

Linda Robinson

January 15, 2014 Interviewers Winston Gereluk & Don Bouzek

Part 2 of an earlier interview?

Q: Explain why it's so important for unionists and activists [to] get involved in politics.

LR: Well I can't remember the exact year it happened, but it was when Gene Mitchell ran for the NDP and I was working at the Federation office at the time. I went over and helped volunteer his campaign doing telephone canvassing and that sort of stuff. That was my first exposure to it. From that point on, I worked on every provincial campaign in one capacity or another, and I've worked on most of the federal campaigns as well in the province. One year we were really on a roll; we elected all the New Democrats and then we elected, oh I can't remember the fellow's name, he was an MP.

Q: From which constituency?

LR: I can't remember which constituency, but he was our first ever NDP MP. I can picture him, Harvey something.

Q: Ross Harvey.

LR: Ross Harvey, there we go, yes. So I worked on his campaign. But just talking, I did-- most of my role was doing telephone canvassing and just talking to people. They'd just buy into the Liberals and the Conservatives, where, if you just vote for me, all this wonderful stuff will happen to you; all the wealth and everything will just rub off onto you like the trickle-down effect. When I first started hearing that, it kind of surprised me. Then, the more I got involved, the more I heard that. So my real reason for getting involved in politics... I'm with the NDP. I've never worked for any other campaign. I've never belonged to any other party and I've never voted for any other party but the New Democrats. It was because people needed to see that that wasn't so, that the Tories and

the Liberals were not there for the average person, particularly the average working person. They were there for the big guys and the corporations, and I hoped that my small part in all of this would help convince people that they need to look at the New Democrats as the only option for working people. There's a lot of talk, particularly in recent years, about forming coalitions with likeminded groups. But the bottom line for me has always been that it doesn't matter how likeminded that person is, they still have to follow the party platform. Only the New Democrats, in my opinion anyway, have a platform that speaks to the people, the ordinary people of the province and of Canada. So this whole idea of working with likeminded people for me is not appealing at all, because the bottom line is they're going to follow whatever their policies say, and those policies generally aren't directed at the working people of this province.

Q: Do the New Democrats work for the Aboriginal people?

LR: Actually for the last election, I can't remember now, I think this is my third term as co-chair of the Indigenous caucus for the New Democrats. Lewis Cardinal and I dug up the Indigenous caucus policy manual, and it's based on the UN Declaration of Rights of the Indigenous People. That document, wherever we brought it during the campaign, people were amazed. First Nations people, Métis people were amazed that we had this document and that that was the position that the New Democrats took as far as Indigenous people were concerned. I did a lot of research around that, and it's really interesting. They've done polls where 65 percent of the First Nation people living on reserve support the New Democrats but only 15 or 20 percent actually go out and vote. So, in 2012, when I ran for the New Democrats on the Enoch reserve, it was kind of interesting. I'm not a band member. I've only moved there recently. So I don't know a whole lot of people. But just from speaking to different groups and getting my literature out there and everything, the day after the election when my son-in-law and I were going out and picking up our signs and stuff, we headed back home and there was a young lady hitchhiking on the reserve. So we just picked her up because Donald knew where she lived. She gets in and she sees all these signs and she goes, you're Linda Robinson? I go, ya. She said, I didn't know who you were but I voted for you. That's a lot of the messages

that I got on Facebook – we're gonna vote for you, we're gonna support you, we really like what you have to say and that sort of stuff. It was actually, I guess maybe because there wasn't a lot of pressure on me to win because I knew we weren't going to win that riding. So I was able to have a lot of fun with it. I did a lot of forums, public forums. When the Wildrose guy was running, we had a forum and he talked about the healthcare position of the Wildrose party and stuff like that. I just got up and said, what you're saying is not correct; your policy is two-tiered. If you're saying you have enough money you can go over here and get the work done, then that's a two-tier healthcare system. So I guess I was able to speak more openly and more freely because there wasn't the whole business of winning on the line. I think I really changed the outlook too for the New Democrats in that area, because a lot of people came up to me after the forums and were really impressed. But it gets back to the whole thing where there's this perception out there that if you're voting for a loser... everybody wants to vote for the winner. That doesn't necessarily mean they support those policies and that position, they just want to say, well you know I voted for the winner. There's still a lot of work that needs to be done, particularly in Alberta.

Q: Talk a bit about your involvement in sports.

LR: It was kind of a segue I guess how I got involved in sports, because I got a phone call from this fellow soliciting memberships to Spa Lady or whatever you call one of those organizations. I told me, well you know, I'm disabled so it really, having a membership in one of those places doesn't really do me any good because there's not much of the equipment and that sort of stuff that I could use. So sorry, but I wouldn't be buying a membership. Then he went on to tell me about the, it used to be called the Rick Hansen Centre over at the U of A where they have a fitness centre for people, a lot of it's with brain injuries, but anybody with a disability could go there. I checked it out and got a membership and I used to go there on a regular basis and just work out and that kind of stuff. Then one day I was heading back towards my car and there were some guys just playing basketball out on the court by the parking lot. They called me over and I thought, oh-oh, I'm in trouble now, maybe I parked somewhere I shouldn't or whatever. Then they

asked me if I was ever interested in playing wheelchair basketball. They gave me the information and I checked it out and got involved. It was the Alberta Northern Lights at that time and the women were the Aurora Lights. So it was a great opportunity cuz I got to travel all across the country playing in different teams and stuff like that. At that time my kids were young and I was just recently divorced as well. So I wasn't able to compete for the national team for the Olympic team because it required that I could be out of the country for a month at a time at different training camps and stuff like that. I just didn't have anybody that I could ask to look after my children, and I didn't want to be away from them for that length of time anyways. Then by the time they were old enough for me to leave I was too old to try out for the team. But I'm not disappointed in that aspect, because I had a great career; I played almost 20 years. Started off with the Northern Lights and then the women's team there folded. Then I got recruited by Calgary, so I played for Calgary for a few years. Then some of the women here in Edmonton got together and formed another team. So they asked me to come back to Edmonton. So over the years I got six gold medals and four silvers, a bunch of bronze. So it was a good career, but it was also a good opportunity to get out there and show, especially kids, that there are opportunities. You can do anything. I wouldn't have had half of the opportunities I had if I hadn't have been involved in sports. Just getting a chance to see different parts of the country; we did a lot of playing down in the U.S. as well. So it's always been interesting and fun and it's always great to win. With the women's team when it was the Inferno we won six gold medals in a row.

Q: For national?

LR: For Canada, ya. We were the top team in Canada. So my role, I was the picker. So I was the one that had to keep the big guys out of the paint to keep them from scoring and that sort of stuff.

Q: What does that involve?

LR: You try to get your chair in a position so that, when you're playing defence, so that the offensive player can't get close enough to make a basket. The court in wheelchair basketball is the same as standup ball. We only have a couple of guys that can shoot from the outside; most of them had to shoot a little closer. So my job was to make sure that those big guys didn't get a chance to post up and make a shot.

Q: So you were raising your children at the same time you were doing all these things and working at the Federation of Labour. You were also pursuing an academic degree.

LR: Ya. It took me almost seven years to get a BA in Labour Studies from Athabasca University. So I was doing that at night along with working and taking my kids on different activities and playing basketball. So, a lot of things happening.

Q: Did you feel at times you were shortchanging your family or that you weren't seeing enough of your kids? How well did they respond to all of this?

LR: Well actually I think I've been really fortunate because when my kids were young I could take them because the Fed had provisions for childcare. So all of the events that I had to go to I could take them. Even when I went to the schools as a delegate and not just as an admin person, I was able to bring them. Same with out-of-town conventions and stuff like that. So in a way they also reaped the rewards, because they got to go to different places, see different things, and stay in places that we wouldn't have been able to stay in otherwise. The same with basketball, they encouraged it to be a family sport, so they were playing on the juniors team. In Canada at a certain level able-bodied people can play the sport. It's only when you get to internationally and to the Olympic level that you have to have a disability.

Q: But even the work-life balance with your work at the Federation of Labour, what sort of care did you arrange for when your children were young?

LR: Well I had childcare; they went to daycare. Actually it was kind of interesting. This is a funny piece of my life. I never really got involved with the Aboriginal community until I was over. As I said earlier, I lost my status because my grandmother lost hers. So in 1985 Bill C-31 was introduced, which allowed women that had lost their status because they married to regain their status, and their children to regain their status. So I got my status back in 1985. But all through those years prior to that, everywhere I went there always seemed to be an Aboriginal person or Aboriginal people in that area, and we always connected with them. Same with my kids--a lot of their friends were Aboriginal. When we were living in Mayfield, there was quite a few families that were Native. If my kids got sick, of course you can't take them to daycare when they're sick, you can't take them to work. So they would be my backups and they would help me. It's always been interesting how I never really went out of my way but it always seemed that we connected. All throughout my life I connected with other Aboriginal people. We found ways to help each other and make a go of everything.

Q: What does it mean to you to have status? Why is it something you wanted?

LR: I think because it validates you. Really with status you don't get a whole lot. I guess I should just explain too, at the same time that they introduced C-31, where you could get your status back, they also introduced legislation that said that the bands would be allowed to decide who their membership was. So just because you got status didn't mean you were a band member. So you had to apply separately to be a band member. What happened was that the government never increased the funding for the bands. All of a sudden there's all these people saying they want to be band members. But the bands don't have the funding to look after these people. So of course then it was a real contentious issue about who was going to get the band membership and who wasn't. I never applied because I never expected to move up to Fort McMurray and live there. I still get the health benefits, education benefits, because Athabasca Tribal Council paid for all my courses through Athabasca University. So you get all of those benefits. I just don't get, like I couldn't move to Anzac and get a house up there and that kind of stuff without being a band member.

Q: Did you experience any abuse in your childhood, and what do you think about the whole process that's going on right now with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

LR: That's really interesting because that's another thing, I'm co-chair of the Living ? and Right Relationships Committee, which is through the Alberta Northwest Conference of the United Church of Canada. The role of that committee is to reconcile the United Church members with what happened at the residential schools. So I spent most of my summer going to the different hearings that they had here in the province. But I can really empathize because growing up in foster care is the same as being raised in an institution. It's not your home, and you know that from the start. You know that any day you could be gone. It's not something that's ever said to you, it's just that underlying sense. I think maybe I sensed that so much because there was other kids. I stayed with the same family; I was fortunate in that. I stayed with the same family until I was 16, but over the years I seen other kids come and go. It's a different situation, and of course there was abuse. I can't talk about that. I was asked at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and I said, no. But ya, so when I was 16, I guess that was another incentive. I had to get through school, because when I was 16 you could apply for emancipation. All you had to do was have a job and you could get out of the welfare system. So that's what I did.

Q: Could you explain that?

LR: Normally you have to stay in. You're considered a minor until you're 18. So I graduated high school when I was 16 and I got a job right away. Then I went to my social worker and said I want to move out. I want to be on my own. So then they went through the process to allow me to do that so I wouldn't have two more years of foster care.

Q: So what do you think about the commission that's going on right now?

LR: Well the commissioners, I believe, really do think that it's worthwhile and that they will come up with something. Personally I don't, because of my involvement in it. It's still

the same old thing. I go to make a suggestion and people, like I'm in a room with ten other white people, and I make a suggestion – oh ya, ya, ya; now just go sit down and be a good little Indian and we'll take care of it. They don't, and it's not just me; other Aboriginal people that I've talked to feel the same way. The people that are involved in that whole process want it to be their process, they want to feel good, that this is a happy event and everybody's going to be friends and palsy walsy by the time the whole thing's over. That's not happening. It can't just be one-sided, the reconciliation. Until the other side honestly sits down and looks at how the First Nations Indigenous people got to this point, and their responsibility and role in that whole process, there's going to be no change. At the end of the day it's going to be like the royal commission, where they came out with this 300 page document that sat on the shelf and nobody's ever done anything with. Harper obviously is not interested. If he really cared to reconcile, why is he introducing all of this legislation that's going to impact the First Nations so badly? It's like, rub, rub, slap, sort of thing, out there trying to make a good impression but his words have no value. He speaks with forked tongue.

Q: In what direction does the answer lie?

LR: My hope is the youth. Right now we have the highest percentage of educated youth ever. They're not just educated in Western institutions, they're educated in our culture. They're the hope; they're the future. I look at Idle No More and I see all these young people out there talking, addressing the issues. They know what it's all about and they're really well prepared and they know the direction they want to go. During the election, when I was talking to various schools, like a lot of the schools out there ask the candidates to come and speak. Up at Seba Beach, because the Paul band is close there, same with Stony Plain, the kids from Enoch go out there because Enoch only goes to grade 9. So I talk to kids and I tell them the ancestors, when they signed the treaties, they made education number one. You look in all the treaties across Canada and education is the number one thing. They knew, for all the backward type of people we were supposed to be back then, they knew that if we didn't have an education, we wouldn't be able to survive in this country. So I tell the kids, honour our ancestors by staying in school and

getting that education, because that's what you need and that's how we're going to get change. I see this group of young people that's coming along now – they're our hope and they're our future and they're going to make changes. They're not prepared to sit back. We've gone through the generation that went to the residential schools. We have the generation that are children of those. And now we have this generation that's coming up, and that's the one that's going to be our strong generation and they're going to make change.

Q: Could you recap your early years to the point where you got your first job at the Federation?

LR: I was born in Fort McMurray. When I got polio, I was sent down to Edmonton and I ended up in the General Hospital. I was there for two years, and when I was ready to leave, they couldn't find my parents. So I went into foster care. So I basically lived all of my life in Edmonton, grew up in Edmonton and went through the school system in Edmonton. Then I got my first job working for the government, and when I got laid off from that I had trouble finding another job. Back in the day, people just didn't know how to deal with somebody with a disability. So it was hard for them to see past the disability and to see my skills. Then when I went and applied for the temporary position at the Federation, that was when I got the phone call and the fellow that interviewed me said, well you're the most qualified, and as a result you have the job if you want it. That was the turning point for me. Here was an organization that saw me as a person, saw my skills, and then maybe later on saw my disability; it wasn't the first thing they saw. So I've been loyal to the labour movement ever since.

Q: What did you find was the reaction of people? How could they avoid giving a job to a person with a disability? How did they justify that?

LR: Well they made all sorts of excuses. They'd say there was cords in the back room that I might trip over if I went there, or they needed somebody that was able to serve

coffee at the meetings--excuses like that. Certainly today I'd tell them what to do with their cords and that sort of stuff, but back then I wasn't empowered.

Q: How old were you when you got polio?

LR: Two.

Q: So two years in a hospital at age two.

LR: Ya. So that's another part of being raised in an institution.

Q: Which hospital was it?

LR: The General. They had a ward. It was really interesting and I don't know if it's my memories or just things that people have told me, but it was young and old, male and female, everybody. Anybody that had polio was all together on the same ward.

Q: There's a perception out there that if you work for the union movement you don't need a union. Why would somebody working for the labour movement need a union?

LR: I think it's because when you work for a union you're working for people that wear two hats. Not only are they union, they're also the employer. So they know both sides of it. I look at it like working for the Federation of Labour should be the best job in the world, but it's not. They tend to take advantage simply because of who they are. I really noticed this when computers were introduced, because then the other staff had easier access to our work. So it was nothing for them to do our work. Those boundaries are not respected. So there's always the issue of this is our work and how do we protect it. So that was a big thing for my union that they've done, and we've negotiated clauses into the collective agreement that protect our work.

Q: What difference does working in a unionized environment make to a person like you?

LR: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Q: What are the benefits of belonging to a union?

LR: Because the union is there for you; the union goes to bat for you. My disability is not an issue because of the union, because they are there asserting my rights, and the employer can't use that as an excuse why I can't do certain stuff. The employer has obligations for ensuring that I'm able to do my job, and that's because of the union too.

Q: Do you feel that your skills are acknowledged?

LR: Well we've had a lot of secretary-treasurers come and go over the years, and each one of them has their own way of doing stuff. I've found that sometimes, because they don't really, the secretary-treasurer doesn't really have a job description like I do. I know what my job is simply from the fact that I have this job description. It doesn't matter how long I've been there, but this tells me what the parameters of my job are. So, when you come into a position where you're not really sure, sometimes there's like, it can be kind of stressful. I'm still a worker, no matter how long I've been there, so it's kind of have to find a way to let the employer know that this is my work when then want to sort of grab the pieces that they can do out of there, and do that in a way that's not going to end up losing your job sort of thing too, because at the end of the day the bottom line is you're the worker and they are the boss. It doesn't matter if it's the Federation of Labour or some other private company.

Q: What were some key events for the labour movement that happened during your time at the Federation?

LR: Of course there was Gainers, and that was our first really major strike where there was a lot of violence, where the police were called in, and our guys were being arrested. I didn't say this earlier today, but thinking now, that I think was when labour realized the

police aren't on our side, they're hired to support the employer and the government and the corporations. For me it was a difficult time during the strike at Gainers to see what was happening. I knew a lot of people from Gainers personally, and to see that violence and know that they're struggling and that they have families and they're just protecting their jobs, that's all. You get somebody like Pocklington who figures he can just do whatever he wants, that's a real problem; that's why we need unions. People still say this to me today – oh unions have outlived their usefulness. But they haven't; that just goes to show. The employer, all he's concerned about is the bottom line. If it wasn't for unions, we wouldn't have even the basic benefits that we have, like minimum wage and vacations and all the rest of it. But also the nurses' strike, that was another big one. We did a lot of good work raising money for them and supporting them. Of course there was a lot of tension too, like when the building trades left and all of that happened, and AUPE left. Just different ups and downs and stuff in the office, things that were going on from one day to the next. Especially when we lost the building trades: that was a huge hit. So who's going to have a job and what's the Federation going to look like at the end of the day? Same thing when AUPE left. There's been a lot of turmoil over the years. But there's also good stuff, like Bill 11 and we organized that huge rally and got Kiefer Sutherland to come in. How many people did we have there? It was just incredible, all the support. So a lot of struggles but a lot of good things happened over the years as well.

Q: Could you talk about the perception of the union as a group of old white guys? Is that people's perception?

LR: In the Aboriginal community I would say yes. I don't know what it is, because I've seen over the years where Aboriginal people that are union members start to get involved, then they just drop off. I don't know if it's because they don't get the support they need. I find this not just at the Federation, it runs across a lot of the unions here in the province, that human rights issues are not really, they're not up there with the rest. When you talk about education it's collective bargaining, steward training, that sort of stuff. When you get to the stuff around human rights, then the unions aren't as willing to fund members to attend. But until we address that, like as far as I'm concerned, and we had suggested this

by the human rights committee a number of years ago, is that there should be a racist and discrimination module attached to each course at the school, and that should be the first thing that is talked about when the school starts. Even well last night or the night before at supper, two sisters, just some of the comments they were making were very racist when they were talking about foreign cab drivers and stuff like that. So there's still that; it's still underlying there. So I think it's important that the union movement has to make that a priority. We have to talk about it. The same with temporary foreign workers, a lot of the talk. That doesn't come from the top, but I know the rank and file is talking about the workers. Their anger is directed at the temporary foreign workers when it shouldn't be, it should be at the government and the employer and those people that are abusing those workers and that sort of stuff. So there's that whole education component that needs to be dealt with. I think when you start talking about that, then not just the Aboriginal community, but all the communities will see that Labour is there for them, for everybody.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

LR: Nothing I can think of.

[END]