeah. They will oppose any use of the internationally accepted definition anywhere. [laughs] At the university, or elsewhere, that's all!

DM: I'm not Jewish and I went, "Look, you want to take shots at Israel or you want to have issues with Hamas[62] or whatever people are doing over there, I don't know what the right answers are, but I know that telling people you can't use this definition for antisemitism doesn't promote academic freedom. I know that for sure." [laughs]

HSF: Definition is very important. Definition, when it comes to disability, but definition of things like "genocide" or "the final solution". You know, with what is going on, the analogies that are being made in the media over the last two weeks between what ever

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59 Letter from Dr Bryan Schwartz to the U of M Faculty Association's Executive and Board of Representatives (24 March 2021) in *The Winnipeg Jewish Review*, online: <www.winnipegjewishreview.com/article_detail.cfm?id=7374&sec=1&title=U_of_M_Faculty_Association_Executive_Pushes_Motion_Attacking_IHRA_definition_of_Antisemitism~Federation_Request_to_Speak_Not_Granted-Invitation_to_Cotler_denied-_Full_comments_by_Dr._Bryan_Schwartz> [https://perma.cc/6KYZ-323Q].

60 University of Manitoba Faculty Association is the bargaining agent for the full-time academic staff at the University of Manitoba.

61 The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is an intergovernmental organization that seeks to strengthen, advance, and promote Holocaust education, remembrance, and research.

62 Hamas is a Palestinian militant organization. It is an Arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

happened at the residential schools and the Holocaust, I find that offensive on so many levels. There is no comparison. They're not the same. It's not industrial murder of… I don't know. I hope someone does something about that because they do a disservice to the people who died in the Holocaust and other genocides by using those words. It's ridiculous.

BPS: Steven, moral courage seems to be the least of the problems these days. One of the big inhibitors on free speech is not, "You're just afraid you're going to get held up against some administrator or something." People are now quite afraid of just being a bigot or a reactionary. You don't seem to have a problem with being outspoken. Where does that come from? I don't know if you can answer that. It's not necessarily one of the characteristics of people in today's elite: being fearless about speaking your mind. There's a lot of practical reasons you wouldn't want to do it, but some of the censorship is at least as much social, in my view, as it is institutional. What are your thoughts about that? How do you manage? It's obviously pretty tough to take the position you did on medical assistance in dying and you once again have to deal with people's flack about, "How dare you of all people". How did you come to this confidence in speaking your mind without being deterred by the blowback?

HSF: Well, let's remember, the blowback with Pallister[63] was a blowout. Like, I got completely blown out of two political parties because of that, but if you can express yourself – Harper was brilliant with this, you could say almost anything behind closed doors to him and he would accept it, reject it, reflect on it, or provide you with the counter argument. Then it's done and you move on; same in Cabinet. There were all sorts of things like that, sometimes I won and sometimes I didn't. So, I don't know where it comes from, but it needs to make common-sense.

DM: I just heard something really interesting there: "Sometimes I won and sometimes I didn't". A lot of people can't deal with losing.

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63 Brian Pallister served as Premier of Manitoba from 2016 to 2021.

They have to believe they're absolutely right and therefore there's an absolute enemy to being wrong. Right? There's an absolute black and white for a lot of people about: if I lose this, it must be because of whatever boogeyman they want to put up there. What I find interesting about you is, you just said, "Sometimes I win and sometimes I lost and I'm not going to be upset over losing. I'm going to be upset over not speaking my mind."

HSF: Yeah. Well, first of all, you need to apply common-sense. Second, you need to be knowledgeable about the issue and become more knowledgeable. I can think of lots of examples, like Efficiency Manitoba[64] – that Crown Corporation. I took a stand on that, but I wanted to do it behind closed doors. That wasn't allowed, at all. No debate. No time ever. So, I brought it up at committee and they didn't like it. I knew that they wouldn't like it, but there were some questions that needed to be asked. That's the whole point of democracy! So, to answer your question, Bryan: I can't punch a punching bag and I can't go for a run. I have to live in my brain. I don't drink, so I can't drink away my sorrows or my misgivings or take drugs. I have to sleep at night. So, that's where it comes from.

DM: So, if it bothers you, it's going to come out somewhere.

HSF: I always try and do the right thing. It's never black and white, sometimes it's wrong; sometimes it's wrong in the context or for the situation, sometimes opinion doesn't matter, and sometimes you bite your tongue.

BPS: I want to ask you something – as you can tell, I think rather associatively – for a long time I've analogized policy making as a form of engineering. You know, you can push in this direction and it's going to have certain drawbacks or maybe you have to have a qualification, a twiddle, an exception; you're basically trying to build a machine. In engineering, it's known there's always trade-offs, right? You can make a car that's totally safe, except you can't

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64 Efficiency Manitoba is a Crown corporation committed to improving energy efficiency in Manitoba.

get it out of the garage because it's too heavy or if it gets in an accident with someone else, it'll wipe out the other people. You can make a car that's very agile and adept, but maybe you do that by making it very light. There are trade-offs. You try adjusting in different ways so that the ensemble works the best it can knowing that there's no perfection, but you try to do trade-offs. The other thing is there's no wishful thinking in what you're doing. "Gee, I wish I could do this and still do that," except that's not how engineering works. The laws of Physics are pretty unforgiving. They don't give you points for wishing it was that way: if the machine is going to break, it's going to break. Does your background in engineering have anything to do with your approach to politics and debate? I don't know if it does, but there's always been a connection to me. I see this analogy between engineering and public policy. Does any of that make any sense to you?

HSF: I definitely approach issues from a different way, in many cases. There's an order of operation; you can't go to the moon without knowing how to make fire. So, that definitely helps. "Are the assumptions sound?" Even just knowing one's units, you know. The classic trick of the Treasury Board, they'll say, "Oh well, you know, there's been an increase of 40% in sulfur emissions and we need to deal with that," but if you ask in absolute numbers, it's 1 to the 12th to 1.4 to the 12th or it's the difference between square metres and square kilometres. So, there's that. There are not enough engineers in public life. When people talk about diversity, it's so maddening. Diversity is not gender-based and it's not mobility-based, it's diversity in life experience and education. What Parliament doesn't need more of are lawyers and Poli-Sci brats, but diversity of experience. I remember I did this ICD[65] course at U of T[66] and they showed a picture of the ideal board. You know what the answer is, what they were looking for. There's a Chinese person. There are three females on it, four guys, and a wheelchair. So,

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65 Institute of Corporate Directors is a not-for-profit organization that provides resources and education to advance governance knowledge and enhance individuals' boardroom contributions.

66 University of Toronto.

everyone said, "Oh yeah, you've got diversity. You've got a woman. You've got visible minorities. You've got an Aboriginal." When it came to me, I said, "I don't know anything about any of these people. I don't know their backgrounds. I don't know if they are accountants, engineers. I don't even know what language they speak. I don't know if they know how to add." That is the worst kind of board; the ones that are unqualified. With the absence of qualifications, you have to assume they're not qualified.

BPS: When you were in university, long ago, did you have a sense that there was a lack of viewpoint? Diversity?

HSF: Oh yeah.

BPS: Can you talk about that a bit? There's more and more literature coming about that is about empirically demonstrating that there is zero limitation to intellectual diversity in our university. From your experience, is that a more newfangled thing or was that already your lived experience?

HSF: Well, first of all, engineering is two plus two always equal four, but in the Arts it could be all sorts of things. Two plus two could equal five, it's just perspective. "What's your opinion on two plus two equals? Tell us." If you go with four, that's conventional and a masculine way of looking at it. I don't know how you guys survive, really, in that environment. Even this high-level course offered by the University of Toronto – and there's people like David Asper[67] and others in the course – but it was just such political correctness; not the whole thing, but huge sections of it, and they have to do it. Even talking quietly with the prof after, he was like, "I know what you're saying, but I have a career."

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[67] David Asper is a Canadian lawyer and businessman. He served as Acting Dean of Robson Hall, the law faculty of the University of Manitoba from 2020-2021. He is also currently the head of his family's namesake philanthropic organization, The Asper Foundation.

BPS: The prof is saying, "I heard your objection, I might even agree with it, but…"

HSF: " – But you just can't say that." So, okay.

DM: So, we were just getting to university; why student politics? Was this the plan? You said you sat on student council in high school. Did you say to yourself, "Okay, the plan is student politics at the U of M; then, off to provincial politics, behind the scenes; then off to the feds; and then back to the province. Was there a long-term thought process or was this just, "Well this might be fun for a bit. I'd like to give this a shot."

HSF: No. Plan Z, for sure. What happened was, I was doing my MBA, and as I mentioned, I had a younger sibling; he was doing engineering at the time and he was the head of the Engineering Society[68]. He came to me in November 1998 and said, "Hey! Do you want to run for UMSU president and vice president? I'll be your vice president and you can run as president." And I was like, "I don't think so." That was in person, then I called him back by the time I got home and said, "You know, that's actually a good idea." So, we put together a team and we approached the election as engineers would. We had the whole campus mapped, posters made, and people prepositioned in the locked buildings (because they locked them at 12:00 and 12:01 you're allowed to put banners up). It was like a military operation, which UMSU had never seen before, and we won! We won against people that had been planning it for their whole lives, like you just explained it.

DM: So, you do that for two years?

HSF: Yeah, I did it for two years and did my MBA classes and it all wrapped up in the same period of time. By the way, I did my classes. Other people that were running asked for deferment of their classes or whatever. I never asked for a deferment: never in engineering

[68] The University of Manitoba Engineering Society is the main student group for University of Manitoba engineering students.

and never in my MBA. If an assignment was due on a date, I submitted it on that date. If there was an exam at that time, I did it at that time. I did not ask for any special treatment, though people were quite willing to provide special treatment, but, nope. UMSU president was a great experience because we re-did the bylaws and organized the businesses. We really shook it up. We renovated the entire UMSU building. We brought businesses in, a photocopy centre. All that, we did. Even the Aboriginal art you see when you're going down the tunnels, that was all done when I was UMSU president.

DM: I didn't realize that.

HSF: Oh yeah, and at our initiative! So, it is a great learning experience. I spent two years on the University Senate[69] and on the University Board of Governors[70] and the Alumni Association[71]. So, you get exposure to all of that as well; so much exposure that I'll never do it again.

BPS: [laughs]

DM: [laughs] Bryan will tell you; we've already had this conversation about UMFA for me. One term is plenty, thanks! So, it's a two-year term or did you run twice?

HSF: It's one year and I ran twice.

DM: So, since we are dealing with the Law Journal, you mentioned already that you had some pretty serious disagreements with MPI when you wanted to take on the supposedly volunteer position of

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69 The University of Manitoba Senate is the senior academic governing body for the University.

70 The University of Manitoba Board of Governors oversees the administrative and business dealings of the University.

71 The University of Manitoba Alumni Association supports former graduates and seeks to foster relationships between the alumni, the community, and the University.

head of the Conservative Party of Manitoba, right?[72] As I understood the debate, if it didn't lead to a job, they weren't going to pay for it.

HSF: That's right. On the balance of probabilities, it wouldn't.

DM: This position was not going to lead directly to remunerated employment for you going forward. [laughs] So, that's really funny now considering your history.

HSF: Like, that's in writing and it was in writing publicly in the Automobile Injury Compensation Appeal Commission[73]. They actually said that. Even if it wasn't directly related to employment, it is part of being reintegrated into society.

DM: I couldn't agree more.

HSF: Well, at that time, they took a different view. I don't think they would do that now, but 20 years ago they sure did.

DM: But you decided to do it anyway.

HSF: Yup. Big risk and it hit me financially because, you know, there are costs associated with that. Actually, there were strong financial disincentives not to be president of UMSU because, of the income replacement, MPI takes a lot away, and CPP[74], they take that away.

DM: They took away your CPP disability cheque and some of your benefits from MPI because you took a paid position to run UMSU?

HSF: Yeah.

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72 AICAC File No AC-02-66, 2002 CarswellMan 635 at paras 14-18, [2002] MAICACD No 59.

73 The Automobile Injury Compensation Appeal Commission is the appeal body for those who disagree with an internal review decision made by MPI.

74 Canada Pension Plan.

DM: What the hell?!

HSF: [scoffs] Yeah. They let you cash the CPP cheque, but they reduce your income replacement indemnity by whatever you get from CPP and they still do that.

DM: The government uses the federal government's money to reduce their obligations to you.

HSF: Yes.

DM: And I'm saying this sarcastically, for the record.

HSF: This is a big, big issue. It affects Veteran Affairs[75] benefits and lots of other things. The difference being one's a provincial thing and Veteran Affairs is a military thing. But, yeah, they take your salary at the time of your accident, subtract whatever taxes you would pay and your deductions, and multiply it by 0.9.

DM: So, that would be 90% of your take-home pay.

HSF: Yeah. Then, if you get like $500 a month of CPP, they would reduce their income replacement by $500.

DM: Oh, my goodness.

HSF: When you're young, that's a lot of money. It's a lot of money when you're old!

DM: Especially when you're putting yourself, essentially, on a fixed income at the age of 23, 24.

HSF: Yeah. So, there were strong financial disincentives to be employed: strong financial disincentives to do anything at all.

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[75] Veteran Affairs Canada is a department within the Canadian government that is responsible for pensions, benefits, and services for war veterans.

That's a battle that I'll probably have with MPI for the rest of my days, really, but my motivation is trying to give back to society as much as I can. My injury will cost, what, $20 million – if I live to 90 – to society? So, I feel very strongly that I need to do what I can to mitigate that: duty bound.

DM: What is very interesting about that is that many people on the conservative side of the ledger say that we can't create such incentives for people not to work. You're the proof that – for people of integrity – sure, it matters to a point, but you want to have the life that allows you to the live the best life that you can. You don't mind working for nothing as long as your life is okay. If working for nothing means I'm not getting the minimum out of my life that I should get, then, I'm not okay with that, but you want to work regardless. You want to give back. For you and me, and a bunch of other people, working is not just about the pay cheque. Sure, the pay cheque's nice, but we don't just work for the pay cheque. We work because that's something that gives meaning and giving back means something.

HSF: Absolutely. You and I are fortunate to have Class 1 education and we do have that ability to give back, but, it doesn't always work. You know, like, doing the MLA thing was, for me, a financial catastrophe because I didn't get any monetary benefit. Whatever I earned as an MLA went to MPI.

DM: It reduced MPI's obligations to you.

HSF: In fact, I incurred about $50,000 on legal fees during my time, on a variety of things: from the floor crossing thing, but also with party related issues. So that's, I guess, sort of a financial contribution to the legal profession.

DM: We appreciate it! [laughs]

HSF: Yes.

BPS: Let me just take us off topic, as usual, for a moment here. Steven, do you go on campuses and talk to today's students? Do you have any occasions to do that?

HSF: I go if I'm asked, yeah. If I'm asked to, I go to high school classes and stuff, but I haven't done that since the federal election. I've gone to Selkirk College[76].

BPS: The reason I'm asking is because you were something of an intellectual nonconformist way back when, but my sense is the university exposes people to an even less of a range of opinion nowadays than it used it. It puts more constraints on the ability to feel comfortable and exploring ideas and the trying of ideas. I'm just asking because I think about this myself, but I'm genuinely interested in what your take is. People talk about politics being a pendulum: it swings to the left; it swings to the right. We try this, then we realize, wait a minute, we've gone too far, so, we come back in the other direction. When you talk to students in university or senior high school students, can you see a bunch of young Steven Fletchers coming out of that environment; a bunch of free market-oriented Conservatives or are we going to produce a generation of people who are, pretty much, with a fairly narrow band of political thought? Does this swing back at some point or have we reached this secular change where it doesn't go back and we can't actually recover this idea of the multiverse being all kinds of different ideas? I'm just genuinely interested in somebody who lived that as a student politician who was very much a philosophical minority and somebody who has been a politician and has talked about it and enjoys debate. Where are we right now? Is this shift something that we ever come back from, that people retreat from? Do you think younger people actually have more of your philosophy but are afraid to say so? I don't quite have a sense of this myself; what do you think?

HSF: The fact that you're asking the question is the answer. The value of a liberal arts education, in this day and age, is just not there:

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[76] Selkirk College is a community college in Castlegar, BC.

I don't see the return. There are a lot of excellent online resources and programs that people can take and probably get just as good, or better, education. The politics of the campuses – U of M, U of W[77], U of T – there are topics you just can't talk about without being accused of being a Nazi, or whatever. I'm waiting for the story where somebody stands up and says that what happened with the residential schools is terrible, if the people died in the way that it seems that they have in Kamloops[78], that is really terrible, but it's not genocide.[79] Then have the whole class point to that person saying that they are a Nazi. That student says, "I'm not a Nazi. I happen to be Jewish," but you can't make those kinds of comparisons. The first person to do that is going to have the world come down on them, but they're right.

BPS: I don't know what people think or I wouldn't be asking the question: do people actually have non-conforming views and they're just afraid to express them nowadays in the contemporary environment or is it, "Oh, I just wouldn't even allow myself to think that"? I don't know where we are! How can I tell?! I don't know if we have a public forum or university that is open to a truly free exchange of ideas. So, I don't actually know whether there's more of a spectrum of political beliefs now, it's just we're not hearing it, or whether we've actually achieved a fair level of philosophical conformity. I don't even know how I would test that out! I'm genuinely puzzled by this. I really don't know!

HSF: I don't know. Universities are going to go the way of the dodo bird. I actually did a course at Harvard[80]. I went there and what they did was they taped the course and they sell it to other universities. You know? Why not? Especially for those first-year courses or

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77 University of Winnipeg.

78 Kamloops is a city in the interior of British Columbia.

79 On May 27, 2021, the undocumented remains of 215 children were found at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School on Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation.

80 Harvard University is a private Ivy League University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

second-year courses. Calculus doesn't change. You know, why do you need to go to university to get your Calculus 1 and 2? There'll be regional centres where you can go in-person, everything else will be done remotely. Then you don't have all the capital cost, all the administration. I think that's where it's going.

BPS: I wonder about that. It is a question I've asked in my class: did this Zoom[81] year and a half, has this actually irrevocably put us on the path that we're going to end the monopoly? I'm part of the monopoly here, and so is Darcy, we have a monopoly on getting a legal education in Manitoba. Are we actually going to move to the fact that people say, "Well, we don't need expensive you dilettantes to teach law school anymore. A whole bunch of people could teach law school. They could do it a lot more cheaply. I wouldn't have to physically be here for three years and lets just compete for exams." By the way, that's how we used to admit people to the practice. Abraham Lincoln[82] never went to law school. He worked as an apprentice for the Supreme Court, he read Blackstone[83], he wrote an exam. My generation, and Darcy's, we benefitted from the period of higher education that came after the '50s and '60s where the economy was growing; universities were expanding; young people were doing better and could actually spend four years in education; and so on. We built up this education system and I think people tend to think anything that is going to last forever, but I'm starting to wonder about that. Now that people have actually seen that we really can do university by Zoom. They didn't like it that much by the end, but it's always compared to the alternative, right? Maybe I don't like getting all my courses on Zoom, but maybe I don't like having to show up for three years and spend, what Darcy, $40,000 on tuition. Something like that? So, do you think that's actually a realistic possibility? Twenty years from now, we'll

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81 Zoom is a video teleconferencing software program.

82 Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865) was the 16th president of the United States from 1861-1865.

83 Sir William Blackstone (July 10, 1723 – February 14, 1780) was an English jurist, judge, and politician from the 18th century who most notably wrote *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.

be looking back saying, "What were they even thinking forcing all those students to physically go to a brick-and-mortar campus?"

HSF: Yeah. Well, what were the governments thinking paying for it all. The other thing is UMSU fees. When I left UMSU, we had brought them down and it was $74 all in. Now, it's over $1,000.

DM: What?!

BPS: Wow.

HSF: Yes.

BPS: I didn't know that! $1,000 a year?

HSF: Yes.

DM: Darcy, are you sharing my wide-eyed amazement here?

HSF: Yes. The first people to complain are hypocrites. I pointed this out, to our credit, two years ago, or whatever. With all due respect, we do not have a very high quality
set of elected officials. You could never have the conversation that we're having right now with anyone in the Manitoba Legislature, I don't think – maybe Kelvin Goertzen[84] you could, but I can't think of anyone else.

BPS: I taught Kelvin. Without disclosing confidentiality, he was a really excellent student, really bright guy, really reasonable. He's come back and taught my Leg Pro[85] class. I've had people from all the parties, but Kelvin always impressed me; a really bright, logical person. I would say that even if he was in a different party. I'll tell you this story quickly. When he came to my class, Kelvin, he said that he was approaching a guy in a neighbouring riding to try to get

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84 Kelvin Goertzen is the MLA for Steinbach, MB and the current Deputy Premier of Manitoba.

85 Leg Pro stands for Legislative Procedure.

him to run for the Progressive Conservatives provincially. The guy was asking him, "Well, how much do you get paid and how many hours a week do you work?" Kelvin said, by the time he'd answered these questions, Kelvin was like, "Well, why am I doing this? I gave up my legal career. I have to work these incredible hours –"

DM: The pension's pretty good. [laughs]

BPS: [laughs] Yeah.

DM: Win some elections and the pension's pretty good.

BPS: "I get criticized all the time." Kelvin didn't say this, but I think it's the experience of even a cabinet minister. You think you have some power when you're a cabinet minister but the margins in which you can operate are very small between the Premier's office and the bureaucracy. You can make a lot less of a difference than you might think. "Oh, you're the Minister? Oh, okay. It doesn't make much of a difference."

HSF: No. The Ministers are not involved in anything, at all. Zero. Zip. I've seen that firsthand. Kelvin might have a little bit because he's smarter than everyone else.

DM: It's remarkable to me that they have a lawyer – Kelvin's a lawyer – and the Minister of Justice and Attorney General is not a lawyer, provincially, right?

HSF: Well, they're two different people, actually. The Minister of Justice and the Attorney General are not the same person.

DM: How does that work?

HSF: Well, it's actually pretty clever at some level.

BPS and DM: [laughs]

HSF: But yeah, if you look at that, you might find the Health Minister is the Attorney General.

BPS: People go into politics for different reasons. Some people are people persons and they just like politics because you're with people all the time. Some people are idea politicians – I think some people genuinely go into politics because they have ideas and they think if they work their way to getting elected they can make a difference. What happens to people like that? All of these questions are not intended to be rhetorical. I'm just genuinely curious. It takes a lot to get to any kind of position of authority – even a Parliamentary Secretary, let alone a cabinet minister – then you get there and discover that, between the PMO[86] telling you what to do and the civil service telling you what to do, you're more like a working stiff than somebody who's actually creating policy. Do people know that going in or does it come as a shock?

HSF: Oh, I don't agree with that. I don't agree with that assessment. It might be the case in some cases, but when I was in Cabinet, the first thing was public face, you have to be a lens, but there were Cabinet committees and there was Treasury Board. I sat on Treasury Board for five years as a cabinet minister and then after for two years, even when I wasn't in Cabinet, and serious stuff happened there. It was like the conduit between everything and a chokepoint. So, in that regard, my experience was if you wanted to – and I wanted to – you could really have a big impact there, and it's a big deal. It's regulations at the federal level. It is budgetary stimulus, international treaties, judgeships, royal mercy – a couple royal mercy things came up – citizenship, all that; it's the whole kit and kaboodle.

BPS: Just go back a second. You were saying cabinet ministers don't do anything. Are you talking about the contemporary provincial scene?

HSF: At the provincial scene.

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86 PMO stands for Prime Minister's Office.

BPS: Ah, ok. So, in Ottawa when you found you were involved with the Treasury Board – which is the inner sanctum of Cabinet where well-meaning, but unduly expensive ideas go to die. You've got to make a lot of tough choices there. Like, it's easy as the Minister to go, "Here, get what you want." Then somebody – the grown-ups at the centre – has to actually sometimes say, "No." As you said, it's kind of a chokepoint there. All governments have them and it's always necessary because somebody has to be in the middle saying, "Well, you can't do this and this and this." So, my guess is you probably found, when you get to that level, people are less ideological than people on the outside think; some real serious thinking goes on.

HSF: Yeah. The people are smart and the bureaucrats are smart. At the provincial level, I understand that it's not as broad as it is federally. You know what, quite frankly, one Crown Corporation, like Canada Post, is bigger than – in monetary terms – the province of Manitoba. You know? So, yeah, it's mind-boggling. Procurement, strategic reviews every four years we'd go through. Going through the defense department, that's an amazing experience and I did it twice. I don't know who is on the Treasury Board now, with the Liberal government, but if you want to know who is actually running the government, don't look necessarily at the Treasury Board President but who else is on that board? People that the Prime Minister can trust.

BPS: It's a tough job too in the sense that you have to say no to your colleagues and friends.

HSF: That's right, and they have to report to you. So, who's whose boss? It's supposed to be consensus. Yeah, it was just amazing. When I was out of Cabinet, I didn't really care because I was still on Treasury Board. I just wanted to apply knowledge.

BPS: Well, it sounds like almost the ideal job in the sense that you could actually go and you could come for an argument, like the

Monty Python[87] skit. You can actually have smart people arguing things on their intellectual merits and win or lose on the basis of how persuasive your argument actually was, rather than the electoral politics and the optics, and so on and so forth.

HSF: That's right.

BPS: It kind of sounds exactly like what would have been the ideal gig for you in government.

HSF: Yeah, or sometimes you give direction and policy is not implemented and it turns out to be a big shemozzle; the Experimental Lakes[88] is a good example of that.

BPS: Oh, are we talking about COVID now?

HSF: No, no Experimental Lakes. I just give that as a very small, micro, local example of where I insisted that they have a way out; to have a third party take it over before anything was done – and they didn't do that – and it turned out to be a big headache, in Winnipeg.

DM: This was your provincial experience?

HSF: No, this was federally, but I just give it because the Fresh Water Institute is on campus and all my naturalist friends are all hyper-interested in that area. Most people wouldn't know what it was, but I sure did and explained, at the time, that you need a communication plan. You need a third party. At the University of Manitoba or Lakehead University or some international agency, if you don't have that – and people think it's going to close – you're just going to get killed. They didn't have a communication plan and they got killed on that issue.

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87 Monty Python was a British comedy troupe with a sketch comedy TV show that first aired on the BBC in 1969.

88 IISD Experimental Lakes Area an internationally unique freshwater research station comprised of 58 pristine lakes in northwestern Ontario.

BPS: I remember that from some years ago. I seem to remember that the federal government basically tried to privatize this stuff at the government level before. I just remember they got a lot of negative publicity about it. I remember at the time thinking, "Well, why are you doing this?" Which is kind of consistent with your story from the inside. They obviously had an idea but they didn't share that with the public.

HSF: I still don't know what happened there, exactly. You know, you delay things so that they have it all proper, so that there is a communication plan and an action plan and sometimes it's not implemented properly. Then you get things like that and that's just a micro-example, but, you know, pick your poison: EH101 helicopters[89], you know, or F-18[90] issues or F-35[91].

BPS: Yeah, it's a hard lesson in public law. You look at the flow-chart for the University. Ministers, even Prime Ministers, even decide a lot of things. If you don't have bureaucracy on your side, it can get sandbagged in all kinds of ways. There could be unintentional bungling, there could be inertia, it could just be, "Yeah, well, the Prime Minister says a lot of things, but he's not going to be here in two years."

DM: That's the problem with deputy ministers.

HSF: Well, that's the thing with Parliamentarians. No Parliamentarian believes that they will be a former Parliamentarian.

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89 EH101 (now AW101) helicopters are medium-lift helicopters used civilly and in the military.

90 An F-18 is a combat jet often used as a fighter and attack aircraft. It was introduced in 1983.

91 An F-35 is a combat jet often used for strike missions that has electronic intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance abilities. It was introduced in 2006.

BPS: [laughs] I haven't heard that before. Tell me about that. What does that mean?

HSF: It means, in many cases, people assume that everyone else might lose but they won't lose. Like Richardson[92]... what was his name from Calgary? He gave us a great story. He won the '88 election by, you know, 40,000 votes and when Kim Campbell[93] was being voted in (the riding was Calgary Centre), and he was seeing the results coming in across the country. He's saying, "Oh, I feel bad for so-and-so," and "So-and-so lost their seat. I feel sorry for all those guys." Then it came to him and he lost by 20,000 votes. So, there was like a 60,000 vote swing. The lesson there is: you're not guaranteed. Don't think you're guaranteed a seat. Though, there are some, I guess. Like Portage-Lisgar has been Conservative since the beginning of Confederation, but, other than that, there's only a few ridings that can say that.

BPS: Yeah, well, Winston Churchill[94], upon winning the Second World War, was immediately voted out of Office.

HSF: That's right. [laughs]

BPS: So, that can happen to just about anyone.

HSF: Yeah, what can you do for us lately?

DM: Yeah, just won World War II. That's great. You've made your contribution. Good-bye.

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92 Lee Richardson was a part of the Progressive Conservative party and was the MP for Calgary Southeast from 1988-1993 and the MP for Calgary Centre from 2004-2012.

93 Kim Campbell is a Canadian politician who served as the 19th Prime Minister of Canada for a few months in 1993. During her career, she also held positions as MLA for Vancouver-Point Grey (1986 – 1988) and as MP for Vancouver Centre (1988 – 1993).

94 Winston Churchill was a British politician who served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940-1945.

BPS: He won the George Cross[95] and he told the King, "Well, thank you Your Majesty for giving me the metal, now that the people have given me the boot."

DM: [laughs] Well, the only story about electoral politics that I remember from being a kid, I was about eleven when my dad became a deputy minister in PEI. It doesn't sound important at all, except he was in charge of tourism, and tourism was the number one industry in PEI. So, it was a pretty big deal. There were literally millions of dollars and thousands of jobs and whatever else. Anyway, he worked for a minister named Gordon MacInnis[96]. One year, after there was a re-election, Gordon was running against the leader of the PCs: the unfortunately named Mel Gass[97]. They announced that Mel Gass had won and my dad left the room. He didn't say much. Then he came back and he said, "You know, I didn't expect it would affect me that much. I liked working with this guy," because the Minister was a guy who largely said, "You run the department. I'll take care of the public stuff. It'll be fine and we'll make the tough decisions together, but it'll be okay." He thought Gordon had lost and he didn't expect it to affect him emotionally. Turns out, they had made a mistake. You should have seen my dad jumping around when they fixed their mistake and Gordon won, because you never think the guy that you work for is going to be the guy who loses. The government was clearly going to stay in place, but there are always shifts with every election. That was something that my dad found very challenging: dealing with that. He wasn't even the guy on the ballot! So, I can't even imagine what it would have been like being the guy on the ballot. Which is, of course, something we're going to get into with you in a bit. So, can we move now to bridge between your student political days and

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95 The George Cross is a British civilian and military decoration for great acts of heroism or courage in circumstances of extreme danger.

96 Gordon MacInnis is a Canadian politician from PEI. He was the MLA for 2nd Queens from 1986-1996.

97 Melbourne (Mel) Gass was a Canadian politician from PEI. He was the MP for Malpeque in PEI from 1979-1988 and led the Progressive Conservative Party of Prince Edward Island from 1988-1990.

when you decided to go into being a political candidate. You were a behind-the-scenes guy, which is one of the things my dad was before he became a deputy minister, and you decided to run. Was that a big decision for you? Usually those two things don't really go together that well: a behind the scenes, president-of-the-party type of person to then go be a candidate. Was that a big decision for you?

HSF: Well, first of all, I lost a nomination against Heather Stefanson[98] in Tuxedo when Gary Filmon[99] stepped down. Then, I was co-chair of the PC Party 2000 Policy Convention with Caroline Sopuck, Bob Sopuck's[100] wife. Then, I was elected president of the PC Party, you're right. One Member, one vote, which will be important when we get to the next thing. At the time, you'll recall the federal Conservative Party had split between Joe Clark's[101] PC and Stephen Harper's Canadian Alliance. The PC Party of Manitoba had nothing to do with the PC Party federally, at the time. That goes back to Mulroney[102] days; Gary Filmon wisely separated the two parties and, amazingly, won the 1998 election, notwithstanding the unpopular federal Conservative Prime Minister. Anyway, so I'm president of the PC Party, humming along. Stephen Harper comes onto the scene and he wants to unite the right and I'm like, "Yeah! That seems like a good idea!" I'm head of the PC Party, so, I decided in March of 2003 – I'm now in my second term of the PC Party – that I would run as the Canadian Alliance candidate in Charleswood-St. James-Assiniboia under the

98 Heather Stefanson is a Canadian politician from Manitoba. She has been the MLA of Manitoba for Tuxedo since 2000 and is the current Manitoba Minister of Health and Seniors Care.

99 Gary Filmon is a Canadian politician who served as the 19th premier of Manitoba from 1988-1999 and was the leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Manitoba from 1983-2000.

100 Robert (Bob) Sopuck is a Canadian politician from the Conservative Party who served as an MP for the Manitoba riding of Dauphin – Swan River – Neepawa from 2010 to 2019.

101 Charles Joseph (Joe) Clark is a Canadian politician who served as the 16th Prime Minister of Canada from 1979-1980.

102 Brian Mulroney served as Canada's 18th Prime Minister from 1984-1993.

auspices of bringing the right together: "Unite the Right". So, that's how that transition happened. So, as a PCer, provincially, and without a track record and education, I would do that. So, in September of '03 I became the Canadian Alliance candidate. Now, the politics of that was brutal because the PC Party of Manitoba was dominated by federal Joe Clark supporters.

DM: You mean Peter McKay[103], right? Was Joe Clark the leader at that time?

HSF: It might have been Peter McKay. I call them Joe Clark types, but maybe it was Peter McKay. So, people like Dorothy Dobbie[104]. I think everyone on the Board was against me and they wanted me to step aside as president of the PC Party. They tried all sorts of power plays. Anyways, my counter to it was, "I'm elected by the members. So, if you want to take it to the membership, that's fine." I wasn't elected by the Board and that's a big difference. Being elected by the membership gives you a legitimate mandate. So, they couldn't get rid of me – the Board. Though, I said, "I bet that 70% of our members support the Canadian Alliance, at least 70%, and you can challenge me on that." They never did. I ran in the contested nomination for the Canadian Alliance and there were people that went bananas there. Dorothy Dobbie was one that just didn't want any kind of merger or anything. So, I won the Canadian Alliance nomination and two people supported me: one was Clayton Maness[105], who was a former cabinet minister, and the other was Harry Enns[106]. To them, it made complete sense.

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103 Peter McKay is a Canadian politician who served as the MP for the Central Nova riding in Nova Scotia from 1997-2015.

104 Dorothy Dobbie is a Canadian politician who served as the MP for the Winnipeg South riding from 1988-1993.

105 Clayton Maness is a Canadian politician who served as a Manitoba MLA in the riding of Morris from 1981-1995.

106 Harry Enns was a Canadian politician who served as a Manitoba MLA in the riding of Rockwood-Iberville from 1966-1969 and then in the riding of Lakeside from 1969-2004. He also held many cabinet minister positions throughout his career.

DM: Sorry, Harry Enns or Henry Enns[107]?

HSF: Harry Enns. Henry Enns is your predecessor on –

DM: At the CCDS[108]. Yeah.

HSF: Anyways, then the parties merged in '03.

DM: Federally.

HSF: Federally – and the Manitoba elite, or whatever, PC Party elite, went and supported Belinda Stronach[109]. I supported Stephen Harper, basically because I thought he was a smart guy and spoke common-sense, even if it was contrary to the mainstream media. He seemed like a guy who could be relied on. Anyways, he won the leadership and I won another contested nomination where all the Belinda people supported the other guy. By the way, in that period, I did write my LSAT[110] and was accepted into law school.

DM: I was going to ask you why you didn't go to law school.

HSF: It was my backup, but I got elected as an MP.

DM: [laughs] "I was too busy running the government." It was a good backup.

HSF: [laughs] That's in my book too. I needed a law degree to fight MPI. So, anyway, that's how I made the transition. Unite the right, and if not, run as the Canadian Alliance candidate. So, I was able to get the Canadian Alliance candidate nomination, contested, and then get the Conservative Party nomination, contested. This was

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107 Henry Enns was a prominent Canadian disability rights activist.

108 Canadian Centre on Disability Studies.

109 Belinda Stronach is a Canadian politician who served as the MP for the Ontario riding of Newmarket – Aurora from 2004-2008.

110 Law School Admission Test.

the election that Paul Martin[111] was going to win by 250 seats and Glen Murray[112], very well-known Liberal mayor of Winnipeg, decided to run in the riding. By the way, Glen Murray is a very formidable candidate. I remember when he made his announcement. I was at a park waiting to respond if any media wanted me to respond, and none did, but I had never seen so many media cameras and reporters in my life, to that point. It was unbelievable; his announcement. So, that happened.

DM: Were you worried?

HSF: Well, I only worry about things I can worry about and what was in my control was door knocking, and reaching out, and building a team, and all the things that needed to be done or that I could do, and that's what I did. I made sure that I was not only the hardest working person, but seen to be working hard. Then, the smoke cleared and we won by 736 votes. It was the only urban seat, outside of Alberta, that the Conservatives won in that election. The photos and stuff that I used did not reveal that I was in a wheelchair, because there are a lot of stereotypes, especially at that time.

DM: Was this your first electoral victory?

HSF: Federally, yes. So, that's 2004.

DM: Right. You didn't even have a lot of name recognition at that time.

HSF: Only with my family.

DM: [laughs] If they weren't going to vote for you already there's a problem.

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111 Paul Martin is a Canadian politician who served as the 21st Prime Minister of Canada from 2003-2006.

112 Glen Murray is a Canadian politician who served as the 41st mayor of Winnipeg from 1998-2004.

HSF: Well, they didn't live in my area, unfortunately. I had a little bit of name recognition from UMSU, from when I was going to university at the time, and my high school was in the area. As I said in one of the debates, a lot of my girlfriends still lived in the area – ex-girlfriends lived in the area – and they were all voting for me. But, there are interesting things that people say. I was on CJOB[113], I think it was Geoff Currier[114], and I was doing an interview. "So, you know, Steven, you're running in a safe Liberal seat. The mayor of Winnipeg is running; nationally known, hand-picked by the Prime Minister, will go straight to Cabinet. Especially given your condition as a quadriplegic, why would anyone vote for you rather than the mayor?" And I said, "The people of Charleswood – St. James – Assiniboia would rather have someone paralyzed from the neck down than the neck up."

DM: There you go. That's not the only famous exchange you've ever had.

HSF: I'm not sure what you're referring to.

DM: I may have this wrong, but I distinctly remember you saying to another Member of Parliament – when he basically challenged you to a fight – that if he wanted to fight you were going to run him over. Do I have that right? [laughs]

HSF: Yeah. It was something like that.

DM: To be fair, I will tell you that as a person in a wheelchair, who's been overlooked occasionally or looked passed certainly on a physical level, I was happy to see somebody standing up and being strong, and very forceful. I wasn't entirely sure that that was the level of debate I wanted to see in Parliament, but… [laughs]

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113 680 CJOB is a commercial AM radio station in Winnipeg, MB.

114 Geoff Currier is a radio host for 680 CJOB.

HSF: On my YouTube channel, I just found this clip[115] about three weeks ago, but it's from '05, the winter election. That was when the slogan for the Conservatives was "Stand up for Canada". So, I'm on Portage Avenue next to Stephen Harper and a reporter – like the whole National Press Gallery[116] is there, it's a big announcement – asks, "Your slogan is 'Stand up for Canada'. It seems rather insensitive given that your candidate is a quadriplegic," something to that effect. I'm stunned. Harper doesn't miss a beat and he says what he says, but I think that might be the stupidest question in the history of mainstream media.

DM: Yeah, it's a little dumb. The clip must be well worth it. I say all the time, "I walk into a room," without thinking twice about it. Other people find it funny, but how else would you say it? I rolled in? When somebody says, "I rolled into work," it usually implies some sort of sloth. I'm not a big fan of that. So, "I walked in. Let's get to work." To me, it was very funny that you were willing to say that out loud on the floor of Parliament. I'm pretty sure that no one will ever get to say that again quite in that context. You sat in Parliament, you sat in Cabinet; what was your greatest personal achievement, do you think?

HSF: Well, the moment I'll remember is just being on the floor during Parliament. It just didn't seem real. This was eight years after my accident. I joke about it, but it's not really a joke: I went to see some of the people that told me I would be institutionalized because I don't think they ever thought that the institution would be the Parliament of Canada.

DM: [laughs] No?

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115 "2005 Campaign office with Stephen Harper including disability question" (15 May 2021), online (video): *YouTube* <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xo1S8QjOMUk> [perma.cc/87N3-JW2F].

116 The Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery is an association of accredited journalists who cover news that relates to Parliament and other Ottawa-based governmental organizations.

HSF: I say it in a joking manner – and I hate doing that – but otherwise, it doesn't even register because if you say I was going to be institutionalized with senior citizens for the rest of my life when I was 23, it's too depressing, but that was the fate. So, that was an amazing experience. They had to change the rules to allow my caregiver to sit next to me – a stranger in the house – which was good. I remember, because we were in opposition, I sat next to the Speaker and the Parliamentary architect would explain the things that they had to move. They had to move the bench and cut this thing so I could roll into the chamber without obstacle. I thanked him and I said, "You know, you realize that all of these changes are temporary?" "What does that mean?" "Cause in few months, I'll be on the government side of the house." And he says, "Ha, ha, ha." I looked at him and I said, "And when that happens, I'm going to run for Speaker." And you sort of see him go apoplectic: "What would be the renos for that!?" Anyways, I was joking. So, those are kind of some fun memories. Of course, taking my parents into the chamber was a special moment because they really had gone through a lot. I remember a Senator came in and was very excited to shake my hand. He reached out, saw he couldn't shake my hand – and, you know, my parents are here – so he ends up patting me on the head.

DM: That happens a lot, even for those of us that can shake hands.

HSF: [laughs] Yeah, he meant well. He's a Liberal, by the way. So, what can you do? I forgot what your question was.

DM: What was the accomplishment, throughout your time in Parliament, that made you the most proud?

HSF: I did everything everyone else did, as an MP, and just being visible without saying anything. If you talk to my former colleagues, they would soon not even notice the wheelchair.

DM: Yeah. It's very funny, you and I think about the world in much the same way. I mean, yes, we want to accomplish certain things and yes, it's important to get the job done, but simply by being

visible and productive, that can have a great deal of impact for a great many people. If not for us, certainly for the people we interact with. If your mind is open, you go, "Okay, wait a minute. Why can't I get this done? If he can get it done being in a wheelchair, why can't I get this done, if I'm not? I really don't have that big an excuse for not getting whatever it is, for getting it done." So, it doesn't surprise me that you said, "Look, my existence probably had a fair amount of impact; my presence had a fair amount of impact." I agree with you that that is probably true for a lot of people who've had disabilities going in: a simple presence can have a very serious impact. So, you ended up leaving the federal government and decided to go back into provincial politics as an elected Member of St. James[117], was it?

HSF: Yeah, Assiniboia[118], which is in St. James. Just before we leave the federal scene, if I may just make an observation about Stephen Harper. He could have stopped me from getting the nomination, but he let me run. He didn't have to make me Shadow Minister[119] of Health, but he let me do that and allowed me to demonstrate that I could do it; same with Parliamentary Secretary and Cabinet. Where a lot of people say, "No," he was focused on, "Can he do the job?" When it came to my caregiver, my caregiver would need to come into the Cabinet meetings with me. It would be the only non-Cabinet Member in the Cabinet meeting, or at the Treasury Board meeting. I thought that was very broad-minded of him to let that happen. There was a certain risk to that, but my caregivers, first of all, couldn't care less about the politics, which is amazing, because everyone within a kilometre radius of that place would give their left arm to be in just one meeting. What that demonstrates is if a C4 quadriplegic can bring their caregiver into a Cabinet meeting of the most sensitive nature of topics that exist in the country, then any workplace in Canada can accommodate a caregiver to allow someone to reach their full potential, but also the

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117 St. James is a provincial electoral district in Winnipeg, MB.

118 Assiniboia is a provincial electoral district in Winnipeg, MB.

119 A shadow minister is a member of the Official Opposition that scrutinises the government's positions and holds them accountable.

full potential of whatever organization they are with. At the end of the day, you want people to make your organization thrive and there's a lot of people that can help do that, especially if you are a little open-minded or accommodating.

DM: I can certainly relate because for the first two years that I went to school, my mother had to come to school. It was the only way they'd let me go to school. They refused to do anything with me, because they were afraid I might fall down. I was on crutches at the time – crutches and canes. Literally, my mother had to come to school with me because they were unwilling to provide a caregiver at my school; to provide an educational assistant[120], or whatever they're calling them now. This was 1981. So, it wasn't yesterday, for sure, but my mother had to do that. So, it's nice to see some advancement from our public institutions over that period of time.

HSF: Yeah. Well, I can't believe that that would be the case today. I would hope it's not.

DM: Hopefully not. There can be a lot of barriers put in the way besides the stairs or the physical barriers that that we face.

HSF: Yeah, that's true. Though, why are there stairs? Really. If you're on the ground level, why do you need stairs?

DM: Don't get me wrong, I give Mr. Harper a fair amount of credit, but I also think that you must have had to at least broach the conversation, because if you hadn't been willing to broach the conversation, the assumption might have been that you weren't interested, that you were incapable or whatever. So, it's partly you.

HSF: Well, that's interesting. I don't think we ever had that conversation.

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120 An educational assistant is a professional that offers students with particular needs or learning difficulties support.

DM: You must have talked about how you were going to bring your caregiver into meetings and such things.

HSF: No.

DM: No? It just happened?

HSF: He knew that was the deal. He's a perceptive guy. You don't have to explain everything to him. He's the sort of guy that just looks at the situation, "So, this guy got nominated twice, did his MBA, got elected to Parliament; okay, we'll just see how far this takes us." Even one-on-one meetings my caregiver would be with us from time-to-time and he never raised the issue once. When I was alone with Harper, he would even be humble enough to help me with a glass of water or something. Think about that, the Prime Minister is helping you with a glass of water. I've never spoken publicly about that – I guess I've never really been asked – but now that we're talking about it, he's a very humble guy.

BPS: I just want to ask you a bit about the theatre of politics versus the personal reality: are some people in politics just really good at theatre? I was going to ask you this in the context of Harper. My understanding of Harper as an individual is very different than the way he projected; he's actually much more impressive in many ways than the way the Canadian public saw him as kind of grumpy, cold, and austere. Did you experience that? That people would see you on TV or see you on the Parliamentary Channel[121] and get one perception of you, which is quite different from the person that you actually are, or think that you are, or did you feel they pretty much got you from your public performances?

HSF: I don't think you can judge people based on what you see on TV. Stephen Harper was a funny, smart, reflective, and hard-working guy. I had an issue in 2012 where my neck essentially collapsed. The rod that was inserted in my original accident had

[121] The Parliamentary Channel, now known as the Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC), provides television coverage of public and government affairs.

come out and I had to talk to Harper face-to-face. It was one of the hardest things because I didn't want to let him down. You know, I had to do this surgery that, as far as I know, had never been done before. It was just terrible and, I'll just say, we had a very human discussion. After the surgery, he had come in from someplace like Timbuktu[122] or something, and he took the time to come to see me, even though I was still high.

DM: Coming off the medications associated with the surgery?

HSF: Yeah, and the morphine. He took my family, who were with me, with his motorcade, to Earls.

BPS: Wow.

DM: The restaurant.

HSF: Yeah. What do you say to that? Also, Nigel Wright[123], who got a horrific ride in the Canadian media, is probably one of the best people I've ever met in public life. I don't know what happened on that issue.

DM: Which issue was it? I forget which one.

BPS: Uh, he was in the Mike Duffy[124]-gate. I think Nigel Wright basically said, "Well, what does it take to make this go away? I will pay the expenses out of my own pocket." I think that's what happened.

DM: Right. Got it.

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122 Timbuktu is a city in northern Mali. It is often used in English as slang to represent anywhere far away.

123 Nigel Wright served as the 13th Chief of Staff of the Prime Minister's Office from 2010-2013.

124 Mike Duffy is a former Canadian politician who served as a senator representing Prince Edward Island from 2009-2021.

HSF: Every experience I've had with him was positive. So, those are examples of people who have, you know, really stepped up. Now, I'd just like to say two more things. For the issues around my medical stuff, what I decided to do was work with my friend Linda McIntosh[125] to write a book about basically everything.[126] So, if people really were interested, I could just say, "Read the book." "How do you go to the bathroom?" "Read the book." Most people wouldn't even bother. It was transparent and, you know, that's fine. The other thing though, which is reality, people in Ottawa – many people, not all but many people – lose perspective. They measure themselves on their career and only on their career; they sacrifice their families, their marriages, and time with their kids. So, when they stop seeing the wheelchair, they start seeing a threat to their progression. The worst politics is sometimes found in your own caucus.

BPS: Who says that? In "Yes Minister"[127], I think, which is a fictionalized version based on the Crossman[128] diaries.

HSF: That show is a documentary, Bryan. I don't know.

BPS: People who have seen it and been in politics say, like, "Yeah, dead on." It's discussed in there that people often get along better in opposition parties than their own colleagues because they are not in direct competition. "I'm not competing with you for a Cabinet post. You guys aren't in government right now, so you go do your thing and I'll do mine, but the guy down the hall might be competing with me for the chair of a committee or Parliamentary

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125 Linda McIntosh is a former Canadian politician who served as an MLA for the riding of Assiniboia in Winnipeg from 1990-1999.

126 Linda McIntosh, *What Do You Do If You Don't Die?: The Steven Fletcher Story* (Winnipeg: Heartland Associates, 2008).

127 Yes Minister is a British political satire sitcom that aired from 1980-1984.

128 Richard Crossman was a British politician who is known for writing *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, a highly revealing three-volume account of his time in politics.

Secretary or Cabinet or something," exactly what you were just saying.

DM: What am I missing here? Is it that important to those people? Is that the thing? If I got into politics and got elected, the first thing you do is do the job.

HSF: Aw, you're so adorable Darcy.

BPS: Come on, you've been living in an academic environment for most of your adult life. You can't understand how people could be petty?

DM: [laughs]

BPS: I know we're in opposite corridors, dude, but you actually find this surprising?

DM: But you're in public service for a reason!

HSF: I can't tell how old you are Darcy without the hair, but…

DM: [laughs] Well, I'm not grey yet! I wouldn't be grey even if I had hair. I'm 45! It's funny to me – Bryan knows this because we've worked on a lot of stuff which gets us nothing but a significant amount of aggravation, and we do it together – because I would think that if I walk out of a place hating the people I work with, it's time to find a different place to walk out of.

HSF: Well, let's go to a local example: the Manitoba Legislature. Toxic. One of the things that Brian couldn't deal with was that I didn't really care about my career as an MLA. I didn't care if I was in Cabinet or not, or committee or not. They couldn't take the job away from me because I was there, basically, voluntarily. I was happy to help in any way I could, but he didn't want any help. In fact, he discouraged it.

DM: We are talking Brian Pallister here, right?

HSF: Yeah, and that's why I introduced so many private Member's bills; I had more private Member's bills, at one point, than the government had bills.

BPS: Did you find that people were unable to accept that you were doing this because you actually believed in it. They just figured, "What is this guy trying to get at? He must want more publicity. He must want something," and they had trouble accepting that you were doing it just because you actually believed in this stuff.

HSF: Yeah, never happened before. How do you control somebody like that?

BPS: [laughs] "This guy's doing this because he believes in it? Oh, come on!" It doesn't compute, right?

HSF: Organ donation[129], there were a couple on insurance[130] (not just MPI but general insurance), Indigenous voting rights[131] – that was a zinger, that was the last bill I brought in. I had resolutions. I brought in stuff on mining. I brought in Seal River[132], as a potential park.[133] They just couldn't understand. Also, when I was an Independent, I always made sure that my reply to the Speech from the Throne was better than the Speech from the Throne.

BPS: That must have been tough, in a sense, because if you're in Office you have the whole bureaucracy basically working for you and helping you put together every line of the Throne Speech: the staff, the charts, the tables. It doesn't matter which party you're from, it's part of the job of the Office, and you had to compete with that with basically no staff, or almost no staff? How did you do that?

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129 Bill 213, *The Gift of Life Act (Human Tissue Gift Act Amended),* 2nd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017 (withdrawn 2 November 2017).

Bill 209, *The Gift of Life Act (Human Tissue Gift Act Amended),* 3rd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017 (first reading 23 November 2017).

Bill 212, *The Gift of Life Act (Human Tissue Gift Act Amended)*, 4th Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2018 (first reading 5 December 2018).

130 Bill 225, *The Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation Amendment Act,* 2nd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017 (first reading 23 May 2017).

Bill 210, *The Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation Amendment Act,* 3rd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017 (first reading 27 November 2017).

Bill 208, *The Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation Amendment Act*, 4th Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2018 (first reading 5 December 2018).

Bill 202, *The Insurance Amendment Act*, 2nd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017 (first reading 29 May 2017).

Bill 203, *The Insurance Amendment Act,* 3rd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017 (first reading 30 November 2017).

Bill 210, *The Insurance Amendment Act*, 4th Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2018 (first reading 4 December 2018).

131 Bill 231, *The Indigenous Representation and Related Amendments Act*, 4th Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2019 (first reading 8 April 2019).

132 Seal River is a river in the northern region of Manitoba. It was nominated for the Canadian Heritage Rivers System in 1987 for its natural and ecological importance and was officially listed in 1992.

133 Manitoba, Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, *Debates and Proceedings*, 41-2, vol 70 No 82B (9 November 2017) at 3625-3626 (Hon Steven Fletcher).

HSF: No staff and I paid for the printing myself, because they wouldn't pay for the printing. Oh! On the conflict-of-interest legislation[134] that I introduced; I wrote it up – based on Saskatchewan's – myself. Then, they made some comments through Legislative Council, fine. But they wouldn't let me introduce it because they said it had to be in both official languages. So, I asked them to translate it and they said, "Oh, we can't do that until June." This is in February! So, I said, "Well, I'll translate it." So, I put it through a translating program and gave it to them. They said, "Well, it has to be better translated." I said, "Why? Who is going to notice? It will be years before anyone would notice if there are any errors." They said, "It's just what we do." So, I got a professional translator guy and paid him $1500 to translate this bill – it was a substantial bill – on principle now, because not only should there be a conflict- of-interest legislation, but they were obviously putting up boundaries. They still wouldn't accept it! So, I want to the clerk and I said, "Look, this is ridiculous. I've read the Supreme Court ruling and it says that at second reading legislation has to be in both official languages, but in the rules, there's nothing talking about first reading. It could be in either language. So, this is what's going to happen next week. I'm going to introduce this bill in French or I can introduce it in both official languages." I introduced it in both official languages. That's the kind of pettiness… They tried every bureaucratic move and I never got reimbursed for that $1500, either. There are so many things wrong with that. The Leg is a very petty place. They didn't want any conflict-of-interest legislation, of course they didn't!

DM: A bunch of people that didn't know they were in a conflict.

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134 Bill 212, *The Conflict of Interest Act*, 2nd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017 (first reading 25 April 2017).

Bill 208, *The Conflict of Interest Act*, 3rd Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2017 (defeated 17 May 2018).

Bill 216, *The Conflict of Interest Act*, 4th Sess, 41st Leg, Manitoba, 2018 (first reading 4 December 2018).

HSF: Oh, the conflict… oh my god. They know that they are in a conflict by any ethical standard but not, maybe, by the letter of the law.

DM: If you're in a moral, ethical dilemma, the law says: disclose. It doesn't say stop, but it does say disclose.

HSF: You're assuming that they are in a moral dilemma.

DM: Okay, what am I missing? Morality, is that what we're getting at?

BPS: Well, you have to have sufficient self-awareness to know that you have a dilemma to feel the dilemma. I think is what he's saying.

HSF: Yeah: self-awareness.

DM: I'm wondering – and this is just coming out of what you said about Harper and about the current Premier – how much of your experience in these two fields, that should be very much related, is determined by the attitude of leadership towards persons with disabilities?

HSF: Uh, none.

DM: The reason I say that is you mentioned specifically that Harper was the humble guy who would wordlessly help with whatever you needed. Then suddenly in the provincial sphere, you had a Premier who couldn't understand you because you were taking oral stances that didn't work for him.

HSF: Yeah, okay, in that regard. He used the disability as a barrier. He didn't want a ramp in the Legislature. My office was covered in tarps for nine months so they could do "renovation to the bathroom", but really, they just wanted to get rid of me or annoy me. Yeah, he definitely used the disability in negative ways. He always would say, even in Ottawa – on TV, on the record – things like, "He does pretty good for someone on his meds," or when they

kicked me out of the caucus, "Oh, well, I have a lot of empathy for him given all of the things he has to do to get out of bed"; very condescending, disingenuous stuff, but that's the way he is.

BPS: Can I go back just a bit? We'll come back to this one in a few minutes. I just want to go back to the point I was making about the way people are perceived and the way people are. My sense of Harper is he is the kind of guy that would take you to Earl's and make a point of not alerting the press, not telling anyone about it; just doing it as a human thing to do. I don't know Harper that well myself, I've only met him a couple of times, but I think it's similar to what you said: he's very bright, very reflective, very human, very decent, not ostentatious, didn't wear his heart on his sleeve, did a lot of good stuff as a matter of conscience, but he didn't project that way.

DM: No, he didn't.

BPS: The way he projected to the Canadian public was austere. He was kind of snippy in the way he would react to the opposition and so on and so forth. Do you have any insight into why the public persona that Harper projected was humourless and sometimes on the austere and sour side? Why is it that Stephen Harper projected differently than Stephen Harper actually is? I don't know the answer to that, that's why I'm asking.

HSF: I appreciate that you think that I know the answer to that. The media had it out for Harper, I think there's no question about it. It comes down to education, I think. When we fail in our education and people don't know their history – our history goes back to 2001 – that's a problem. Harper is a serious guy who is well-rounded, well-read, and earned everything on ability. He didn't come from a wealthy family; he was like Thatcher[135] in that regard:

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[135] Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979-1990.

a middle-class family with those values. Trudeau[136] is a contrast to Harper. I have a certain respect for Trudeau in that he plays a different kind of game that probably wouldn't fly in my world, or your world, but it flies in the world, for sure, because he's been spectacularly successful; that's from an objective point of view. He may learn his lines, the way a Shakespearean actor would learn their lines before going on stage, and that seems to be effective. Appearance seems to play a role, which is ironic because we're supposed to be against all that kind of stuff, unless they happen to be on their side of the political spectrum. I don't know. Why did the feminists not like Margaret Thatcher?

DM: Fair enough.

BPS: The thing with Margaret Thatcher, I have the sense that her public persona was pretty close to her private persona. Like, yeah, she pretty much believed everything she said. She kind of reminds me of Sterling Lyon[137]. I didn't know him personally, but he always struck me as a very authentic politician: whatever he was telling you, right or wrong, he actually believed it. I have the sense that Margaret Thatcher, the politician, is pretty much Margaret Thatcher. She didn't really make stuff up or pretend. The little Stephen Harper I know, is kind of a different individual than the Stephen Harper that is in the Canadian public. I think his ultimately being voted out of Office had nothing to do with policy, he just kind of struck you as your grumpy old dad – like, no fun. It had not a whole lot to do with public policy. The little I understand or know about Stephen Harper is that he is an extraordinarily bright guy, very thoughtful, very reflective, did a lot of good stuff and didn't make a big fuss about it. Like, the residential school apology negotiated between Phil Fontaine[138] and Stephen Harper –

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136 Justin Trudeau is the current Prime Minister of Canada. He is the 23rd Prime Minister of Canada and has been serving as such since 2015.

137 Sterling Lyon was a Canadian politician who served as the 17th Premier of Manitoba from 1977-1981.

138 Phil Fontaine is an Aboriginal leader from Canada who served as the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations from 1997-2000.

HSF: And Jim Prentice[139]. Jim Prentice was involved in it.

BPS: Yeah, Jim Prentice played a major role in that. I think we have an interview where we talk about Phil Fontaine running into Stephen Harper at the Pope's funeral in Rome or something; worlds intersecting. Anyway, when Harper did stuff, I think he did a lot of things, politically, as a matter of conscience. Do you think it was primarily the way the media spun him, in Harper's case?

HSF: Yeah, I could give you a dozen anecdotes from my own personal experience. He got a bad rap, a really bad rap. I could give you some anecdotes about Justin Trudeau, actually, that show that he actually was thoughtful too, in a lot of ways. Like, I remember being in a wheelchair race with him and doing some other things. I have no problem with him. I like Harper because he just earned his way and maybe that's why he liked me. I don't know, or maybe he doesn't like me. Who knows?

BPS: If I can ask you this [laughs] existential question. Some people live their lives wondering, "How will I be remembered, what will be my legacy?" My experience in the world, frankly, is I see Supreme Court of Canada judges coming through and it's like, "Can I touch the hem of your garment!?" Then, a few years later they're out and people are like, "Who are you?" You can be a former president of the university, former Prime Minister of Canada, have a big aura about you and then two seconds after you walk out of office it's like, "Mulroney who? Harper who?" What is your experience in the political world? Are people constantly thinking, "I want to leave behind legislation. I want to be remembered for this." Do more of them have this acute sense of "I'm just here for a little while. It's just a footprint in the sand. I just have to do my best for a little while, most people won't remember me." I'm just curious about the point of view about how we live in our lives. I know a lot of people in my world wonder, "Am I going to be remembered? Am I going

[139] Jim Prentice was a Canadian politician who served as the 16th Premier of Alberta from 2014-2015.

to have my name be on a building?" You know, I work in a building and until Darcy and I did a book about it, most people didn't know the actual person it was named after. So, you've had a relatively lengthy career to look back on this stuff. What's your sense of politicians? Are they relatively legacy oriented? Are they more acutely aware of just being there for a little while? How do they tend to look at the world that way?

HSF: I don't know. I don't think it's that binary: everyone is an individual, and so on. If you look at the provincial guys and gals, this is the best job they will ever have and they will try to keep it as long as they can, and that goes right across the spectrum. I initially thought the PC Party was quite lucky to have Brian because, you know, he didn't need the job and brought new ideas, but I didn't realize, sort of, the psychopathic narcissistic, petty, jealous… I think he is a guy who wants to be remembered, but, if he is remembered, will be remembered for things that you would rather not be remembered for, or I could be wrong. Federally, I think there's a lot of well-meaning people on all sides, but in the long run, we're all forgotten, right? My motivation, part of it, at least early on, was to circumvent MPI. You know. It was survival, I guess, thinking about it. I would have survived another way, but –

DM: Your reason for becoming politically active was to circumvent MPI, originally?

HSF: Well, when I saw that they didn't want me to be an MP, it made me go, "Okay, well then, I'm going to be an MP." My higher probability plan was to go into law and that's why I had that planned. You know, I would like a world, a Canada, where everyone has the ability to reach their full potential as human beings. It doesn't mean that they will and that's not the same as equality. I think everyone is equal under the law and have the fundamental right to life, and so on, but equality of opportunity and, every day, people making the best decisions for themselves, which means the best decisions for their family and the community; that's the society that I would like my niece and grand-nieces and nephews to grow up in.

DM: Right. Let's talk a little bit about floor-crossing. You've talked about how you were kicked out of the caucus of the provincial Progressive Conservative Party and therefore became an Independent. The term "floor crossing" or "crossing the floor" gets used a lot, do you consider what happened to you, or what you decided to do as a result of that, to be crossing the floor?

HSF: Wow. Well, that's the crux of it. Well, it's the how they did it that was annoying because all of my protests and comments were behind the scenes, with the exception of Efficiency Manitoba – and that only came out after the Premier refused to discuss the issue in caucus.[140] He promised that he would and when he did, it was an open meeting. I don't know, Bryan, if you were there or not, but it was in one of the committee rooms and he invited the president of the U of M and some outside consultants and all the staff. So, it wasn't a caucus meeting. I had prepared forty binders full of stuff to make my case and brought them in on a trolley. It was totally disingenuous. So, they had a meeting that I was going to go to and then got told not to. It was two days before I was told what they had done. I found out from Nick Martin[141] in the Free Press[142]. So, had they done it a different way, you know, that would have been better.

DM: Had you been in the room to have the discussion about what the Premier and other members of the caucus expected in public hearings.

HSF: Yeah, I made it clear right from the first caucus meeting that I wasn't prepared to give up any of my parliamentary privileges as an MLA. I would introduce private Member's bills – I'm not going to give that right up – and before I introduce it for a second reading, I'd let the party or the caucus know. You know, all that kind of stuff.

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140 "Bill 19 – The Efficiency Manitoba Act", Manitoba, Legislative Assembly, *The Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs,* 41-2 (23 May 2017) at 190-241.

141 Nick Martin is a retired reporter from the Winnipeg Free Press.

142 The Winnipeg Free Press is a daily broadsheet newspaper in Winnipeg, MB.

DM: Before you'd introduce it for a first reading, you would let the party and caucus know.

HSF: No, I'd introduce it before second reading because that's when it becomes public. I did a whole thing about Parliamentary privilege for the caucus and handed it out to each Member – because they were mostly new – and explained it. Everything is probably going to be fine, but it might not be, and you can't give up your fundamental rights and duties as MLAs. Actually, we're not here to support a political party or a Premier, necessarily. We're here to represent our constituents. So, we all pull in the same direction and have an agreed manifesto, but if it's not on the agenda it's fair game. I'm thinking about organ donation, for example. I ended up introducing a bill on organ donation and conflict-of-interest. Both of those things were not in the manifesto and seemed to be legitimate, but they didn't… So, the way they removed me was a problem. I didn't appreciate it, especially since I didn't even want to run as an MLA. My plan was to continue to work and then run federally again, but the leader of the Conservative Party at the time told me that I should run for the betterment of the Conservative movement in Canada, because at the time there was no Conservative governments and Brian had to win. Brian wanted me to run. So, I agreed to run, for the greater good, in a riding that I had just got schmucked in a few months earlier and where there was an NDP seat. But, I ran and I won.
I had no expectations; just do what I needed to do is an MLA. It also means that they had no control over me.

DM: When you have no expectations, they have no means of control.

HSF: Yeah, my own expectation was just to do my job. It turns out that none of them know how to do their job, except maybe Kelvin. I think Kelvin has experienced severe burn out. Some of the fire

may have died in his soul, which is understandable after, you know, Stu Murray[143] and
Hugh McFadyen[144]. But, I'm ready to go and do all sorts of stuff with a group of people that are playing sponge ball: I want to play hockey, NHL[145] hockey, but they're the sponge ball league. So, I go to my solo sports: do PMBs, and that was even too much. What do you do?

DM: Now, I mean, you've been through floor crossings with people like Belinda Stronachs and others that weren't your own. What's your perception of how the electorate perceives these maneuvers, how other politician perceive these maneuvers, and how political parties perceive these maneuvers? I'm not entirely sure whether you getting kicked out of caucus is the same thing, but clearly there are people who get elected under one banner and then decide to change banners, as it were, change horses mid-stream, as it were.

HSF: And I think that is vitally important. That is a fundamental right. The NDP, like any good Communist-like party, believe it's the party that's number one. Well, as a Conservative, in the spirit of Edmund Burke[146], I have to believe that people should be able to cross the floor or vote the other way on certain issues, because that's the fundamental principle of our parliamentary democracy. When the party becomes all-powerful, you're not representing the people, you're representing the party and I just can't accept that on principle. So, in Manitoba there was this bizarre proviso that wouldn't allow people to change parties, which I think goes against the fundamental principles of parliamentary privilege, the right of

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143 Stuart Murray is a politician from Manitoba who served as the leader of the Opposition in the Manitoba legislature and the leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Manitoba from 2000-2006.

144 Hugh McFadyen is a Canadian politician who served as the leader of the Opposition in the Manitoba legislature and the leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Manitoba from 2006-2012.

145 The National Hockey League is a professional ice hockey league in North America.

146 Edmund Burke was an Irish statesman who served as an MP in the House of Commons of Great Britain from 1765-1794.

association, the right of... everything. It's up to the electorate to make the ultimate decision when the next election comes up. That's what happened with Scott Brison[147]. That's what happened with Belinda Stronach. They both crossed the floor and were re-elected. Fine. Then you go to the guy from Thunder Bay[148], the car guy. I forget his name, great guy. He was Mister in the Liberal government, crossed over. Colin[149], I think, did the same. Bev Desjarlais[150] became an Independent; she was the MP for Churchill[151]. It happens all the time and it's important that it's allowed to happen. One of the democratic reform initiatives that I think would be very good is – to bring it more balanced – to allow to take the party name off the ballot; the way it used to be. So, you're voting for the person and there's no question, "Are you going for the party or the person", because if you're voting for the party and not the person, I think it's a fundamental undermine of the ability of the individual to represent their constituents.

DM: So, is the solution then to not ban the political parties, obviously the political parties help you figure out who forms the government and whatever, but simply changing the way we run the election; the ballot as it were, the means by which you do that. Although, if you think that political parties serve a purpose, and I think that you might agree that they do, why is it that taking that away on election day is helpful?

HSF: Yeah, and that's a great question. Political parties are absolutely essential for our democracy. Show me a country without a multi-party system: you have a totalitarian regime. So, yes, I have a love-hate relationship with political parties.

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147 Scott Brison is a Canadian politician who served as the MP for the Nova Scotia riding of Kings – Hants from 1997-2019.

148 Thunder Bay is a city in western Ontario on Lake Superior.

149 Colin Thatcher is a Canadian politician who served as the Saskatchewan MLA in the riding of Thunder Creek from 1975-1984.

150 Bev Desjarlais was a Canadian politician who served as the MP for the riding of Churchill in Manitoba from 1997-2006.

151 Churchill is a town in northern Manitoba on Hudson Bay.

DM: I'm sincerely asking the question because one of my questions later on, as you may have seen when you looked at the questions, is, "How do we fix it?" At one level, I'm very attracted to the idea of saying to people on election day, "Take away the political party and then tell me what you believe in and I'll decide whether I want to vote for you." But, on the other hand – I'll just take the Liberals in Manitoba – voting for the Liberals in many cases, if you want to have any influence at all on any public policy matter in this province, is a wasted ballot, right? They don't have a party that is going to form any meaningful opposition to anyone, no matter who actually forms the government. They're very unlikely to win the government and they're very unlikely to form a significant opposition. So, isn't it helpful to know that?

HSF: Well, it is under the current circumstance. I was successful in getting them to remove the clause in the Legislative Assembly Amendment Act that supposedly prevented people from crossing the floor once elected.[152] So, that is one thing that could have been done and that is exactly what was done. Although, I had to take it to court[153] – again on my own dime, on principle – and that was $35,000, but was it removed? Yes. So, I declare victory. Although, I was ready to go to the Supreme Court on that, but I couldn't afford to take it to the Supreme Court. By removing it, they made the issue kind of moot, as you guys say. So, that was that. Taking the name of the political party off is one of those things. Public education is very important. Perhaps, increased number of voting days, which I did as Minister; we added some more days and maybe we should add some more on top of that. I think we need to have higher expectations in our elected officials and make the stakes a little higher. I did bring in legislation to reduce the number of MLAs in Manitoba because I really don't think that we're getting value for

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152 Bill 4, *The Legislative Assembly Amendment Act (Member Changing Parties)*, 3rd Sess, 41st Leg, 2017, (assented to 4 June 2018).

153 *Fletcher v Manitoba*, [2018] MJ No 175, 2018 MBQB 104.

money or effort.[154] Now, Saskatchewan's gone the other way, but in Manitoba an MLA is not expected to do much and they don't do much. So, let's reduce the number and make it meaningful.

DM: Well, that's really it. You've said a couple of things in that last answer that are really quite interesting to me because when I look south of the border, I see a very large swath of the conservative wing trying to reduce the ability of some people to vote. So, to hear somebody who is a self-acknowledged Conservative in our country saying, "We need to do more to get people educated and to get people to vote, whoever they vote for." I'm assuming that goes with it: you still want them to vote even if it's not for the person you'd vote for.

HSF: Yeah, well definitions are important. I am a Tory: a Conservative. The Republicans are the opposite of Tories, by definition. So, whatever gong show is going down south of the border is always a gong show. It always has been a gong show. They made a big mistake in 1776 when they left our club and they will never recover unless they join Canada.

BPS: [laughs]

HSF: So, that's that.

DM: [laughs] Fair enough. Fair enough.

HSF: Edmund Burke is my guy and that's the kind of conservatism that I try to emulate and that also means freedom to caucus on different votes, on different things, if it's not a confidence vote. We had a three-whip system in Ottawa: three is you have to vote, two is Parliamentary Secretaries and Cabinet has to vote one way, and one is a pre-vote. That doesn't exist in Manitoba. It's always a confidence vote, it seems.

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154 Bill 203, *The Electoral Divisions Amendment Act*, 2nd Sess, 41st Leg, 2017, (first reading 29 May 2017). Bill 204, *The Electoral Divisions Amendment Act*, 3rd Sess, 41st Leg, 2017, (first reading 3 November 2017).

BPS: Yeah, the middle ground seems to be where the United Kingdom has been going for twenty or thirty years, now. Ironically, it began during Thatcher. The party discipline in the UK is much more strict than it is in Canada.

HSF: I think that is the way to go and I think it served them very well, especially during Brexit[155]. In our case, we're moving to a presidential system in a parliamentary democracy, which is not the way it's supposed to be. Then, provincially, we're not really electing the caliber of people, in a lot of cases, that we would like. Federally, if you base it on ability, it's pretty good overall. I think some of that has to do with more competition: more qualified people will run for MP, than would run for MLA.

BPS: You might disagree on this one, Steven. One of the things that concerns me is the House of Commons only gets bigger, it never gets smaller. Every time there is a redistribution, we add more and more MPs. At what point does it not matter how talented you are? You're just one person in a hundred people, two hundred people, three hundred people, four hundred people. At some point we're going to have so many people in the House of Commons, what chance do you have on the back bench to have any kind of significant voice. US Congress limited its size of the House of Representatives as a constitutional matter. You've mentioned, in your views, maybe we have too many MLAs in Manitoba. It's not a big point, but I'm kind of concerned about the fact that we seem to have a one-way ratchet to constantly increase the number of people in the House of Commons, which, seems to me, is kind of a deterrent to getting involved, because what can you do if you're just one of five hundred people?

HSF: Yeah, well, the way it works now, and will forever, is the quotient is 108,000 per seat, except in provinces like PEI who got

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[155] Brexit is the term used for the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. It is a portmanteau of "British exit".

away with murder when they joined Confederation, as far as Parliamentary representation is concerned.

DM: Yeah, because sending four people from PEI to Ottawa is really [laughs]… I've heard this argument before. I'm from PEI and I hear the Bill Maher[156] argument about how the Dakotas get four senators and California gets two and I said, "If you've got to live through our winters, the least you can do is send three people to Ottawa, because you have to give us one Member of Parliament at least!" [laughs] But that's just the joke, I'm not actually –

HSF: Well, you're actually half right. You guys sent eight Members to Parliament, because you can't have fewer senators than you have MPs.

DM: Right, I hadn't thought of the senators. I get it.

HSF: I want whoever negotiated PEI's entry into Confederation on my negotiation team.

Everyone: [laughs]

HSF: You know? Anyway. That's done. So, 108 is the quotient and there's an escalator clause. So, in order for there to be any more additional seats in a given province, they would have to grow much faster than the national average. So, it'll take forever to get to three hundred and fifty seats.

DM: That's very interesting. So, how much of this is simply – getting back to floor crossing – how much of it, really, is just political theatre? I mean, I remember the Belinda Stronach thing. I remember Chuck Cadman[157] voting to uphold the government – I think it was under Paul Martin. He didn't cross the floor, he was

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156 Bill Maher is an American comedian, political commentator, actor, and television host.

157 Chuck Cadman was a Canadian politician who served as an MP for the BC riding of Surrey North from 1997-2005.

something else, but floor crossing is sort of political theatre. At one level, one thinks, if you're going to do that – and you mentioned Scott Brison and Belinda Stronach and a couple of others – if you're going to do that, you do it on purpose, presumably, to make a public impact. It's not usually done privately with these superstar candidates, when they change. How much of it is political theatre and how much of it is just expediency, because you said earlier that this happens a lot more than you think?

HSF: Yeah, I don't know. Like, Belinda Stronach, I lived through that.

DM: [laughs] I know you did.

HSF: Yeah, that was something else.

DM: What was that like, to be on the losing side of that one?

HSF: I'm not a Liberal.

DM: Wait, no, but she was a Conservative, right?

HSF: Oh yeah, but you said the losing side.

DM: Oh! [laughs] You may, in retrospect, think that you won – and I'm not going to argue that point with you, you might very well be right – but at the time they did it, it looked like a win for the Liberals.

HSF: Yeah, so, she crossed the floor on a Tuesday. On the Sunday, Peter MacKay was in my riding doing a fundraiser at a friend's house. You know that Peter McKay and Belinda were going out, right? They were a couple.

DM: Yeah, I knew that.

HSF: That's an important little detail, actually. So, Peter and Belinda were an item. Monday was a normal day. Shadow Cabinet

meets a nine o'clock on Tuesday mornings. You can't be late, but an email comes over and says, "Shadow Cabinet is not going to happen today," so, that's unusual, "and nobody is to make any comment about anything." Okay. I wasn't planning on making a comment, but I don't know what the hell they're talking about. Oh, and there was a confidence vote coming up.

DM: That I remember because I think that was one of the reasons they went after her, because they wanted to be sure they passed the confidence vote.

HSF: Yeah. They got it through. Anyways, so, Belinda crossed the floor. By noon, I guess everyone knew what was going on. That was a big deal – a very big deal – because a lot of people supported Belinda, especially in Manitoba, like Hugh McFadyen and that crowd, and now she's a Liberal. So, what do you do if you're those people? What does Peter do? His girlfriend just joined the Liberal Cabinet and he's the Deputy Leader of the Conservative Party. It was all very dramatic. There was lots of personal stuff going on there.

DM: How did you feel about it? I mean, forgetting the politics of it and the interpersonal relationships of it, how did it strike you as somebody who was sitting in the Shadow Cabinet and suddenly one of your colleagues is no longer your colleague but has joined the opposition: your opposition.

HSF: I didn't know Belinda that well, but I knew her well enough. I think it was shocking at the time and it turned out to be a blessing in many ways because I don't know whether we were completely ready to go to an election, in hindsight. The extra six months, actually – like on the health policy stuff, which I was responsible for – we had a much better health policy six months later than we did at that time. So, it gave us time to get organized, at least a little bit more on that file. It also allowed me to bring forward legislation on a national cancer strategy and a national mental health strategy, which was the first-time mental health had been raised in the House. So, in the end, I thought it was fine. It worked out well and

the caucus, which seemed to be leaking a lot – and that's a big no-no – stopped leaking after she left. So, it kind of suggests where the leaks were coming from; although, not definitively. She has the right to do it and she went back to the electorate within six months and was re-elected. So, the people of her area endorsed her crossing. So, what's the issue?

DM: Now, obviously, it was less of your choosing in your situation, the way you describe it, but were you ultimately happier not being in caucus?

HSF: Way happier.

DM: Okay.

HSF: Much happier.

DM: Why were you happier?

HSF: Well, I was sad that it came to that. It didn't need to come to that, but I have to live with myself and Brian's just not the kind of guy that endears. Actually, I feel sorry for Brian, in many ways. I feel sympathy for him. I don't know what it takes for someone to become so insecure. He is fundamentally insecure and vindictive. How does someone do that? How can someone be like that?

DM: Well, given his personal circumstances particularly: he's a relatively well-off guy, by all accounts. He's a grandfather, he talks a lot about his grandkids and why he does what he does, from a Conservative standpoint; it's to set up the world that he wants his grandchildren to live in. So, it leads to the question – and I'm just reinforcing your question I don't have an answer for it – but it leads to the question of when his private persona is this insecure and vindictive, I'm assuming beyond party discipline matters, it's a personal affront to him when he doesn't get what he wants from his own caucus.

HSF: Well, you see that in Ottawa. I don't know if you know what happened in '08.

DM: Sorry, what happened in '08?

HSF: Brian, when he left federal politics and the reasons why.

DM: I don't remember that. I wasn't, as I say, engaged. What riding did he represent?

HSF: Portage-Lisgar.

DM: So, the one you said couldn't be lost by the Conservatives if they tried. [laughs]

HSF: Yeah, except they did lose it once to the Reform Party and Brian was their candidate, thinking about it.

DM: Brian was the PC candidate?

HSF: Federally, yeah, in Portage-Lisgar, but he eventually got in. The papers say that he is not truthful and that he lies; I don't disagree with that. The crocodile tears at press conferences… it's okay to cry in public if it's genuine. So, I guess people are figuring it out, but my issues were more based on public policy, Manitoba Hydro. As an independent, I was able to call them out on that and the entire Board resigned eventually. I could introduce and pursue various private Member's bills. With private Member's bills people always say, "Oh, you're never going to get it passed because you only can bring forward one per session." Well, I know I'm not going to get them all passed, but when you bring forward private Member's bills, that brings attention to the issue.

DM: Yeah.

HSF: That's another thing that they could never get. The private Member's bills that were introduced by government, if you look at them, it's like, "Oh, let's make February 30th Red Hat Day," or

something; just totally meaningless, and this is their big accomplishment for their political career?

BPS: [laughs]

HSF: It's just ridiculous. I think it's not cool to bring forward private Member's bills that go against a budget, or something. You shouldn't be able to do that, but if your government doesn't talk about it – like organ donation or seat distribution or insurance issues… Like, they made a mistake in the insurance law when it comes to dying in dignity: there's a loophole where an insurance company can deny coverage if they think it's a suicide. So, there's a loophole there, which, if they had talked to me, I would have told them about, but even though I championed the medical assistance in dying legislation federally, in Parliament, wrote a book[158] on it, a dozen national editorials, countless interviews, not once was I asked my opinion on the topic, and I was in the caucus!

DM: So, Conservative?

HSF: Yes.

DM: Yeah. Well, let's talk about that for a minute. I mean, let's talk about your stance, because I think it's an interesting position to take. You mentioned earlier in this interview that it was an area where you got an avalanche of criticism that is unjustified, from my point of view. Not because I agree necessarily with everything you say about medical assistance in dying, but because the conversation is important and people are going to do it. There are going to be people, whether it's legal or not, that are going to do this. My concern – and I genuinely want to get your thoughts on this – my concern is about just saying, "It's legal, do it, whatever. Do whatever you want. Anything about assisted suicide, do whatever works for you." I am blessed, in many ways, that I have my own mind and that I've trained my mind and all of those things. I have a very

158 Linda McIntosh & Steven Fletcher, *Master of my Fate* (Winnipeg: Heartland Associates, 2015).

supportive family, but there have been times in my life when I've had to call in family because a caregiver quits and I've got no plan. You know, if the main caregiver just quits, then my parents used to come running. One of my brothers would come running if I needed. I have a bunch of friends now in Winnipeg who would come running in the short term. Even with all of that, there have been times when the caregiver is gone and it's taking five or six weeks to find a new person, where you go, "Can I keep putting other people through this when my own future is this fragile, this uncertain, this unknown?" Can I keep doing that to them and just say to them, "Well, we haven't hired anybody yet," or am I willing to hire somebody? Now, usually when I get down, somebody will say, "Wait, hang on a second. This is a rough patch, but you're going to be all right. It'll be okay. We'll get through this." When I lose an attendant, my world gets thrown upside down. I can't imagine what it must be like for you when your main caregiver quits. That must be a very dynamic thing. All that said, has it crossed my mind that it's not worth doing to these people? It has. I get past it, but I worry about people that don't have my training, my mind, or the people that care about me and don't have a genuine desire to die, yet are convinced by others that it's not worth doing this. I worry about that: that assisted suicide is a slippery slope toward other people making decisions or putting pressure in a way that isn't healthy. What would your position be on that? I'm genuinely curious. How do we avoid it?

HSF: Okay. I'll answer that, but one thing that is very important is, again, parliamentary privilege. If you're a backbench MP – if you follow the Burke model – you are entitled to bring forward bills for debate: private Member's bills. Interestingly, even though a lot of Members of my own party disagreed with me vehemently, there was no one in the party that said I couldn't, or shouldn't, be allowed to bring forward that bill, because at the federal level, there's a high level of sophistication; if you're a private Member, you should be able to bring forward a bill. Even though a lot of these people would be against medical assistance – they may be pro-life – but they would like to be able to bring forward bills that are important to them.

For example, that's exactly what Erin O'Toole[159] went through a couple of weeks ago. The media goes bananas on them because, "Oh, there's a bill talking about gendercide," but they did the right thing by letting the people express themselves. So, that's one thing that the federal Conservatives seem to still have: a belief in a private Member's ability to bring forward an idea, even if it is contrary or it can be difficult in the media, or whatever. The issue that we are talking about, when I brought forward the bill, there were two bills. One was to remove the criminality of it under the Criminal Code and the second one was to keep track and do the data – "Why are people doing this" – because good data usually means better public policy. The Supreme Court actually ended up using the wording of my private Member's bill in their decision.[160] So, essentially, I was able to, as a single MP, get the wording of the law changed without having a single vote in Parliament. Now, that drives a lot of people crazy because Parliament is supposed to be supreme.

DM: Yep. The Supreme Court did that in a constitutional case, though.

HSF: That's right. So, that's one thing the Conservatives need to accept, but that principle is what I used with the floor crossing because I learned that, federally, you don't actually need to have the support of the governing party to change the law. That's exactly what I wanted to demonstrate again and that's exactly why I think Parliament – even though it was totally related to my role as an MLA, obviously – made me bite the bullet financially on it, because they don't want anyone else to do that.

DM: This is why, all of these private Member's bills, they want you to translate them, do all this other stuff –

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159 Erin O'Toole is a Canadian politician serving as the Leader of the Official Opposition of Canada and the leader of the Conservative Party of Canada since 2020.

160 *Carter v Canada (Attorney General)*, 2015 SCC 5.

HSF: There's another way to deal with changing the law that has nothing to do with the Legislature and that is on a constitutional basis: the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. So, really, what, the floor crossing – I hate that term.

DM: You want to call it the change in your status?

HSF: Yeah, if an MLA has a change in status or wants to change their status, they were saying, "No, you can't." Well, that's not correct, in my view. I was aware of a way to change the law without having the support of the Legislature and that is through the courts. I don't know if they were smart enough to ever figure that out or not. They probably figured it out eventually, but it was a principled issue that they weren't going to do anything about, but by bringing it to the courts, I wanted to provide MLAs the freedom, without a doubt. I think that freedom exists now, notwithstanding what they put in, but by bringing it forward to the court that forced the government to remove that clause because otherwise we were going to go to the Supreme Court and get it removed that way.

BPS: Yeah, sometimes I urge on my students the idea of anchoring. If you're in a negotiation or you're in a political debate, one of the things a private Member still does is put yourself through the self-discipline of actually formulating a concrete legal proposal. It tends to focus your own thinking and can have a very significant effect on other people's thinking because you haven't just identified the conflict, you've actually put it into sufficient legal language. Same thing in a negotiation, if you can get the other side to work off your paper – you've made a specific proposal and people negotiate from there – it can be way more effective than just formulating a broad conflict. In this case, Steven, I think not only did you draw attention to the issue, you actually formulated specific language, which sounds like had a significant influence on the way the courts looked at it. We published an article in the UTGB on private Member's bills a while ago.[161] They're not introduced primarily to

[161] Jason Stitt, "The Private Member Battleground: The Future of Private

get passed: they're introduced to begin public debate and eventually, as you did, to influence the bill that is ultimately adopted later to influence the way the court looks at it. I just wanted to make the distinction that there's some value added by actually bringing forth a private Member's bill and articulating crystallized legal language.

[HSF] Absolutely, what I did though was I did introduce a private Member's bill myself and I could have designated it and had it voted on, but I didn't because there's another way to change law, and that's the way physician assisted death applied. So, what I was testing was the principle. One way or the other, it was going to happen because either I introduce my private Member's bill or the government would introduce a bill. The government ended up introducing a bill, but I was prepared to go to the Supreme Court and had the Court sided with me – that it was a constitutional case and that that clause was not constitutional – that would have been another example of how to change the law without any support from the Legislature. I suspect that that is why it was moot after the government introduced the legislation. I got shmucked in the court decision.

BPS: [laughs]

HSF: Mysteriously, I only asked one question ever as an MLA and that was in the extra session in June 2018. I think they just did it so I would ask a question and that objection would be removed and the judge would have to write his decision. In hindsight, what would have been an interesting test is if it was an issue of legislative privilege, because the Legislature has privilege just as an MLA has certain privileges. Which privilege is more important: the MLA's privilege or the Assembly's privilege to make the rules for the Assembly?

BPS: That is one interesting question.

Member's Bills at the Manitoba Legislative Assembly" (2013) 36:2 Man LJ at 157-180.

HSF: I was ticked off about how they had conducted the caucus removal, so I did want to make a point, and the point was made, the legislation was changed, and it cost me $35,000. So, who won?

BPS: After the caucus removal, Steven, what happened in the corridors down in the Legislative Assembly? You've got a lot of friends and colleagues who formally threw you from caucus, were you still able to have conversations with these folks?

HSF: I don't take any of that personally.

DM: I believe you don't, but don't some of them take it personally?

HSF: Uh, yeah, well, I don't know. You'd have to ask them.

DM: Fair enough. Fair enough.

HSF: It does change the dynamic, sure, especially with people who want to endear themselves with the Premier. Like, if I really wanted to screw an MLA – and I didn't – I would wait to when everyone was in the chamber and go over and talk to that MLA.

BPS: Oh, because you're radioactive.

HSF: In the Premier's eyes, yeah.

BPS: [laughs] I hadn't thought of that actually.

DM: Wow. Oh, my goodness. I hadn't thought of that, but, wow. That's the type of discourse we don't want, I would think.

HSF: Yeah, well I was never that vindictive, but if I wanted to get a significant amount of revenge, that would've worked.

BPS: There was some sort of motto in the UK about "In victory magnanimous, in defeat gracious," or something. Then, in "Yes Minister" it was "In victory gloating and in defeat vindictive." I'll

see if I can look that up. Sorry to interrupt there, back to regularly scheduled programming.

DM: Not a problem. The next thing I wanted to talk about was creating your own political party. You decided, after being expelled from caucus, that you needed to start your own political party and you were the first leader the Manitoba Party, later Manitoba First.

HSF: Okay, we've got clear this out: I have nothing to do with Manitoba First.

DM: Okay.

HSF: Those guys are nuts and I have nothing to do with it.

DM: Okay, fair enough.

HSF: I was always going to run federally, either as an Independent or PPC, as it turned out, but that was always my plan. In the summer of 2018, the people who had already registered the Manitoba Party came to me in August and said, "Will you be the leader of the Manitoba Party?" I said, "No," and they said, "Well, we're going to close it down because that's all you have to do." I said, "Well, that seems like a bit of a waste. So, what's involved in becoming a leader?" So, the current leader can just sign an order; if you're the leader of a political party in Manitoba, you can sign over the leadership to whomever you want. He consulted with his Board – he did do it through a board – and signed it over to me. So, I had control of the Manitoba Party. I don't know what I'm going to do with it.

DM: This was not something that you organized or orchestrated?

HSF: No, I didn't organize or orchestrate it; it literally fell in my lap, on a Friday. Then, on a Tuesday I did the signing, because what harm could it do? This was a week or two before the Federal

Conservative Convention in Halifax where Maxime[162] left the Conservative Party. So, I was at that caucus meeting. So, I was still a member of the federal Conservative Party at that point. So, now I have this Manitoba Party who nobody knew about, at the time. So, I got a team together, wrote up a constitution – a very good constitution –, principles, some material, and ran with it. It also allowed me to become the first new officially recognized political party in the Legislature and that caused them all sorts of problems, but really, I just carried on doing what I would have done anyway. It's a footnote.

DM: Right. Okay. You mentioned, just to be clear, that you have nothing to do with Manitoba First.

HSF: Nada. Nothing. They tried to railroad me into that. In July, I got a call from the media saying, "Oh, are you part of this Manitoba First?" "I don't know what you're talking about." I went to the website. He goes, "Well, you're on the website. It looks pretty Steven-centric." You know, they took three ideas out of the seven or eight that they presented. "Well, I'm pleased that people are taking my ideas, but no, I have nothing to do with them."

DM: So, you had resigned from the Manitoba Party at this point?

HSF: No, no. This was before the Manitoba Party. It was just that they were trying to – the people who were behind Manitoba First – jam me into that political party without my permission.

DM: Okay.

HSF: Yeah. So, nothing to do with those folks.

DM: Okay. When you said they're nuts, you meant they did some pretty crazy things to try to jam you into it?

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[162] Maxime Bernier is a Canadian politician who is the founder and current leader of the People's Party of Canada.

HSF: That's part of it, yeah. I haven't looked at the website in a long time, but I presume they're still nuts. For the Manitoba Party, I will take responsibility for everything that party did from mid-August 2018 to May 2019, but beyond that, I transferred it to someone else and they transferred it to someone else and then that someone else changed the name, whatever.

DM: That someone else changed the name to Manitoba First.

HSF: Yeah.

DM: Then you ended up with this. Got it. So, it was two or three elements removed from you by the time it became these other people.

HSF: Yeah. I have no idea who.

DM: What was unexpected about running your own political party?

HSF: Well, the politics right away: there was a group that were really mad that I had control of the party – full control of it – and they brought forward a case to the court to try and wrestle control away, but that was more annoying than anything. It's a big responsibility because you have to raise money, you have to have a way of selecting candidates, and organizational issues, and so on. I think if I had had two years it would have been a pretty serious thing by now, had I kept it, but I didn't really want it. I focused on the federal scene. At this point, I still wasn't sure if I was going to run federally, for the PPC, or as an Independent, but I knew I was going to run one way or the other federally, so I gave it up.

DM: Right. Right. Okay. Now, let's talk about the PPC for a second. You ran under the PPC in the last federal election. You were unsuccessful, but what I found was when I saw Maxime Bernier on TV, he seemed to disagree with the public perception of that party's platform. So, let's start with: what was the platform, at least as you saw it?

HSF: Sure. In 2018, even though I was president of the Electoral District Association and I stepped down to run for the nomination, the Conservative Party kind of blocked me from even running for the nomination. So, I thought that was pretty high handed, because had I gone through a nomination, I was quite confident of success, given the support that had been expressed.

DM: So, you were the president of the EDA for the riding that you wanted to run for the nomination for and the central party simply would not accept your nomination papers.

HSF: I stepped down as president when I declared that I was going to run for nomination in January 2018 and by June 2018, the federal party wouldn't allow me to run. I was told it was in part because of my position on medical assistance in dying and in part that they wanted Pallister's support in the federal election.

DM: That's weird. Okay.

HSF: There was no proper reason. Those are the reasons and that's politics. It's ironic because I only ran provincially because the federal party asked me to and the provincial party wanted me to. I was the only MLA that really supported the federal position on the carbon tax because remember, provincially, Pallister was flip flopping. He was for it. He was against it. He was for it, against it.

DM: He challenged it.

HSF: No, he didn't! He wanted a made-in-Manitoba carbon tax. He would rather tax Manitobans than have the federal government tax Manitobans, but then he flipped after the election. My advice to Pallister on the carbon tax was, "You can't fight the federal government: they have the taxing power. Let the federal government explain. Don't worry about it." But Brian wanted Manitoba to have the tax to be able to collect and spend the money, not the federal government, so he would get the credit for that additional revenue. After the election in 2019, he introduced it

anyway and he screwed the federal Conservatives by having an early provincial election.

DM: How does that screw the feds?

HSF: Well, because the federal election is a fixed date. Pallister was only three years into a five-year mandate and by having the election first, that means the fundraising and the volunteers all expend themselves for the six weeks and then you're asking, in many cases, the same people to donate and use their time for the next six weeks. He had the control to spread that out. So, if you talk to any federal Conservative, they were quite annoyed with Pallister for calling that election two years earlier.

DM: Fair enough.

HSF: It may have been the right thing to do given COVID and stuff, but other provinces had elections in 2020, so they could've snuck one in there, but anyway. What was your question? I forgot.

DM: The platform.

HSF: Oh, yes. So, Maxime was on Treasury Board for part of the time I was there and I thought some of the things that he said made sense – on corporate welfare. He was against the subsidies that went to Bombardier[163] and, being from St. James, that made a lot of sense because of the CF-18 affair, which you may or may not recall, where the government of Brian Mulroney gave the maintenance contract for the F-18s to a Quebec company over a Winnipeg company. Even though the Winnipeg company's bid was superior, Mulroney gave it to Quebec for political reasons. So, the Manitoba aerospace industry, which is the third largest industry in Manitoba, suffered a great deal from that government using corporate welfare. Bernier was against that and being from Quebec and being against it, I thought, showed a certain amount of integrity because he wasn't playing to Quebec. He was doing something that was reasonable for

[163] Bombardier Inc. is a Canadian business aviation manufacturer.

the country. Another example: he is a free trader. He's okay with MPs bringing forward private Member's bills; he seemed cool on that. I also thought it would be important to have him in the national debates. My riding actually was one of the ridings used to justify him to be in the national debates because the poll numbers were such that they made it possible.

DM: The way that I remember he was cast in that particular election – by his opponents, admittedly – was that they were anti-immigration: a bad version of the Republican approach down south. I wasn't sure, so that's why I wanted you to talk a bit about the platform because I wasn't clear on it. I know that Maxime Bernier said, "No, we're not that." What I wanted to hear was what their platform actually was about because it's something that attracted you. I didn't see you as an extreme person, but the way it was being cast in the media –

HSF: That was the media falling into what the federal Conservatives wanted them to say.

DM: What was it supposed to be?

HSF: Well, when I became involved, there wasn't a number. It was more along the lines of: the number of immigrants that Canada should bring in should be the number of immigrants that is in the interest of Canada and mostly based on their ability to contribute to the economy. Now, in the election campaign, Max made a mistake – which happens in all election campaigns – by putting a number on that. The number was less than it had been for a very long time and I think that may have helped lead the narrative to what you just described. I don't agree with the number that he provided; if the number is 500,000, so be it. Do you speak French at all?

DM: Yeah, my mom is from Montreal – she was an Anglophone Montrealer – but she wanted us to learn French, so we all learned French: me and my brothers.

HSF: Okay. So, I sort of know a little and sometimes I'm giving out numbers and I screw it up. Like, I'll say deux cent[164] instead of deux mille[165], or whatever. I kind of wonder if that happened with Max when he said – I don't know what it was – 200,000 or whatever and he meant 400,000. It happens. You also don't want to ever admit that you're making a mistake. Where the party was in its evolution – like it was only a year old – basically, what Max said was the policy because there wasn't really any time to have a written policy.

DM: So, I think what you're saying is, the platform was evolving and if the leader spoke to an issue, that de facto became the platform because the party was so new.

HSF: Yeah, and he spoke to it in English, but maybe it was deliberate. The answer is I don't know; I just know what I know. I would do what was in Canada's interest, economically, and that number varies.

DM: Okay, fair enough. Now, we've talked a little bit already about "Unite the Right" and you obviously found that quite appealing, at one point, when you were dealing with the federal Conservatives and the Reform Party. Then, you took over one party and joined a third; all of which would be considered to be on the conservative side of the spectrum, I think. So, let's assume that the PPC is highly successful, compared to the Erin O'Toole-led Conservatives: how does that play out? I'm just wondering how you think about it now and why it's different than before?

HSF: Well, look, what I think is the Conservative Party totally screwed up the leadership after Harper left. Then, for whatever reason, the people that everyone thought was going to run – you know, like Peter McKay, James Moore or Rona Ambrose – none of them ran. Then, we ended up with the third ballot guy, Andrew[166],

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164 Deux cent translates to two-hundred in English.

165 Deux mille translates to two-thousand in English.

166 Andrew Scheer is a Canadian politician who served as the leader of the

who made some really bad decisions. One of them was not allowing me to run, because that was his decision, right? He's the leader of the party and it wouldn't have happened if he didn't agree with it. So, there was a fundamental breakdown in the party structure that allowed someone who is everyone's third or fourth choice to become the leader in the ranked ballot system. So, that is error number one. Going to 13 ballots, really? Does it even mean anything after that? So, the leadership was screwed up. Andrew became leader. He'd never been in a government caucus. He was Speaker. I sat next to him for five years when he was Speaker and you know, nice enough guy, but leader? Not really. Policy guy? Not really. Speaks French? No. He's just a guy from Saskatchewan. Then we find out that the guy who came second is kicked out of, or leaves, the caucus. So, that's really weird.

DM: Sorry. Who is this? I just don't remember.

HSF: Maxime Bernier.

DM: Okay. Right. So, we're talking about… okay.

HSF: I was at the Conservative Convention when that happened and I had no idea that was going to happen. So, he's gone. So, what is wrong with that Conservative Party? Then you see, you know, some of the people Andrew has around him and you think, "Wow, that's really bad."

DM: So, you're talking about the leadership team that Leader Scheer had put around himself?

HSF: Yeah. Like, what he should have done is brought together exactly the people you didn't want. Like, Maxime Bernier: he should have put him under his wing. Right? You know, Maxime wants to be a finance critic? Who cares, be finance critic, nobody else really cares. Oh yeah, supply management: I'm against supply

Official Opposition and the leader of the Conservative Party of Canada from 2017-2020.

management. That was another area where I thought Max showed a lot of leadership.

DM: Supply management in things like milk and eggs and…

HSF: Yeah.

DM: And Max was against it as well?

HSF: Yeah, and I think that was the public policy issue that they removed. Like, supply management, really? Who cares? The vast majority of people in my riding, when I was president, voted for Maxime. The vast majority of people in Winnipeg voted for Max. I don't know if Andrew even came fifth in this area! So, okay. So, I'm just bringing us back to what happened, just as a quick reminder. Then Andrew, turns out, didn't get rid of his American citizenship. Really? You know, idiot! Why did he keep that? Of all the countries, he could have been a dual citizen of France as Stéphane Dion[167] was or the UK as Michael Ignatieff[168] was.

DM: That's true. You could be, but remember the Conservatives did a really good job of hanging the word "my country" around Michael Ignatieff's neck when he was at Harvard. I mean, it was politically brilliant!

HSF: Andrew really screwed that up.

DM: Yup.

HSF: Right? Then it turns out that money that I donated to the Conservative Party in early 2019 or 2018, or whatever it was, was

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[167] Stéphane Dion is a Canadian politician who served as the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and the Leader of the Official Opposition from 2006-2008.

[168] Michael Ignatieff is a Canadian politician who served as the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and the Leader of the Official Opposition from 2008-2011.

used to help Andrew send his kids to private school in a province that he supposedly doesn't live in. You know? So, that is the party as it is. Then, Andrew gets the boot and Peter becomes the leader. I don't remember what Peter McKay did or did not do that would cause so many people to be opposed to him, other than perhaps some of the people on his team in Manitoba basically sabotaged him. Who needs enemies if your friends are like that? Anyway, so, O'Toole wins. People who supported Andrew last time were ticked that they helped pay for his private schooling and it turned out to be a bit of a sham. I don't know what people are going to do. Maxime has potential and he always will have potential. O'Toole, or whoever becomes leader of either party, would be very, very wise to reconcile.

DM: By either party you mean the Liberals or the Conservatives?

HSF: PPC and the Conservatives.

DM: Oh, both party leaders should seek to reconcile to reunite the right? is that what we're saying?

HSF: Well, to reunite. Now, the PPC isn't solely conservative members; I think they do have an appeal to different parties on different spectrums. Like, a lot of people are sick of the NDP. How does the NDP function? The guys in the union shop in Flin Flon, how do they get along with the Toronto Centre environmentalists? No one's really been able to explain that to me. There's potential for major realignments going on.

BPS: Yes, there's some challenges there: reconciling people who work in resource industry who are against having resource extraction industry. Yeah, I haven't thought of it that way in the immediate context, but, yeah, that's kind of a challenge. By the way, just by way of a self-serving cross reference on supply marketing: I wrote an article on the curious persistence of the Dairy Marketing Board. That has got to be the most effective special interest group in the history of politics, anywhere on the planet. A petty number of prosperous dairy farmers – who, despite the fact that every public

policy analyst on the left or the right think supply management is a bad idea, including effectively being a tax on the poor, no matter what happens, makes sure the supply management survives – might have made a decisive difference in the Scheer versus Bernier campaign.

HSF: Oh, they did. They absolutely did.

BPS: They bought memberships and then voted for Scheer because they didn't want Bernier because he was against retention.

HSF: That's right.

BPS: They got organized and bought a bunch of memberships.

HSF: Yeah, and it made the difference; it was decimal places. Andrew just played the system. So, I guess I can't fault him for that, but there's something wrong there when you have twelve candidates and thirteen ballots, or whatever, fourteen candidates and thirteen ballots, and you choose your leader to the 1000th decimal place.

BPS: Is the theory that by doing it that way you're basically incentivizing people to buy a membership? That it was kind of an indirect fundraiser: a way to make money by running a leisure campaign rather than losing it?

HSF: Well, I don't know. I think that logic has proven false. I'm sure Andrew using party money to send his kids to school doesn't really reach out to the grassroots or Pallister having an early election doesn't really help raise money in Manitoba, but whatever. I couldn't save the PC Party in Manitoba and I can't save the Conservative Party. I feel kind of hopeless these days in the Canadian political spectrum.

DM: Well, I have to tell you that as much as you've enjoyed this conversation, for me, it's nice to talk to people who are on different parts of the political spectrum, who are nonetheless reasonable. For

me, it's really funny when you talk about the supply management stuff. To me, that's the ultimate anti-Conservative approach to anything because what they talk about is not picking winners and losers in the private sector. That's the Burkean way, right? You let the private sector figure out who's going to make money and who isn't. The fact that it serves a public policy goal of lowering the cost of milk, for example, seems very pro-Conservative, pro-business but yet the Conservatives supported the idea of supply management because of special interest. That doesn't –

HSF: Yeah, and it was the falling out of Maxime, Andrew, and the party. Like, Maxime said that he had published a chapter out of his book on supply management and, you know, a bit too far and you're out, on a policy issue. Like, good grief. The other one along those lines is the F-18 fiasco, which, being from the Maritimes[169], may not reach into your soul like it does anyone in Manitoba who lived through that, but it's worth reading up on. That's one of the reasons why I like Maxime on corporate welfare and that type of thing.

DM: I can admire that because there was a similar thing when Mulroney closed CFB Summerside[170], which is the only Canadian Forces Base in Prince Edward Island. It was a massive thing, right, because Summerside is not a big city by any means. So, when they decided to move it, they gave them back, oddly enough, the CRA[171]. You'll notice you send your tax returns to Summerside, PEI, because that was the giveback by the Mulroney government; they didn't set up the entire CRA, but that particular office of CRA. Procurement decisions versus political expediency is always a tough thing to manage and, of course, one of those scandals brought Stephen Harper to power. Ad scam was a huge problem and I

169 The Maritimes is a region of eastern Canada that consists of the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and PEI.

170 Canadian Forces Base Summerside used to be an air force base located in St. Eleanors, PEI and is now a part of the city of Summerside.

171 The Canada Revenue Agency collects taxes, administers tax law and policy, and delivers benefit programs and tax credits for the Government of Canada.

suspect, in the last one, the SNC-Lavalin[172] stuff didn't help Trudeau much. So, when you're unprincipled, it seems to me, you get yourself into trouble. It doesn't matter what party it is, once they think you're unprincipled you're in some trouble.

BPS: Well, how do you figure? Trudeau won the last election and he's on course to get a majority after the two or three official conflict of interest findings? I don't know, it seems to be working for him.

DM: He went from a majority to a minority, though. Now, I admit to you, the electorate is not paying the type of attention to his foibles that they probably should be. That's not because of who I believe in in the electoral process, but it's a very interesting dynamic because he was on track for a majority, then there was the SNC stuff and they went, "Oh, hell, no!" Right? People were like, "What are you doing?" Jody Wilson-Raybould[173], and all of that stuff – that's a very interesting one – who got re-elected as an Independent.

BPS: I don't know. I think the takeaway is, apparently, there were just things that were just unspoken. You get caught in a scandal like that, you resign. Now, apparently, you get re-elected and probably, it looks like, a majority government, now.

DM: Does it? I mean, he's done a reasonable job on how he's going to message on COVID. I don't think he's done nearly as good a job on the actual policy on COVID, but he's messaged COVID to his advantage, I think. It's interesting.

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172 SNC-Lavalin Group Inc. is a Canadian company that offers engineering, procurement, and construction services to a multitude of industries, including mining, oil, environment, infrastructure, and clean power.

173 Jody Wilson-Raybould is a Canadian politician who has served as the MP for the BC riding of Vancouver Granville since 2015. She was the Minister of Justice and Attorney General from 2015-2019, but stepped down from that role after allegations that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had attempted to influence her regarding an ongoing prosecution of SNC-Lavalin. Jody Wilson-Raybould was later expelled by Trudeau from the Liberal caucus and now sits as an Independent.

HSF: It's going to be the Liberals and, I agree with Brian, it'll be a majority.

BPS: Well, what is it about current Conservative leaders that is not getting any traction. Is it internal divisions in the Conservative ranks? Is it his own lack of charisma, or that Canadians perceive a lack of charisma? Yeah, all the polls seem to say that Trudeau will do very well, possibly get a majority with 38% or 40% or something. Why is that?

HSF: All I can say is: Erin O'Toole, or whoever becomes the leader, needs to bring people in rather than kick them out or keep them out.

BPS: There are still wounds from the past, it sounds like.

HSF: Mark Carney[174] is going to be the next Liberal leader.

DM: The former Governor of the Bank of Canada?

BPS: The former Governor of the Bank of England?

HSF: Yeah, you're both right.

DM: Okay, and do we do we know when that's supposed to happen?

HSF: Yeah. It's about a year before the UN has its Security Council General Election.

DM: Are we on rotation to be on the Security Council?

HSF: No, no, but there's someone who's elected: the Secretary General.

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174 Mark Carney is a Canadian economist and banker.

DM: So, what does that have to do with our election?

HSF: Trudeau will hang on until he's in a position to run for that.

DM: He wants to be the head of the UN?

HSF: I think that's common knowledge.

DM: Is it? Wow.

BPS: I didn't know that.

DM: Yeah, no, I'm not plugged in the way you are Steven.

HSF: Well, that's been my theory for a number of years; it's common knowledge to me.

BPS: Okay. Actually, just quickly retro-casting some political events, including Canada's foreign policy, that would –

DM: Yeah, that would seem about right. It would be the type of position he'd want to go for, for sure. Whether he'll win it or not is another question. So, you've said that the Legislature was a very inhospitable place for you; not the House of Commons, but the provincial Legislature. I assume you meant physically inhospitable in the sense that it wasn't really made for you or for anyone with significant disabilities to operate in. Did I have that right?

HSF: Yep. Well, the first thing that really came to the fore was, actually, my constituency office. I needed to get an accessible constituency office and you have the requirement that it needs to be in your riding. Well, guess what? There are no accessible constituency offices in my riding. So, a considerable sum was needed to get that going and the Legislature did not participate with that, until much later. Although, the most important thing – and the most blatant and the most unbelievable thing – that I've ever experienced dealing with disability in public life is the issue of the Manitoba Legislative Chamber. This is a chamber that's in a bowl.

Unlike most places, where you can just walk onto the main floor and the benches go up from there, in the Manitoba Legislature the floor goes down into a bowl, like a hole. So, you walk in and you're on the outside benches and you have to go down stairs to get to the second row and the first row. The first row is where the front bench MLAs, like the cabinet ministers and opposition critics, are and the clerks who are very integral to running the operation. Also, access to the Speaker: if you want to talk to the Speaker, you go over and talk. So, I was elected and there is a bowl; obviously, it's not accessible. I was told that it was very difficult to deal with. They'd been planning for years on how to deal with it and it may not be possible. Also, it's an historic building and they don't want to interfere with the historic-ness of the building. Then, there's fire regulations. They said, "We are looking at putting a lift on either side of the Speaker, but it's going to take at least $2 million to do the renovations and we don't actually know what's underneath the floor because it's such an old building." So, I'm gobsmacked because the answer is obvious, as light as day: just put a ramp down the middle or on either side, and that will take care of that. "Well, no, it would be too steep." So, I went down to my car – and I have pictures I can show you – and got two or three ramps out of my car. We laid them right down to the floor of the chamber. So, now the excuse was, "Well, the plan is still lifts." Lifts don't work. They're noisy, they're not reliable, and that wouldn't help me anyway, or someone in my situation, because I can't touch a button! Like, what button am I going to touch to get the lift or am I going to turn a key? And they say, "We found one in the market." Well, you couldn't have because there weren't any on the market. I knew the market! They said, "Yeah, well, with the ramps you can see it's pretty steep. We measured it out and the ramps would need to be at the right slope. So, we'd end up going right to the Speaker's chair." Well, the answer to that is pretty obvious. You just raise the floor or make it flush, like, whatever. They said, "No, no, no, we can't do that." Well, no, that's what you can do and nobody would notice the difference. Anyway, nothing was done. So, I raised it as a matter

of privilege.[175] A matter of privilege is like a nuclear bomb procedure. It's basically saying that one of the five fundamental rights of a Parliamentarian had been violated. In this case, it's you know, it's obviously an obstruction for me to be able to do my job. It's all in Hansard[176]; a big long thing. I wasn't familiar with the rules of the Manitoba Legislature at this point. All I know is: I can't get down there, I want to be able to get down there, and I need to be able to get down there. So, that was just before summer. Summer rolls around and –

DM: Summer of 2019?

HSF: 2016. So, I've been elected for about three months now and I arranged a meeting with the Speaker. I actually had some consultants from MPI come to the meeting, also and they heard all the same things. I said, "Well, you know, a ramp would be in and you could just raise the floor. You can even put the ramp in on either side, or both sides or whatever. Ramps don't break down and there's plenty of room." The Speaker says, "It's going to be too steep." It's not going to be too steep. Then, you get into a whole issue of rise over run and this was a very difficult concept for the people who were at this meeting. It was very frustrating because you would expect that people of this level would know the grade of a slope or the nature of a right-angle triangle.

DM: They're just playing dumb.

HSF: Maybe, but they do it very convincingly. No, I don't think so. To do that the way it happened, you would have to have no self-respect.

DM: [laughs] Wow, and this is your party?! This is your party.

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175 Manitoba, Legislative Assembly, *Debates and Proceedings*, 41-1, No 30A (28 June 2016) at 1593-1596 (Hon Steven Fletcher).

176 Hansard is the official verbatim transcript of governmental debates.

HSF: It was one of the caucus members, not an engineer but a speaker of the chamber. Then she went off to some junket to the UK looking at lifts. Like, oh yeah, whatever, you're never going to find it. So, the summer clicks by and I thought about quitting but I did want to get this lift thing sorted. I have the photos, by the way, of the ramps going down that demonstrate the concept. So, when the House came back October 2016, after question period, the Speaker gets up and gives a ruling saying that there was no obstacle in the chamber and ruled against me.[177] So, I opposed the Speaker's ruling.[178] You need four people to stand: Wab Kinew stood up, a couple of Conservatives stood up, and Jon Gerrard stood up. So, the Speaker's ruling is challenged. You have a fifteen-minute break and then there's a vote. So, we all recessed and got together and I get pushback from my own caucus saying how I put them in an awkward position. I'm like, "What are you talking about? This is not an accessible room! It's the chamber. It's an obstacle. It is obvious!" The Premier said, "This is an issue of confidence. You vote against the Speaker and you're voting against this government."

DM: Really.

HSF: Absolutely. So, what am I going do? Well, I voted against the government. The real kicker is that I had some things I wanted to hand out to the Members and the clerk comes up to me and says, "The pages have been directed not to hand anything out from you this afternoon." "What do you mean?" "Well, because the Speaker feels that you may be handing things out that may contradict her decision." I was like, "Well, wait a second. Why not? Handing it out illustrates my point! If the room was accessible, I would do it on my own, but I can't. That's why the pages are there, so I can pass material out to the front and backbench. That's exactly why there needs to be a ramp!" So, that was the afternoon. Then, I was kicked

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177 Manitoba, Legislative Assembly, *Debates and Proceedings*, 41-1, No 37 (3 October 2016) at 1790-1793 (Madam Speaker).

178 Manitoba, Legislative Assembly, *Debates and Proceedings*, 41-1, No 37 (3 October 2016) at 1793 (Hon Steven Fletcher).

off a committee as punishment. So, I got punished for accessibility. Anyway.

DM: Rather remarkable.

HSF: It's the worst example. It was a dumb decision, to the Speaker's shame, and the government, to its shame, supported the Speaker on an issue that should have just been obvious. Now, I understand that it may take some time to figure it out or come up with a plan, but to just reject it in the way that she did, to use the words that she used, and to deny the ability to pass anything on afterwards, it was just… And my caucus members supported her! I was just beside myself.

DM: Did you ever think about bringing a human rights complaint?

HSF: I did. In fact, that was what was in my envelope: a human rights complaint. One of the things that was in there was an example from the Fort Garry hotel and their rotating restaurant. In the 1990s, they neglected to put in any kind of wheelchair accessible lift or ramp. Then, people like Harry Enns and Jim Derksen[179] went to the Human Rights Commission and the Human Rights Commission agreed with them that they should have put in something to make it wheelchair accessible. That was a few hundred metres away from the Legislature! So, I thought that was kind of ironic. You could argue that the Human Rights Code doesn't apply in the Legislative Chamber because the Legislative Chamber is an entity onto its own: it makes its own rules and whatever happens outside doesn't matter, sort of like why there's MLA immunity. If you do something inside the chamber, you can't be sued for it. Right? The chamber is supposed to be –

DM: Its own jurisdiction.

HSF: Its own jurisdiction. Yeah, which was in part also one of my underlying… or the change of MLAs circumstance, I did want to

[179] Jim Derksen a disability advocate and wheelchair user from Winnipeg, MB.

make the point that not in every situation is a legislature its own jurisdiction. So, as you may know, a ramp was installed a year later and they did raise the floor, as I said they could and should. In fact, during the meeting with the Speaker in the summer, I said, "Look. I have some engineering friends, just let us in at two in the morning and by six o'clock in the morning there will be an elevated floor, a ramp, and nobody will notice the difference." You know, tongue in cheek, those are some of the pranks that we did when we were in university. We turned all the chairs around, so they were back to forward.

DM: Engineering fun. Putting all the chairs so they're facing the wrong way. [laughs]

HSF: And bolted them down. [laughs]

DM: [laughs] Oh dear. Now that would be funny. "Wait a minute! Wait a minute!"

HSF: The room was painted red too; washable paint as it turns out. Anyway, but the point is, I think it was one of the most ignorant, vicious, stupidest things that I've ever seen happen. Then, to have the government support it and make it a confidence vote is a disgrace. Then, a year later, they did exactly what I suggested. Now, they will argue, "Well, we had a committee that looked at it and they made the recommendation." No. What's in the Hansard – what they did and the logic and the reasons – is totally appalling. So, anyway, then I was out, I didn't last that much longer. Another thing that they did was they took nine months to renovate the washroom in my office. First of all, I didn't ask for it to be renovated. Then, when they did it, they didn't do it properly: the door swung in instead of out. So, if I ever needed to use the washroom, I actually couldn't because there wasn't enough room for me and the door to close. So – this is another true story – Rick Hansen was coming to the Legislature for a visit. So, "Oh, okay, great! Come on by and I'll take you for a tour." I took him for a tour of the Assembly, "Yeah, totally not accessible." One of the media guys was there taking pictures. Then, show him my office

and "Yeah, they definitely screwed that up." Then, turns out, they didn't use the pictures in the Chamber. I got into trouble for not telling them who I was bringing into the Legislature. I said, "Well, since when do we do that?" They said, "Well, if it's someone like Rick Hansen and you should tell us." "Well, I didn't know that. It's not in the rules." Who does that? "And the media was taking pictures." Okay. "What's wrong with that?" The effect of that was it really embarrassed the government. I can't criticize the Speaker, otherwise I get thrown out or something terrible, but I didn't, Rick ended up doing it inadvertently.[180]

DM: It's a very disappointing thing to hear that they need to be named and shamed into doing what the right thing to do is, clearly.

BPS: Did the media catch up on this story at the time of the Speaker's ruling? Obviously, Darcy wasn't aware of it. I wasn't aware of it until you told this account, but I expect we would find that in Hansard, wouldn't we?

HSF: Yeah, you'll find it in Hansard and you'll find in in the Winnipeg Free Press[181], but they actually went after the media. As I understand it, they told Bob Silver[182] that they couldn't use the photos of me and Rick in the Chamber because the media didn't have permission. The media never asks permission! Then they called the Free Press sometime at night and added an explanatory bar on the side.

BPS: I won't even attach an adjective. This is just… I thought there would have been a media firestorm about that. I guess there was

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180 Nick Martin, "Disabled MLA faces 'significant barriers' at legislature, Canadian icon Hansen says" *The Winnipeg Free Press* (15 March 2017), online: <www.winnipegfreepress.com > [perma.cc/L27D-E23W].

181 Larry Kusch, "Fletcher says legislature not fit for wheelchair", *The Winnipeg Free Press* (28 June 2016), online: <www.winnipegfreepress.com> [perma.cc/DH57-GNWW].

182 Bob Silver is a co-owner of the Winnipeg Free Press.

some coverage but it didn't have any longevity there, in terms of covering it.

HSF: Well, I didn't try to make it into a big thing about it.

BPS: Oh, okay.

HSF: Like, I was in shock.

BPS: I see.

HSF: It's a new government, you know. I don't even want to be there, necessarily; I wanted to run federally. Anyway, yeah, I just couldn't believe it. So, that's the answer.

DM: That's quite a thing, but since leaving politics you've started something called Fletcher Focus and you started it with family. Tell us about this project.

HSF: Well, it's two incorporated companies. One is Fletcher Focus International and the other one is Fletcher Focus. As I mentioned earlier, I have siblings of various engineering backgrounds and in three different countries: United States, Canada, and the UK. Plus, we are eligible for our Brazilian citizenship and my brother and sister-in-law are fluent in Portuguese. So, before COVID, the plan was to provide certain engineering consulting services and other projects in these various jurisdictions, depending on what we're dealing with. I have an interest in the mining industry and that's part of it. If you go to mindfulmining.ca you'll see a template of a website that will discuss mining issues. I also have something called freedomwithfocus.com: Freedom with Focus Foundation, again playing on the FFF. That is designed to deal with public policy issues that don't make the news. So, I think that the first one is going to be on organ donation; the law commission is asking for submissions on organ donation.

DM: What commission is that?

HSF: Manitoba Law Commission.

DM: The Law Reform Commission?

HSF: Yeah, The Law Reform Commission. I don't even know who they are really. What do they do?

DM: Well, they pick areas of the law and write reports about how government might choose to change, basically, statute law to better serve the public.

HSF: Well, I'm going to be submitting something to them through Freedom with Focus, but based on my private Member's legislation. They just made that announcement last month, I think? Then, I have another fascinating episode going on, which will go through that as well.

DM: So, you've got other things in the pipeline, as it were. That's great, and you're doing it with family! I'm not sure I could manage to work full-time with my siblings. Love them, but…

HSF: Well, they're out there out of the country and, if need be, you know, there could always be a Zoom technical problem, or whatever.

BPS: [laughs]

DM: [laughs] There can always be a technical problem. I understand. Okay, so, two books have been written about your life, let's assume one of them gets made into a movie, who plays you?

HSF: It would never happen.

DM: So, last one, what question didn't I ask that you would have wanted me that ask?

HSF: Well, it depends on the scope of what this is about.

DM: It's completely up to you. What do you want this interview to end with?

HSF: I think it really depends. You know, it's interesting how people define success. I've been very fortunate to somehow live independently and get my P. Eng in school and have been blessed to have the opportunity to represent people helping other people solve their problems or make their lives better. I'm forever grateful for that and hopefully will be able to continue to do that in the future. Success – from a very young age – to me is defined as being half a father to my children as my dad has been to me. I obviously don't have children, that I know about. So, on a fundamental level, I would say I have not achieved success, but I would like to do the best I can for my nieces and nephews.

DM: Again, not that I'm being contrarian at all, but children require someone else to be involved and to want to end up with that same goal. You can't control it. So, you said, "I can only worry about the things I can control." Well, if that's true, in virtually everything that you can control, you've achieved all sorts of success. So, I would focus more on that. I understand that, because I'm in, basically, the same spot in life, but it's a matter of simply saying, "I can't control that part, but I can be good to my nieces and nephews." I'm sure, like me, you're doing the same thing and going, "Yeah, we can do some things for them that, if there were direct children in the picture, one would have trouble putting that time and effort forward into nieces and nephews." So, that's a plus for children, even if they're not your biological, direct descendants.

HSF: Sure. Well, the people who put their political career ahead of their marriages and family and parents, I think that they don't realize that they're not being successful.

DM: Fair enough. I can understand that; to be mindful. You're very mindful of family in a way that many people in your business haven't been. It's a very interesting way to think about it and it does seem to drive you to want to do other things to be successful.

HSF: It all depends on definition, but I appreciate what you're saying.

BPS: I've certainly learned a lot of things from this. There are a lot of factual events that I wasn't even remotely familiar with. There were a lot of things from history that I wasn't familiar with, some of which, unfortunately, are going to be pretty difficult to forget; some of the things you told us about or experienced, like the whole story you told us about the accessibility of the Leg and so on.

HSF: Well, I don't want people to forget, you know, now that they can't get me.

BPS: [laughs] Well, thank you so much.