

The Weekend Telegram's 20 Questions



Richard Alexander

Richard Alexander outside the Newfoundland and Labrador Employers' Council offices in Donovans Industrial Park, Mount Pearl.
—Photo by Joe Gibbons/The Telegram

By DEANA SIKORS SULLIVAN
THE TELEGRAM

Richard Alexander, executive director of the Newfoundland and Labrador Employers' Council, began his career in the business sector doing policy and communications work for Hospitality Newfoundland and Labrador. Alexander said he worked on a couple of labour standards issues on behalf of the tourism industry and worked with the employers' council, and one thing led to another. He began working for the council full time almost 10

years ago. After his supervisor retired, he moved into the executive director's role in 2007, which, he said, had been one of his long-term goals. Since then, he's been vocal about issues affecting local employers and their businesses. In recent years, Alexander said, employers have been concerned about what they view as a tax on labour in the province. As an example, he said the cost of the workers' compensation system for employers is very high and it's a challenge for businesses to pay the premiums and remain competitive.

"It makes business uncompetitive, so it's been the No. 1 issue for the employers' council for a number of years and I can't see that changing until we get some solid movement on assessment rates," Alexander said. The province's two per cent health and post-secondary education payroll tax is also a big issue for employers, he said. "We just want an environment that's competitive in terms of tax on all areas," Alexander said, because when employers have to pay high taxes, it costs jobs.

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What is your full name?
Richard Bertram Alexander.

Where and when were you born?
At the Grace (hospital) in St. John's in 1971, but I grew up in Stephenville.

Where is home today?
Waterford Valley, St. John's.

What was one act of rebellion you committed as a youth?
It depends on who you ask, I guess. I was fairly obsessed with martial arts and slingshots, BB guns and pellet guns and all that stuff as a kid, so much to my mother's chagrin. I was learning to use nunchuks, those things that you swing around, and I beat up my room pretty bad and the walls ... smashing light fixtures and things like that. I wasn't very old. I was probably about 12 or 13.

What is your favourite food?
I'd have to say the smoked (Arctic) char you get in Nain. It's hard to get it here in St. John's, but it's absolutely fantastic. I love it.

What was your favourite year?
2001, when my first daughter was born, and then 2003, when my second daughter was born. Those were the big years when I didn't understand what it was like to be a father and then just how fantastic it's been, a constant joy ever since.

What type of music do you like?
It's fairly broad because when I run, I listen to things like Usher and Jay Z ... because the hip-hop has a good beat. I play guitar and most of the music that I play is traditional Newfoundland and folk music.

What is your greatest indulgence?
I love red wine, but my greatest indulgence — I spend a lot of my time sea kayaking, surfing, paddling, tide races and tidal currents and

things like that. That's my obsession. I've spent months of my life doing sea kayaking. I paddled up the west coast of Greenland a few years ago and finished a trip 300 miles above the Arctic Circle, so I'm a hard-core sea kayaker.

Who would play you in a movie about your life?
Jason Bateman or someone like that.

What is your greatest regret?
When I finished school, I was thinking about doing the backpacking across Europe thing. I never did that when I finished school, so that's a bit of a regret.

What bugs you?
Individuals who tend to complain about certain situations in their life or in the province without making a suggestion as to how to improve it. Anybody can complain, but it takes real talent and imagination to make a comment about how we can improve the situation.

What are your best and worst qualities?
They're probably one and the same. When I get involved in something that I believe strongly, it's almost like the blinkers are on or the blinders are on and every second of my life becomes obsessed with it, so I'm 150 per cent on whatever it is. It may be something with work, something with sea kayaking or whatever, and that's good in a sense, that usually the output or the achievement in that area is pretty good. But it's knowing when to say when. With the obsession, the extreme amount of focus, other things get left by the wayside or it becomes unhealthy after a period of time.

Who inspires you?
Some of the political leaders who have been faced with some big crises and how they've dealt with it and how they've spoken to the public to motivate people and things like that. From history, Winston Churchill would be somebody who was a pretty mild-mannered person,

but just gave inspiration to a lot of people. The ability to do that is incredible and not everybody has it, so that inspires me.

What is your most treasured possession?
I picked up a sealskin fur coat, with Arctic fox around the hood ... a child's coat, when I was in Greenland. I bought it from this person who was making them in a little community up there and brought it back for my daughter as a gift, and now it's sort of a new family keepsake. It's pretty cool, but I find what is interesting is when she wears it during the winter and we're out downtown somewhere, the reaction she gets from Newfoundlanders who see her wearing it is unbelievable. People think I'm making some big political statement and that's not it at all. It's a little bit of a political statement, but it's just a really nice coat. That's something I'd like to see my children pass on to their children.

Do you have any hidden talents?
I can breakdance, actually. It's a big hit at weddings. I usually only pull out the breakdancing when it gets later at night and I've had a few glasses of red wine.

What do you like to do when you're not working?
As I said, I'm pretty hard core into the sea kayaking side of things. I've been instructing sea kayaking for 10 years. There's a national certification program for sea kayaking instruction and I've reached the top of that. I'm one of six people with that designation in Canada.

What is your personal motto?
Act like you can't fail at something. Even if there's an issue that's very hard to generate public interest on or public concern on, you have to give that person, that this is an important issue ... and things will change, eventually. You just have to keep hammering on it and act like there's no chance of failing because this is going to succeed.

Who would you least or most like to be stuck in an elevator with?
Anybody who just wants to complain about a situation without posing a solution to it. It seems like there's a lot of that. When you listen to open line, that's all you hear, problem, problem, problem; government can't do this, government's not doing that, without proposing a solution, other than just throw more money at it or tax business more to get more done.

Who is one person, living or deceased, you'd love to have lunch with?
I think right now, because I'm reading his political memoirs, Tony Blair ... He brought peace to Northern Ireland, he gets a lot of flak from some of the election stuff, but he took an extreme left party and brought it to the mainstream and reformed it to do great things on the social side without attacking the business environment and business, and I think that's really forward thinking, and he demonstrated great leadership. It would be great to talk to him.

If you were premier of the province, what's one thing you would try to do?
That's an easy one for me. The whole economy thing is near and dear to my heart and we often think about making improvements in the economy based on, you know, the Lower Churchill, and that's definitely going to improve the economy, but I think it's about creating environments that can lead to job creation. One of the things, in the past 10 years that I've been working with the employers' council, is the workers' comp system; if I were premier I'd like to be able to reform that to protect the benefits that are paid to injured workers, but bring the assessments in line with what the rest of the Atlantic provinces are paying and, by doing that, what would that do? That would create jobs in the province. It's not sexy, but it would increase business investment, it would increase our productivity, our competitiveness, and create jobs in the province and I can't see any reason why we can't have all of these things.