

BY ANYA LEVYKH

BREA AKING THROUGH



Michael Pickup, FCPA, is taking lessons from his childhood and lived experience and applying them to the role of B.C.'s auditor general

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VISHAL MARAPON



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ichael Pickup's introduction to the media came at a younger age than most of his contemporaries. Born in Cape Breton, N.S., on December 13, 1965, to Molly and Jack Pickup, he made the news at the tender age of two when a babysitter didn't notice him breaking

through the backyard fence and subsequently falling into a freezing creek behind the house. A passing driver luckily saw something in the water and stopped to take a look, saving young Michael from certain death.

"That was the first time I made the paper," Pickup recalls. "My mother said she should have known because she almost had me in a police car. She went into labour in the middle of a snowstorm and my father couldn't get the car out because of all the snow, and there were no ambulances in this small town in Cape Breton at the time, so the police took her to the hospital."

Despite the rather dramatic start, Pickup grew up to have a fairly happy childhood. "My parents between them were the oldest of 15 kids and quite young when they had me," he says. "So I grew up with a large, close family and lots of kids around. I have 43 first cousins younger than me."

While his father and mother were only 18 and 19, respectively, when he was born, they were determined and worked hard to make a better life for him and his siblings. "My mother got a job in a bank and worked her way up. She put my dad through school, and he eventually became a marine engineer. But those early years were lean."

Growing up one block from the entry to the Membertou reservation, today one of the most prosperous reservations in Canada, also exposed Pickup early on to the systemic racism that Indigenous people experience. "I've had every benefit of looking white, but I saw from an early age what racism was toward Indigenous people." Pickup understands what intergenerational trauma looks like. His mother's maternal grandmother was a young Indigenous girl who left her reservation at 13 to marry a 30-year-old white man and had her first child at 14. She had 10 more children by the time she was 30.

"One of those children was my grandmother. She was told by her husband to forget she was Indigenous, to never mention it to anyone, although that could have partially been to protect her at a time when it wasn't acceptable to be Indigenous outside of a reservation. My other grandmother was the oldest of 13, and between her and her siblings, they had 73 kids.

"Coming from such a large family on both sides, I would never pretend it was all sunshine and blue skies; you certainly saw people with issues and some

bad things happening. It really did give me a sense of the importance of the public sector, the importance of government programs and services." He also says that it taught him the importance of treating people with equal respect and just accepting them for who they are.

He carried that lesson with him and kept it close as he progressed in his career, eventually leading him to assume the role of auditor general of Nova Scotia in 2014 and then for British Columbia in 2020.

Treating people with respect, acceptance and love was also a priority for Pickup's paternal grandmother. "Somebody interviewed her before she died and asked her if she was proud of me being auditor general of Nova Scotia [at the time] and she said, absolutely, but that she was most proud of the person I was, of me being compassionate and understanding, and treating people well."

He jokes, though, that the time he was on the Weather Network, with other auditors general to discuss an environmental audit, trumps everything else he has done.

"That was the moment for her. You know you've arrived career-wise when you're on The Weather Network," he says with a laugh.

That acceptance was important when Pickup decided to come out to his family. "Looking back over a 35-year career—I'm 57 now—and thinking back to my mid-20s when I came out and really accepted who I was, my immediate and extended family was very open, and I felt very safe with them," he says. "But my mother cautioned me to be careful about it. The world was very different 35 years ago, especially in the workplace."

"I have a responsibility to represent, to show people that anyone can become auditor general regardless of culture or background"

"I remember in Halifax at the time, you'd have maybe 100 people go to Pride and they'd have paper bags over their heads, for fear of being fired or abused. The last Pride I went to in Halifax, just before the pandemic, there were 95,000 people there, in a city of less than 400,000. So the world has changed a lot."

Pickup works hard to ensure no one he works with now has to experience that. But he admits it takes time to move from tolerance to the ultimate goal of inclusion and celebration.

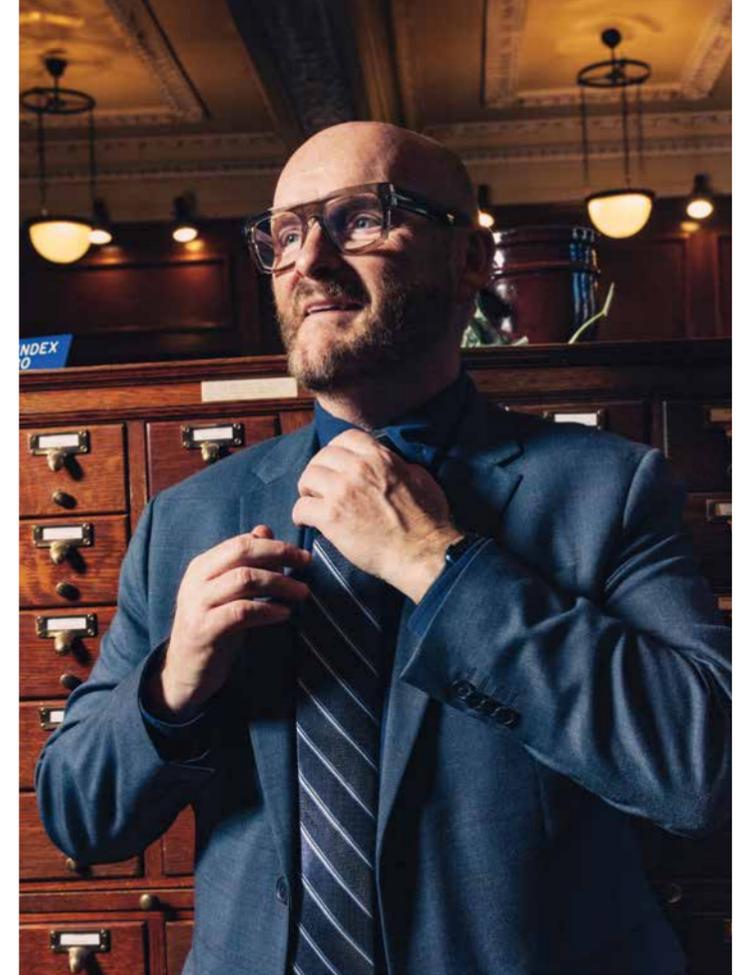
"It's why now, near the tail end of my career, I feel I have a responsibility to represent, to be more out there, and show people that anybody can become an auditor general. It's important [that] people see themselves represented, regardless of what background or culture they're from, what group they're part of."

Pickup's colleagues both in Nova Scotia and British Columbia can attest to the acceptance and inclusivity he demonstrates in the workplace. "One of his strengths is ensuring a diversity of thought and people in everything he does," says Evangeline Colman-Sadd, CPA, CA, former auditor general for Halifax Regional Municipality, who has known Pickup since 2014. "He's very empathetic and kind to people. Shortly after he started working at the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) Nova Scotia, we had a longtime member of the team suddenly pass away. Michael brought in crisis counsellors so that people could talk and process their grief in their own individual ways. He ensured that there was a way for staff to share their stories and experiences with the person's family."

Pickup's interest in people initially led him to major in Canadian economics and political science at Acadia University, with no thought at first of a career in audit or accounting. "I was quite active in university; class vice-president, news director at the student radio station, all kinds of things." But he said that he fielded calls from the firms offering to put him through an accounting degree, and eventually, after multiple conversations, decided to enter the program. "I was very fortunate that CPAs were really ahead of their time in being open to people from different disciplines."

Pickup spent a few years at Doane Raymond (later to become part of Grant Thornton) after graduation. "They taught me so much. This was in the late 80's and we did bookkeeping manually. No software, just old ledgers and cancelled cheques, everything by hand. We'd do tax returns with a pencil, because if you made a mistake, you'd have to redo everything. It was certainly a great learning opportunity, and I was grateful to them many times over the years for their patience and for investing in me."

He enjoyed making connections with people and working with clients one-on-one, but then became interested in economy, efficiency and effectiveness in



Pickup is a member of the Miawpukek First Nations

the public sector. "I got interested in the idea of value for money auditing [now called performance audits] when I saw what was being done by the then-auditor general of Canada after he did an audit in Nova Scotia on a road project that went nowhere."

These performance audits look at how well programs and services are being delivered for the people across the country. "I wanted to do that."

"The OAG of Canada audits the finances of some of the biggest public sector businesses from across the country. When I started there, I was working on government-owned coal mining companies, marine transportation companies, fish processing, manufacturing, you name it."

"Being an auditor is a lot more interesting than people might think. During my career so far, I got to spend three days in prison [as part of an audit on correctional facilities], climb the world's largest container ship in the middle of the ocean, and visit a mine four kilometres below the ocean floor."

"He's something that I've never met before," says Elaine Hepburn, former director of executive accountabilities at OAG B.C. "He's so full of life, laughter, joy and kindness. There was an excitement when he started [as auditor general]. You could see how he wanted to connect with people, regardless of whether it was a janitor or the Premier; he treats everyone the same. And it was important for him that we could all

bring our whole selves to work, regardless of our individual backgrounds.

“He also empowers the people around him,” continues Hepburn. “When Michael first came on board, I wasn’t on the executive team yet and I remember sitting in a meeting with him and saying, ‘Sorry, could I say something?’ because I wasn’t used to having a voice in meetings at that point and Michael turned to me and said, ‘Why are you apologizing, Elaine? You’re a part of this meeting and you can say anything you want; your voice is equal to anyone else’s.’ And I was blown away by that.”

That empowerment is also something that Pickup learned to give to himself over the years. “Historically, auditing and accounting has been seen as a very conservative field, very colonial in nature,” he says. “The first time I really felt comfortable coming out in the workplace was when I moved to Ottawa in the 90’s to OAG Canada as a project leader. It was a previous auditor general, Denis Desautels, who encouraged me to move to Ottawa and be myself.”

In Ottawa he was working with over 600 people from across the country, as opposed to a small office with 15 to 20 people. “There were four Michaels in that small office!”



Pickup was one of the 40,000 attendees at the 2023 Victoria Pride Parade

Within a year in Ottawa, he became a director. In 2001, when Sheila Fraser became auditor general, “I felt she brought a breath of fresh air into the place as well, being the first female auditor general of Canada. There was more of a focus on diversity and inclusivity.

“But I think it was only when I came to B.C. that I grew into the idea that part of my legacy would be as the first LGBTQ2SIA+ and first Indigenous auditor general in Canada, because I had always been so cautious about the idea of merit and not having my accomplishments and abilities be overshadowed by my identity.”



Standing proudly underneath the British Columbia flag

And those accomplishments are lengthy. In July of 2014, he became auditor general of Nova Scotia, a position he kept until accepting the same role in British Columbia, where he is now four years into his eight-year term. In addition to his degree and designation, he’s also completed certificates in diversity and inclusion, and LGBTQ executive leadership, from Cornell and Stanford universities, respectively, and he’s coached and trained auditors in Africa and South America, and published a memoir about growing up with his paternal grandmother, *Nan-Made: How a Grandmother Made a Man*.

“DEI was another area where he brought a new perspective,” says Hepburn. “I’d say we were a bit behind in that area and one of the first things he had the executives on his team, including myself, do was take eCornell’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Certificate Program.”

While his focus on diversity and inclusion has been a constant, his rigorous work ethic is unmatched. “He’s very hands-on, very process oriented,” explains

Hepburn. According to her, Pickup spends every weekend reading through 100 to 200 printed pages of compiled notes, reports, presentations, etc., and delivers his feedback to his team on Mondays. “It’s an incredible process that really works,” Hepburn says.

Pickup’s enthusiasm for diversity of thought has improved the effectiveness of the audit reporting process in both Nova Scotia and B.C. “One of the things he focused on here [in Nova Scotia] is how the audits are communicated,” explains Colman-Sadd. “Even those of us who audit for a living don’t necessarily want to read audit reports all day. He made sure they were communicated in manageable bits.”

Hepburn agrees, adding that Pickup wants people to understand the reports, so he created a one-page-audit-at-a-glance summary for MPs and anyone else who was interested. “He’d also make that available to the media at press conferences, but he could also reference any page in the full report on the spot.” That focus on efficiency also impacted the number

Pickup is very process oriented, but is also focused on empowering the people he works with

and success of recommendations that his office produced. “We primarily worked on performance audits together for things like capital funding in schools, homes for special care, management of hospital system capacity in Nova Scotia, surgical wait-lists, licensed child-care centres,” says Colman-Sadd. “You have to make sure your recommendations are practical and can actually be implemented, and then it’s up to government as to whether or not they implement them. He tried to narrow down the number of those recommendations to maybe 10 or 12, to focus on the higher-risk items in hopes of bumping up the implementation rate, which did increase noticeably during his time. I’ve seen the number of recommendations go as high as 30-plus in the past. Michael’s approach really streamlined this.”

“Our job is primarily to provide assurance to elected people in the legislature on how something is working,” explains Pickup. “I don’t hold government accountable; I give a tool to elected officials and they decide how to use that tool to hold government accountable. So if they want to question a minister or government department, they have the information and tools to do that. On the other hand, the reason why many of us continue to do this work is all the recommendations we make are generally agreed to and hopefully implemented. In many ways, that’s what drives us. We did an audit on our mental health services recently, which we tabled this past winter, and that was focused on Indigenous offenders in correctional facilities. The hope is that those recommendations will improve service delivery in that area.”

As for the future, Pickup plans to start working on a second book about his maternal grandmother but is certainly not limiting himself to other possibilities. “If my experience [almost drowning] as a kid could be said to have inspired a motto, I’d say it’s ‘Don’t fence me in.’” ♦

PHOTOGRAPH (LEFT) COURTESY OF MICHAEL PICKUP