



A reformer at heart

Ron Skolrood's interest in social policy inspired a life-long dedication to improving the law.

By Michael Dempster

In Ron Skolrood's busy world, there's nothing more relaxing than a Saturday morning visit to Vancouver's bustling Granville Island public market. There, he takes his time choosing the freshest ingredients for an evening's dinner with friends.

His lucky guests might be treated to Skolrood's balsamic and red wine-braised short ribs — his signature dish — complemented with some good conversation.

During the summer, those conversations often turn to the kids' softball teams that Skolrood coaches, the two golf vacations he's made to Pebble Beach during the past year, or an interesting recipe (he's taken several cooking courses) they're about to be served.

But this fall, a meatier topic may be up for discussion as Skolrood returns to the Court of Appeal in B.C. for the latest go-round in the fight against the federal government's Proceeds of Crime (Money Laundering) legislation, first tabled in May 1999.

It's an issue that Skolrood, a senior litigator at Lawson Lundell LLP, knows inside out. He has represented the Canadian Bar Association, which is an intervenor, on a pro bono basis from the beginning.

And like his passion for entertaining friends, golf, family and his practice, Skolrood finds deep satisfaction digging into areas concerning law reform.

"The proceeds of crime legislation is a very important issue for the legal profession and the importance of maintaining an independent bar and protecting solicitor-client privilege," Skolrood explains. "That's what drew me to the issue."

While he contends that lawyers and the legal profession support the government's efforts to combat money laundering and terrorist financing, he strongly believes it can't be at all costs.

"I think that's where the CBA and the Federation of Law Societies have tried to draw a line — that lawyers, while supportive of the efforts of government, shouldn't be co-opted into being agents of the state to spy on their clients," he says. "It tends to call into question the whole administration of justice."

Skolrood is perplexed by the government's persistence. He notes the law societies have addressed the two major areas of government concern: first, limits have been put on the

amount of cash lawyers can accept from clients; second, efforts around client identification and verification rules are in place.

The latter issue is the most recent concern. Under the proposed legislation, lawyers would have to collect and maintain certain personal information relating to their clients and relating to the transactions in which their clients are involved. That information would have to be available for inspection on demand.

“For me,” Skolrood says, “issues like this are important for the profession and society, and from a lawyer’s perspective, to get immersed in.”

The legislation is just one example of interesting cases that motivate Skolrood to become involved. He has been recognized for his pro bono work with the B.C. Civil Liberties Association. He is also past chair (2007-2010) of the B.C. Law Institute, a not-for-profit law reform agency that’s near and dear to his heart because of its mission to improve the law.

“That’s what I’ve enjoyed about the CBA,” he adds. “It’s very involved in law reform. It makes submissions to government on legislation and ways to improve the law, and I think that’s a very important function.”

Skolrood’s day-to-day practice involves pension and benefits litigation involving large pension plans. He’s worked in public law, constitutional and administrative law, and a smattering of commercial disputes.

His interest in social policy evolved as a youngster. Born in Vancouver, the family moved to southern Alberta in 1967 when his father became one of the founding faculty members at the University of Lethbridge.

Harold Skolrood was a professor in the education department, taught sociology and, as his son remembers, was a “very engaged person” who passed on his interest for politics and history during dinner table discussions.

Skolrood was attracted to the law, in part, because of the role it can play in social policy. He was further convinced after earning his law degree at the University of Victoria and then being chosen to clerk at the Supreme Court of Canada in 1986-87. There, he says, “some brilliant judges, and a group of interesting people (his peers) who were all bent on doing interesting things,” inspired him.

Peter Behie, Q.C., and partner at Ramsay Lampman Rhodes on Vancouver Island, was one year ahead of Skolrood at law school and again at the Supreme Court. The clerk’s job, Behie says, had a lasting effect.

“You can’t get a richer, higher octane environment at the Supreme Court,” Behie says. “The people there... have deeply penetrating minds, as you would expect, because the issues that get (to that level) resist easy analysis.”

“They are challenging questions that are on the cutting edge of law,” he adds. “They are big issues, capacious.”

Although Skolrood and Behie were a year apart, their similar career paths brought them together. After the Supreme Court, both would article at Lawson Lundell, followed by graduate work (Behie at the University of California, Berkeley; Skolrood, the University of Cambridge) then returning to Lawson Lundell. Behie left six years later for Vancouver Island, but by then they’d become fast friends.

“We were young single lawyers at Lawson, a gaggle of us, who worked really hard, long hours and then hung out and had lots of fun together,” Behie remembers. “Those relationships tend to be tight.”

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— Peter Behie, Q.C.

Behie calls his friend a bit of an enigma, whose easy-going personality hasn’t changed within the pressure cooker of a big firm. In such an environment, he explains, “you often see the rooster-in-the-barnyard phenomenon where you have to paw the ground and puff your chest out.”

“Part of Ron’s charm and ability to succeed is that he is very likable and maintains that nice touch with people, notwithstanding the fairly challenging head-butting aspects of corporate commercial litigation,” Behie says. “That’s no small feat.”

Associate Michelle Jones sees the same traits in Skolrood, her formal mentor at Lawson Lundell since she started as a summer student in 2006.

“He is genuinely interested in helping me to be the best lawyer I can be,” Jones says. “I never, ever thought when I started that I’d have someone as invested as he is.”

Jones earned her law degree from the University of Ottawa in 2007 and afterwards spent a year clerking in the Federal Court of Canada’s trial division.

Jones and Skolrood share the same professional interests, she says. “We’re both in tune and fascinated with government and policies and administrative regulatory schemes that oversee behaviour of a certain discipline or an area that cries out for legislation.”

Beyond insightful debates at work where they flesh out issues, Jones admires how “well-rounded and well-grounded” her mentor is.

She also notes how well Skolrood and his wife have managed to balance their work and family lives.

Jane Murdoch, a mining securities lawyer, met her future husband when they articulated together. She was a partner at Lawson Lundell until this spring when she left the firm to join Cassels Brock.

Un réformateur passionné

Ron Skolrood a toujours voulu poursuivre des objectifs de politique sociale. C'est pourquoi il est devenu avocat.

Avec le rythme de vie trépidant de Ron Skolrood, rien de plus relaxant qu'un samedi matin passé à faire les courses au marché public de l'île de Granville à Vancouver, pour préparer un dîner entre amis composé de bouts de côtes braisées au vin rouge et au vinaigre balsamique « à la Skolrood ».

Les conversations estivales accompagnant ces repas tournent souvent autour des équipes de balle molle dont M^e Skolrood est entraîneur, ses vacances de golf à Pebble Beach ou une recette intéressante.

Cet automne, un sujet plus consistant pourrait être abordé au terme de la lutte à la Cour d'appel de C.-B. contre la législation fédérale sur le blanchiment d'argent, initialement déposée en mai 1999 à laquelle M^e Skolrood prendra part.

Associé à Lawson Lundell, il maîtrise ce sujet passionnant sur la réforme du droit. Il a représenté l'ABC qui est intervenue bénévolement depuis les débuts de cette affaire.

Selon lui, « la *Loi sur le recyclage des produits de la criminalité* est vitale, de même que le maintien d'une cour indépendante et la protection du secret professionnel de l'avocat ».

Bien que les avocats soutiennent les efforts gouvernementaux pour lutter contre le blanchiment d'argent et le financement d'actes terroristes, il croit fermement que cela ne peut se faire à n'importe quel prix.

« C'est pourquoi l'ABC et la Fédération des barreaux ont tenté d'établir la ligne de démarcation suivante: les avocats ne devraient pas devenir les espions de leurs clients. La remise en question de toute l'administration de la justice est en cause ici. »

Étonné de la persistance du gouvernement, M^e Skolrood fait remarquer que les barreaux ont souligné deux grandes sources d'inquiétude: premièrement, les limites sur les fonds que les avocats peuvent accepter de la part de leurs clients. Et, plus récemment, l'identification du client et les règles de vérification. Le projet de loi propose que les avocats soient obligés de recueillir et de conserver des données personnelles concernant leurs clients et leurs transactions. Ces renseignements doivent être disponibles sur demande en cas d'inspection.

Par ailleurs, M^e Skolrood a été reconnu pour son bénévolat auprès du B.C. Civil Liberties Association. Il a présidé le B.C. Law Institute de 2007 à 2010, un OSBL dont la mission est l'amélioration du droit. C'est d'ailleurs ce dénominateur commun avec l'ABC que l'avocat affectionne particulièrement. « L'ABC est très engagée en faveur des réformes juridiques », précise-t-il.

Au quotidien, il s'occupe des litiges en matière de pensions et d'avantages sociaux, y compris les grands régimes de retraite. Le droit public, le droit constitutionnel et administratif et une série de différends commerciaux ont également fait l'objet de ses mandats.

La politique sociale a captivé son intérêt dès sa jeunesse, son père, enseignant en sociologie à l'Université de Lethbridge, étant lui-même très engagé. En fait, Ron Skolrood était attiré par le droit à cause de son rattachement à la politique sociale. Il a donc obtenu son diplôme en droit à l'Université de Victoria, puis a été choisi comme auxiliaire juridique à la Cour suprême du Canada en 1986-1987, ce qui lui a donné l'occasion de rencontrer des juges brillants.

Peter Behie, associé chez Ramsay Lampman Rhodes à Vancouver, ancien collègue et ami, considère qu'une partie du charme et de la capacité de réussite lui vient de son affabilité. « Il sait conserver un lien agréable avec les gens », affirme-t-il.

M^e Skolrood était l'ancien mentor de Michelle Jones, une associée qui l'apprécie beaucoup. Elle se souvient à quel point il l'a aidée à devenir la meilleure avocate possible. Elle fait également remarquer l'art avec lequel il a équilibré sa vie familiale et professionnelle.

Avec une épouse avocate du nom de Jane Murdoch, qui travaille actuellement chez Cassels Brock, l'emploi du temps est extrêmement chargé. Cela ne l'empêche pas de se présenter pour encourager ses trois enfants à s'adonner au sport.

Son seul regret? Ne pas jouer suffisamment au golf. Il a golfé deux fois à Pebble Beach cette année, notamment lors de son cinquantième anniversaire, ce qui est un bon début. Son handicap pourra servir de matière à discussion entre amis. Du moins jusqu'à l'ouverture des tribunaux, lorsqu'une partie plus sérieuse reprendra devant la Cour d'appel. **N**

— Yasmina El Jamaï

The job switch will likely add to an already hectic “go, go, go” household. Hannah, 17, Sam 15, and Daniel 8, are all busy, athletic kids, and the family works together to manage the chaos at a reasonable level.

Skolrood has coached Hannah in softball for years, encouraged Sam's passions for hockey and baseball, and this year has gone full circle, returning to coach Daniel's baseball team.

Busy as his life can get, nothing has really suffered except for his golf game — a subject Skolrood admits he really never tires talking about.

Last year, for his 50th birthday, he, Jane and another couple

travelled to California's Monterey Peninsula where, over three magical days, they played the famed Pebble Beach, Links at Spanish Bay and Spyglass Hill golf courses.

“That was one of the most special weekends in my life,” he says, adding that he made a follow-up visit to Pebble Beach with some buddies earlier this year.

Those two trips made him determined to play more golf, Skolrood says. That means his handicap will likely be brought up over dinner with friends — at least until fall when a more serious game resumes at the Court of Appeal. **N**

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