

Muriel Turner-Wilkinson

MT: I was born in Medicine Hat, which is a joke—like, when I met my relatives in the U.K. and told them, well, everybody's heard of Medicine Hat because it's in all the films. Anyway, when I was seven, we moved to Lethbridge. By the way, I never lived in Medicine Hat; I only went there for the event, and then we went home to Bow Island. My father was a schoolteacher. Shortly after we went to Lethbridge, he ran for city council. In Lethbridge, there are parties at the civic level, and there's the Civic Labour Organization, and he ran for city council under their banner. When I was a kid, there were civic elections every year. He ran every other year, but we also used to work very hard for whoever the candidate was on the off year as well. As far as I was concerned, Election Day was more fun than Christmas and everything else rolled into one; I just loved Election Day. That was where I got my taste for this business, because I just loved elections. I really enjoyed watching my father working with people and making a difference in the city and doing things. Of course the establishment hated his guts, to the extent that when they decided that they were going to build a second high school in town, and they offered him the principalship of the high school, they told him he could be principal of the high school or he could be on city council, but not both: he had to choose one or the other. There was another man who was on the city council who was the school principal, whose school was almost as big as his. It wasn't a problem for them for him to be on city council, but my dad was a thorn in everybody's side, and that's how they got rid of him.

Q: Was he elected the first time he ran?

MT: Oh yeah.

Q: And then re-elected?

MT: For 16 years. And then after he retired from being principal of the school, he ran for the school board, and at that time it was a three-year term. He served two terms on the school board. On one of the elections when he was running for the school board they went away on holidays. He wasn't even in town for the whole election period, and he topped the polls. He was very popular among the people, but very unpopular among the movers and shakers, because he was a very effective person.

Q: The school board elections—was there a civic party there too, or just in the municipal riding?

MT: No, I don't think the school board had the party, but he was still himself.

Q: Is there still a civic labour organization in Lethbridge?

MT: It wouldn't surprise me. I haven't had any connection with Lethbridge. It's not my favourite place in the world, to tell you the truth.

Q: Tell me about yourself.

MT: Forget the Medicine Hat part, as I say; I just went there for the event. I married young, had five kids, and spent 20 years as a stay-at-home mom. We moved to Regina for a couple of years. I had always been CCF, NDP in my heart but hadn't taken any active part in it. But when we were in Regina, I hooked up with people who were involved in the party, and I got interested and active. Then, when we came back to Alberta, my eldest daughter got active in the 1971 election because her schoolteacher was the NDP candidate. She got active, I got involved. The next thing I knew, I was at Convention. The next thing I knew, I was the candidate in Crowfoot. The next thing I knew, I was the candidate in the provincial election in the High River constituency. Then we moved back into the city, and I ran in Egmont. Then, years later, when my eldest daughter was president of the party and they needed a candidate—just a name on the ballot—I ran in Fish Creek. The same time that I ran in Egmont, my eldest daughter ran federally in

Calgary-South. We ran the campaigns out of the house. We had big election signs that said “Elect McCreery,” and used them for both elections.

Q: Tell me about the experience of running in all those constituencies.

MT: Crowfoot covered about half the province; it was absolutely huge. The Conservative member and candidate was Jack Horner, and he loved interacting with people. The United Farmers set up forums all through the constituency. The way that it worked is that we went to the forum in Claresholm, which was the first one, we drew lots for speaking order, and then all of the rest of the forums were run by other chapters of the United Farmers and they agreed that they would just move on from one to the next. So the order that we drew for the first one, in the second one the first person dropped down. So, the speaking order was set for the whole nine forums when we went to the first one. It was the most interesting and amazing experience. I remember in Consort in particular, one of the things was they were shutting down the rural railway lines. That was something that both the Conservatives and the NDP were opposed to. So, depending on which one of us, Jack or I, got to be the first speaker, that person got to talk about the railways. So, in the various places we went, we more or less agreed that if I spoke first I spoke about the railways, and if he spoke first he spoke about the railways. We hit it off reasonably well, and he was there at all of the forums. We took turns bashing the Liberal candidate and just had a wonderful time. In Consort, I just happened to hit it right or whatever, but the crowd was with me. I don't think I picked up a vote, but it didn't make any difference. They were interested in hearing what I had to say. I felt like I had that crowd in the palm of my hand. It was the most amazing experience that you could ever possibly have. I was hooked. I just loved it. Then I ran for a place on the executive of the NDP, and I was on the provincial executive for quite a number of years. I also served three years on the federal council of the NDP and just really enjoyed my time there. Then all of my kids started school, and I decided it was time to get out and get myself a job. When we first came back from Regina we lived out in the country. We set up a little library in the school in Millerville. I was serving on the board of the library. There was a library trustees' meeting in Calgary, so I came in to the meeting. I met the director of the library at this

meeting, and we hit it off fairly well. I had worked at the library at the university before I was married, so I went and applied for a job at the library. The secretary of the director was the person who took the applications. She looked at my application, 20 years as a stay-at-home mom and nothing much in the way of education. I'd had one year of university and hadn't really done anything that looked like anything on an application form. She sort of said, "Don't call us, we'll call you." Just as I was going out the door, the director came in and, "Oh hi, how are you, what are you doing here?" "Oh, I've come to apply for a job." "Oh, you're hired." It isn't what you know, it's who you know. That was August, and they hired me in August, and the job that they hired me for didn't start until the first of December. They just shuffled me around and training, just because he wanted me to be there. I was still active in the party at that point. Shortly after that I got divorced, and I realized there was no way I could afford to do the things I'd been doing with the party. I couldn't afford it. That was part of what caused me to get interested in the union, but also I did it because it was something I was interested in. Almost at my first union meeting I got elected to go onto the negotiating committee. By this time, we had a new director who had come out of the library in Lethbridge and knew my parents very well. One of the other directors on the library executive was a woman who came from Lethbridge whose father had Alzheimer's disease, and so did my father at that point, and they were roommates in the hospital. The third guy who was on the negotiating committee on the library side was a member of the NDP, and I knew him well. So I was a natural to be on the negotiating committee, because I had real connections with everybody who was on the other side of the table.

Q: What were some of the early issues that you confronted in your life?

MT: The Liberal candidate in the Highwood constituency, which was High River, went into the forum at Nanton and said, "Elect me, and I'll tell you where the Lost Lemon Mine is." I thought, "Boy, I hope I get more votes than her—she's a loony." And I did; I think I beat her by about five votes. It was really tough slugging. The other thing that happened in that election was that it was just at the time of the case where the woman had taken her husband to court to get half of the assets in the marriage. They had a farm, and

when they were divorced, she said that her work on the farm was equal to his and that she was entitled to half of the farm. So, I went and spoke to a group of farm women as part of the election situation. It was amazing to me that these women really understood what she was talking about. They really believed that their contribution to the farm was equal to or of equal value to what their husbands were doing, that they were entitled to a fair split if there was ever a divorce or death, that they were entitled to more than just their homestead rights. But they wanted their homestead rights, too. I said, “If you are opting for equal treatment, then that means that you are equal on the upside and on the downside. You don't get to say, we're equal until there's a problem and then I still get my half. It doesn't work that way.” They wanted to play both sides of the street, and I was quite taken aback that they didn't understand the concept of equality—meaning that if there were problems, then you shared the problems as well. I've gotten into some pretty hefty arguments with people both on issues like that and with labour people—a lot on having them not understand that just because you don't have a paycheck doesn't mean that you don't work. Everybody works, and whatever it is that they do—whether it's art, or writing, or taking care of children, or housekeeping, or whatever it is that they choose to make their life's work—just because somebody isn't giving them a paycheck doesn't mean that they're not working. That's a concept that's really hard for some people to get their minds around.

Q: Did that come up during the election?

MT: It came up in my interactions with people through my union work and my party work. One of the things was that, because I was a candidate in the federal election, there was an NDP conference of women in Winnipeg. The election that I ran in was in early July, and the women's conference was in August. I said to my then-husband, “There's really no way that we can afford for me to go to this conference.” I was invited because of being a candidate. He said, “Oh, you have to go.” I said, “Well, something that you have to understand is that if I go to this women's conference, I might come back a different person, and you have to be prepared for that.” He said, “Okay.” It was in one of the workshops there that, because at that point I was a stay-at-home mom, and there they

were talking about equal rights for women, and rights in the workplace, and that kind of thing. I just disappeared into the woodwork. My situation, and who I was, and what I represented as a home worker with no paycheck was just of no interest or value at all. I squalled, but I was so new at it at that point that I didn't really make much impact. It certainly started me on the road to making a lot more impact, a lot more often after that. Even after I went to work, I still really appreciated the fact that not everybody works for a wage, but they work.

Q: Tell me some of your experiences in the union, and what influence you brought into the union based on your experiences.

MT: The union had been pretty candy-assed, if you pardon me being rude, up to that point. I really took an interest in the union structure. I went to conferences and conventions and took other people with me. I don't know why this is true, but the one really important skill that I have is that I can pick people to work with, and put the right person in the right job, and get them to do what needs to be done. I gathered around me a powerful executive. We went through the collective agreement, and it was just cobbled together with a phrase here and there. The first time I was on the negotiating committee we submitted maybe two pages of phrase changes. The people that I brought onto the executive said, "This is horrible; we've got to do something about this." We sat down and rewrote the whole of our collective agreement in good English and in clear, understandable language, and we submitted it. The management team just about fell off their chairs when they saw this book that we handed them. We said, "Well, it's really not that much of a change; all it is, is that we're cleaning up the language to make it say what it actually says, and to say it in good English." So, we cleaned up the collective agreement, and made it an excellent English document. That was probably one of the most important things that I precipitated, but it was my team that did it. The other thing we did was over the years [was that] the maintenance men in the place had been being paid significantly more than they were worth. It was completely unfair to have the janitors making more money than the people who had postgraduate degrees. So, what we did was, we set up a system that evaluated all the different jobs in the library and put a

value on them all. The maintenance people who were in place were red-circled. After the new agreement went in, anybody who came on staff, the men and women who were in the maintenance department, were getting the same wage, and were getting less than the degreed men or women higher up the way. We rationalized the wage scales. It was quite funny, because when we got it all worked out it turned out there were a couple of guys that were at the top of the maintenance work levels that actually ended up getting a raise. Somehow or other over the long haul, they hadn't kept up with the lower guys. Anyway, it all worked out and everybody who was there was happy, or at least I didn't hear any complaints from anybody. But the first hire under the new scale—he comes in, he applies for the job, he gets hired, they tell him what his wages were, and obviously he was happy enough with it because he took the job. Then he found out that the guys he was working beside were making more than him, and he was just furious. He used to call me up and rail at me all the time because he wasn't making as much as the guys that were red-circled. I said, "You took the job, quit complaining. You're not entitled to what the red-circled guys are getting. They wouldn't be getting it either except that we wouldn't cut them back." He just hated me because he was stuck at the new wage scale. But that was something I was very proud of doing.

Q: And that issue was just due to human error.

MT: That's right. What we did was we rationalized it so that people were being paid for the work that they did. It didn't make any difference whether they were men or women, they were being paid for the work that they did.

Q: So you were elected for the leadership of the library?

MT: After I was on the negotiating committee, I was then elected for one year as treasurer, and then I was president for five years. Then I fell over a box.

Q: Were you injured at work?

MT: Oh yeah.

Q: Then you must've applied for worker's compensation.

MT: Didn't have a problem with workers' compensation. What happened was, I fell over a box, I landed on my outstretched arm, and it caved back into my ribs, and I had an undisplaced fracture of my elbow, and I had very severely damaged ribs. They called an ambulance, the ambulance came. The guy looked at me and he said, "Oh, I don't think you need an ambulance to go to the hospital. You can get a cab." So, they went off and I went to the hospital. I don't think I did a very good job of describing what had happened. They didn't take any x-rays at all. They said, "Well, we don't do anything for ribs these days; if you start coughing up blood, come back. If you find yourself getting really tired, go and see your doctor." Then, the next day my elbow was really bothering me, so I went to my own doctor. He x-rayed it, and it turned out that it was fractured. I was off for six weeks while my elbow healed. The workers' compensation accepted that without a problem. When I went back to work, I was still having a problem with my ribs and my lungs. I must've done some damage to my lungs. So, I ended up I got the flu and was off sick. Every time that I'd be well enough to go back to work, I'd go back to work, and I was babying my elbow and doing everything two-handed, and transferring all the pressure up into my shoulders, thinking that my shoulders were okay. I kept getting sick and being off work because I had flu and so on. Off and on, I was off work for about a year. The library didn't have a long-term disability plan at that point. What they had was a sick leave bank. Once a year, every employee put in half a day out of their sick leave, and the library put a day. There was this huge bank, and nobody ever used it. Nobody ever applied for the sick leave bank because you had to be sick for two weeks before you were eligible to even apply for it. I just applied to the sick leave bank, and I was off for the best part of a year. I would go back to work for a little while, and then I'd be off again, then I'd go back for a few days and be off again. The upshot of the whole thing was that I went back to work, and the branch that I was working in had a very good system of working at the various stations for an hour at a time and then moving to something else, so you weren't doing anything for too long at a time. I was so tired and ill that I kept trading with

people and working at jobs where I could sit down. What I didn't realize was that I was destroying my shoulders. Through the union I had been to health and safety conferences, I had a drawer full of material on repetitive strain injuries. I probably knew more about repetitive strain injuries than any other 10 people you could name. You just do what you have to do and you don't realize that you're killing yourself. I finally got another case of flu and thought, "Am I going to be sick enough to be off for two weeks? Yeah, I think I am." So, I applied to the sick leave bank again for another two weeks. The two weeks was up and my shoulders were still so sore. But, I realized that it wasn't the ache of the flu anymore, that it was something else. So, I went to my doctor. He said, "Describe to me exactly what it is that you do at work." So I did that. He said, "You can't do that, can you?" I said, "Well, actually, no, I can't." So, he took me off work entirely, and I never worked another day after that. I went to a rheumatologist, I went to a neurologist. I finally went to a guy who was an expert in occupational medicine. I described to him what had happened. He said, "What you have is repetitive strain injury, and it flows from the accident. Because you had the accident, because you went back to work and damaged the same areas that you had hurt." I had apparently hurt my shoulder without realizing that I did. So, the whole thing had sort of flowed from the accident. So, he submitted the thing to the Workers Compensation Board and tied the whole situation back to the accident. They accepted the claim, and they gave me a retroactive payment. That was okay, but then every time there was a question about what was going on or if they were going to accept further payments or whatever, they would open up the file, and the accident was on top. I went to a physiatrist finally, and he said to me, "You can never work again, you're totally disabled." So, then they sent me to a physiatrist, but because they opened up the file and looked at the top page, they asked him to look at my elbow. It was my shoulders that were shot. So he said, "There's nothing the matter with her elbow." I said, "Well, I never said there was anything wrong with my elbow." But because that was what they had told him to look at, he couldn't look at what was really the problem. So, I kept running into problems with the Board because the two conditions were tied. But the actual thing that was my permanent injury was 10 pages down in the file, and nobody ever turned over the file and looked 10 pages down. I went to the final appeal board twice. The first time they accepted the claim, and then the second time I went to them to

try to get a pension, and they said, "Yes, you're permanently disabled. Yes, it's a work-related injury. No, I'm sorry we don't have a category for you, and you can't have a pension." So, they wouldn't give me a pension. ... I was on a deigned income situation where they decided that I could be a receptionist at a car dealership. Well, I was a little old, and a little fat, and a little ugly for that. That was the deigned income. So, they gave me the difference between what they said that person would earn and what I had been earning at the time of the accident, and at the end of the year they gave that person a 10 percent raise at a time when nobody was getting raises in the economy at all. So, they cut me back about half. Then, by the time I retired they had given this person another raise, and I was down to under \$100. So, it wasn't even bothering to fight for; it was just nuts. ... Essentially, they did not accept the fact that, like, I went through an assessment at the Rockyview, and they said I had 10 percent function in my shoulders at that point. They didn't accept that. I couldn't drive, I had to give up driving. I had to give up everything except for taking personal care of myself, and that's all I can do now.

Q: What do you think of the WCB?

MT: I think that the guy who went after him with a shotgun was probably well justified. Not that I would do something like that myself, but I can certainly understand why somebody would. Their mission statements, they said that their reason for being was to protect the employers. ... Thinking back on it, I was an arrogant little twerp. Kathy was the labour lawyer, and she said to me, "You know what to do, and you can do it." I was that lawyer that's stupid and takes care of himself. I carried my own case through both with my employer, and with the Board, and the whole thing. I did all of my fighting for myself. As president of the union, I had been the steward as well. If there were any problems, I was the one who went in and took care of them, and I did. There was one guy that they fired because he got in a fight with another guy in the elevator at the library, and walked out. I went in and persuaded them that he had to walk out, he was injured and had to go and see his doctor. I got him his job back. I was good at it, so I did it for myself too. . . . I applied for Canada Pension disability, and I got that. At the time, the WCB wouldn't pay you if you were on Canada Pension. Then they changed their rules. Because

I had contact with the people who were fighting the WCB, and I had been involved with other people, and had gone to rallies and marches and things like that, this guy phoned me up right away and said, "Did you know they've changed the rules? I think it applies to you." So, that's how I got the deigned income thing, because I found out that they changed the rules. They knew that they changed the rules, they knew that it affected me. Do they call you up and tell you that you're now eligible for payment? No way. You have to find these things out yourself. It's crazy. If you don't know what you don't know...

Q: Back to your political career, where do you think the NDP are going?

MT: I was very, very pleased with the election campaign that they ran recently. I thought they did an excellent job in the federal campaign. I was very pleased with that. I think the day is coming, Alberta flips. I think this economic situation may be the engine that makes it flip. It'll flip to us, it will absolutely. And particularly with Obama, if he does what it looks like he's going to do, he'll make us credible. ... We got really involved in both the election campaigns. We watched CPAC and got really interested in the election campaign. I think things are going to change. Now you have to realize that I'm always wrong, but I really do think things are going to change.

Q: What do you think about this idea that came out in the provincial election about getting together with the Liberals?

MT: Never, never, never. Don't do it. It's the stupidest idea anybody ever had.

[ END ]