

David Lega: A source of inspiration

Written by Lorna Hutchinson on 3 December 2019 in Interviews
Interviews

After conquering the worlds of sport and local politics in his native Sweden, newly-elected MEP David Lega now wants to change the world for the better on a European level. He tells Lorna Hutchinson about the issues that drive his passion for policymaking.



Photo credit: Bea Uhart

Before being elected as an MEP this year, David Lega had already reached dizzying heights in his career, breaking fourteen world records as a Paralympic swimmer, serving as Deputy Mayor of Gothenburg and lecturing in leadership and personal development.

Asked what made him take the leap into politics after his impressive sporting achievements, he explains that during his childhood and formative years, he received so much support from his parents, teachers, physiotherapists and swimming coaches, that he wanted to pay it forward.

“Usually when you talk about politics, you talk about the things that are not right. But I knew what

helped me to become the person I am today, and I felt that it was my obligation to give something back; to give chances to other children, regardless of whether they're in a wheelchair or not. Whether they're immigrants or they're just normal kids; they deserve to have the same possibilities in life as I did. It is all about having the possibility to become the best version of yourself, regardless if that is working in a bank or becoming a parent or becoming a gardener or an MEP."

RELATED CONTENT

- [New Commission urged to implement 'ambitious' EU trade policy](#) [1]
 - [EU policymakers gear up to underscore urgency of climate action at COP25](#) [2]
 - [MEPs lambast Member States refusing to ratify Istanbul Convention](#) [3]
 - [Girls Speak Out](#) [4]
 - [COP25: Nicolás González Casares "Setting new ambitions"](#) [5]
-

He explains that having provided inspiration to others as an athlete, then helping people to reach their full potential as a lecturer and motivational speaker, he then became the Deputy Mayor of Gothenburg for the Christian Democratic Party in Sweden. "I was the vice-chair of the party on a national level, I was on the party board for many years and I was Deputy Mayor for eight and a half years."

Turning to his recent election to the European Parliament, where he is now a member of the Foreign Affairs committee and the sub-committee on Human Rights, Lega says, "I managed to reach my goals concerning which committees I should be in. When I decided to run for office, I said that I wanted to be the voice of the people who have the most difficulty making themselves heard. This can be children, it can be people with disabilities, it can also be imprisoned journalists, it can be from a human rights perspective as well. If I manage to be the voice of those groups and people, I would be extremely proud of my five years."

"I knew what helped me to become the person I am today, and I felt that it was my obligation to give back; to give chances to other children, regardless of whether they're in a wheelchair or not"

The issue of children's rights is one which Lega is passionately dedicated to. He says that as a member of Parliament's Children's Intergroup, one of his priorities during his tenure as an MEP is to "look at things from the children's perspective in every piece of legislation we are dealing with; that it is not only words, that we stay focussed on the children."

"With trade agreements, for example, we know that Saudi Arabia imprisons children of their political opponents and keeps them in prison until they are adults and then executes them. Because we know that, it means that we have to remain focussed and keep this perspective in mind when we come to trade agreements, not just forget about it. The most dangerous thing, I believe, is if an issue is forgotten, that we suddenly accept it as standard instead of actually continuing to talk about it."

Lega says that an issue not often addressed when it comes to advocating for children is that of being anonymous. "In this stressed environment, with large classrooms, parents on Facebook and Instagram, one of the hardest things about being a child today is probably being anonymous. I have been through many things, but I have never been anonymous, which gave me a lot of confidence."

“Everyone knew my name, even when I was two, because if everyone always tells you during your early years that you are happy, fantastic, and amazing, you will become pretty happy and fantastic. But if everyone tells you that you are a burden, you are a nuisance, you are a problem or that you are a cost, you will become a cost. And so many young refugees, children, coming to Europe today, often all alone, are being described only as a cost, a burden, a problem. If you spend your childhood years only being described as a problem, I am absolutely certain that you will become nothing else.”

He adds, “Of course, I think every child would prefer being happy and fantastic, but even being seen as a nuisance is a lot better than being anonymous; no child wants to be anonymous.”

“I wanted to be the voice of the people who have the most difficulty making themselves heard. This can be children, it can be people with disabilities, it can also be imprisoned journalists”

On the event of the European Day of Persons with Disabilities in late November, Lega says it is difficult for policymakers on a European level to legislate on disability rights. He explains, “In our twenty-eight or [soon-to-be] twenty-seven Member States, the situation is so different both when it comes to infrastructure and when it comes to medical aid, to money, to culture. So I am a bit worried about setting a European standard, because while it would be awesome for the countries hit the hardest, I’m afraid of the risk it would carry for the countries who have achieved more. So, legislation about disability rights is something that I actually want to keep out of the European level.”

“It sounds harsh to say, and it’s hard to make people understand, that I want to fight for people with disabilities by keeping the issue out of Parliament, due to the risk that it has to some countries.” He adds, however, that when it comes to legislation on accessibility or technology to aid people with disabilities, that is entirely different, “because that benefits everyone.”

Asked if there should be more high-profile politicians and public figures with disabilities, Lega says he does not believe in quotas. “I would never be respected on the same level if the Parliament was supposed to have ten people in wheelchairs. If that was a law, I would have a hard time getting the respect of my colleagues. I fought for this seat with everyone on a level playing field – it was not only for people in a wheelchair.”

“Don’t get me wrong; I will always fight for people with disabilities, but I don’t want to fight only for disabilities, and that is why I don’t want to be a co-chair of the Disability Intergroup. It is because I want to fight for all children that I’m the co-chair of the Children’s Intergroup, which includes children with disabilities.”

“My disability is, and will always be, one of my identities, but it will never be all of my identity. I was an athlete, I was an entrepreneur, I was a speaker, I’m a boyfriend, I’m a brother, I’m a friend and I’m in a wheelchair”

He says that during his first five or six years in politics in Sweden, he never spoke about disability rights issues, “because it is about identities, isn’t it? My disability is, and will always be, one of my identities, but it will never be all of my identity. I was an athlete, I was an entrepreneur, I was a speaker, I’m a boyfriend, I’m a brother, I’m a friend and I’m in a wheelchair. And, due to the amazing support from the Parliament and everything around it, that gives me the possibility to become something else.”

“I’m pretty sure that there will be a Commissioner with a disability sooner or later - probably sooner - but I don’t want to make it a quota. Commissioners or MEPs or politicians on a national level are elected because they represent different groups, based on their own experience or based on knowledge. Naturally, due to my background, I have other experiences and may have different insights than other people, which is my asset.”

“But I have to accept the disadvantages in order to be able to see the advantages that it brings. I know that I have a harder time writing on a piece of paper; it takes a bit longer at the beginning, I need everything adjusted, but if I learn to use the iPad and the apps properly, I will be quicker than my colleagues. So, if I accept the fact that I’m slower, I can find a solution to becoming better. To become faster and know more.”

“If everyone always tells you during your early years that you are happy, fantastic, and amazing, you will become pretty happy and fantastic”

Lega explains that when it comes to electing politicians, “we want people that we can feel connected to, to represent us. And I don’t only want to represent people in wheelchairs; I want to represent businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises. I want to represent human rights activists, parents and children.”

Lega recalls an anecdote from a recent EPP event with incoming Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, with whom he had his photo taken. “One of my colleagues then ran after me and said, ‘please take a photo of me and Ursula.’ And I said, ‘I don’t want to swallow your phone in my mouth when I do it.’ And she said, ‘I forgot that you’re disabled’ and she got so embarrassed. But you know, this is my main goal. Not to see beyond the disability but just to forget about it. For me, it is a cliché, seeing the person behind. If I forget that I’m in a wheelchair and my friends and my colleagues and my girlfriend are forgetting that I’m in a wheelchair, then I have succeeded. It was actually the best acknowledgment of me being something else when she asked me to take a photo with my paralysed arms.”

About the author

Lorna Hutchinson is Deputy Editor at The Parliament Magazine

Tags

[Culture and Education](#) [6]

[Employment and Social Affairs](#) [7]

[Justice and Rights](#) [8]

Categories

[Gender equality](#) [9]

[Culture, media and sport](#) [10]

[Education and skills](#) [11]

[Public order, justice and rights](#) [12]

Site Sections

- [Home](#)
- [Content](#)
- [Policy](#)
- [Magazines](#)
- [PM+](#)
- [Thought Leader](#)
- [Climate Crisis](#)
- [Editorial Calendar](#)
- [Policy Events](#)
- [Event Coverage](#)
- [MEP Awards 2020](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

Services

[Dods PeopleDods](#)
[MonitoringDods](#)
[ResearchDods](#)
[EventsDods](#)
[Training](#)

Media & publishing titles

[Politics HomeThe](#)
[HouseThe](#)
[Parliament](#)
[MagazineHolyrood](#)
[Total PoliticsPublic](#)
[Affairs NewsCivil](#)
[Service](#)
[World](#)
[PublicTechnology](#)
[Training](#)
[JournalDods](#)
[Parliamentary](#)
[CompanionVacher's](#)
[Quarterly The](#)
[European Union and](#)
[Public Affairs](#)
[Directory](#)

Dods events

[Westminster](#)
[BriefingDigital](#)
[Health & Care](#)

[ScotlandMEP AwardsThe Skills SummitScottish Public Service AwardsPublic Sector Procurement SummitPublic Sector ICT SummitCyber Security SummitCyber Security 2017Training Journal Awards](#)

Partnership events

[The Health and Care Innovation ExpoCivil Service LiveCivil Service AwardsChief Nursing Officer for England's SummitWomen into LeadershipThe Youth Justice ConventionSocitm Spring ConferenceNHSCC Annual Members' EventDods at Party Conference](#)

Source URL: <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/interviews/david-lega-source-inspiration>

Links

[1] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/new-commission-urged-implement-%E2%80%98ambitious%E2%80%99-eu-trade-policy>

[2] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/eu-policymakers-gear-underscore-urgency-climate-action-cop25>

[3] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/meps-lambast-member-states-refusing-ratify-is-ambul-convention>

[4] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/event-coverage/girls-speak-out>

[5] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/interviews/cop25-nicol%C3%A1s-gonz%C3%A1lez-casares-setting-new-ambitions>

[6] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/culture-and-education>

[7] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/employment-and-social-affairs>

[8] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/justice-and-rights>

[9] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/gender-equality>

[10] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/culture-media-and-sport>

[11] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/education-and-skills>

[12] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/public-order-justice-and-rights>