



A Passion for Reform: Attorney General Geoff Plant

The Honourable Geoff Plant believes in accessibility. Plant generously allotted time for our meeting between other appointments. Ever the gentleman, his calm demeanor belied his frenetic schedule as we sat down for tea and a chat about the current Attorney General of our province.

Born in Hamilton, Ontario, and raised in Vancouver, Plant says his earliest recollections of being positively influenced toward a future in the legal field came from such literary role models as found in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Though he was not initially focused on becoming a lawyer, the intellectual discipline in the field of law increasingly appealed to him throughout his years of education. Before being called to the Bar in 1982, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Harvard, and law degrees from the universities of Dalhousie, Southampton, and Cambridge.

Because his parents were active volunteers in support of local candidates, a focus on politics had been a large part of growing up in the Plant household. Early in the 1990s, Plant became active himself as a volunteer but only seriously considered running for office late in 1995. He felt he had unique skills to offer, not only from his experience as a practising lawyer but particularly his expertise in aboriginal land claims. He hoped to some degree that his friends might talk him out of the idea; instead,

they were extremely supportive and promptly offered their assistance.



In his first election in 1996, he won his riding in Richmond-Steveston, though his party was defeated. Even in Opposition as Justice Critic, however, he enjoyed the atmosphere of the legislature, the stimulating debate, and the fact that he was making a contribution. This was an ideal training ground and learning experience for a newly elected official. When the BC Liberal Party later swept into power in 2001, he was appointed Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Treaty Negotiations by the new Premier.

Several unique responsibilities come with the position of Attorney General. The AG is the government's lawyer, ensuring that it gets the best possible legal advice. The AG is also chief prosecutor, politically accountable for setting policy though individual prosecutors generally manage their cases without intervention. His office oversees funding for Legal Aid and Family Justice Programs. Court Services Branch and those statutes governing the legal profession also fall within the AG's portfolio. In addition to these responsibilities, Plant is the Chair of the Legislative Review Committee of Cabinet.

Geoff Plant has an admitted passion for reform. He has spearheaded a major initiative to modernize administrative justice through reforms of such agencies as the Workers' Compensation Board, Labour Relations Board, and Residential Tenancy Branch, among others. Plant considers ADR, alternative dispute resolution, an important priority in improving access to justice; he believes greater efficiencies can yet be gained through the effective use of electronic technology.

According to Plant, the primary goal of legal reform should be a levelling of the playing field to the effect that members of the public are given equal

access to justice in order that disputes be resolved most fairly. Real change, however, comes neither quickly nor easily. Standard operating procedure dictates a review of the *status quo* with recommendations for improvement then offered for consideration, debate, and legislative procedure.

With a view toward the future of the legal profession, Plant anticipates that specialization, now on the rise, will eventually prevail as the law becomes increasingly complex. As the provision of traditional legal advice and representation becomes more expensive, government will necessarily be looking at ways of maintaining public access to affordable assistance. Plant cites these as some of the reasons why Ontario and BC are more closely evaluating the roles and accountability of paralegals and lay advocates.

Plant reaffirms the need to find a balance between improving public access to competent legal service providers while maintaining public confidence in the quality of those services. Given his office's responsibility for statutes governing the legal profession and his personal passion for reform, Plant is well positioned to make the significant contribution to the system that he and his friends knew was possible when he first chose to run for office.

Plant's role model demonstrates the difference one man of conviction can make even in the face of an imbalance of power or resistance to new ideas. Let us look forward to the realization of Geoff Plant's passion for reform into a legacy of positive changes for the legal profession. ▲

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