

An open letter to Prime Minister Trudeau

My name is Benjamin Williamson, I am 16 years old and I have a physical disability called cerebral palsy. We met last summer when you came to my hometown of Aurora.

I now have a signed photograph of you and me with the Member of Parliament for Aurora/Oak Ridges/Richmond Hill, Leona Alleslev. However I'm writing to you today in the hopes that I might be able to discuss with you some issues that I face as a Canadian that I wasn't able to bring up during our brief meeting.

But, before I do that I would like to congratulate you on your majority win.

I am very proud to say that I supported you and my local candidate Leona during the election campaign.

The first thing I would like to discuss with you is that it is getting more and more difficult to be a person with a disability in Canada. The barriers people with disabilities face are many: physical, legal, bureaucratic, communication, technological and, above all, attitudinal.

25 years ago, the U.S. adopted the Americans with Disabilities Act. In short, the ADA gave people legal rights to be full participants in everyday life, and it has had a revolutionary effect.

The most visible impact is the tearing down of physical barriers: schools, stores, sports stadiums, government buildings, public transit that are accessible to people with mobility-impairments are now the norm.

The law has been used by thousands with psychiatric, development and physical disabilities to leave institutional care in hospitals, nursing homes and other facilities and receive care in the community.

Discrimination against those with disabilities is no longer tolerated in the workplace, and employment rates have improved, though the jobless rate among people with disabilities remains stubbornly high with about two-thirds out of work (compared to about one-quarter of those without disabilities.)

Our system in Canada is anything but clear. We have a mish-mash of vague principles and tame enforcement bodies.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees persons with disabilities the right to "equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination based on mental or physical disability." The Canadian Human Rights Act also prohibits discrimination, as do provincial human rights codes.

The fundamental difference in approaches is that, in the United States, the ADA was proactive - it forced governments and private businesses to tear down barriers or face punishing sanctions, and it gave people with disabilities legal tools to demand change.

In Canada, I feel we continue to treat inclusion of people with disabilities as a privilege rather than a right.

I continuously have to fight for support in my own home. The Government of Ontario provides me with up to 10 hours a week of personal support worker assistance. That is enough for two hours a day one hour in the morning to help me get off to school and one hour in the evening to help me take a shower Monday to Friday.

However, on the weekends, I am expected to care for myself. This is an unreasonable expectation. I need real change now.

I formally request a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss these issues.

I thank you for taking the time to read my letter and look forward to hearing from you soon.

All my very best.

Benjamin Williamson

Aurora