

# THE PEOPLE'S V

## *How Canadians can surmount differences to agree on their future*

"Conflict is a growth industry. People are going to bump into one another ever more frequently, and we need more and more skills to deal with it."  
—Conflict resolution expert and Harvard law professor Roger Fisher, addressing participants in the *Maclean's* forum on national unity

They knew nothing about one another except that they had all been chosen for their differences. At the invitation of *Maclean's*, 12 Canadians had travelled as far as 3,000 miles to spend three days together, discussing Canada's future at a critical time in the nation's history. They met at a secluded Ontario resort, under the glare of TV lights and the watchful gaze of a team of *Maclean's* reporters and editors. The time was short, the pressure was intense and, still, they managed to work some magic. Asked to come up with a vision for the future of Canada, they began their task with a remarkable, and entirely unpredictable, decision: they chose three broad topics for discussions, only one of which involved specific constitutional issues.

Another was the economy. And the third was what they called "mutual understanding"—focusing on a failure to communicate that they said was at the heart of Canada's current crisis. What is more, the 12 agreed—both in their own deliberations and in the nation at large—that those three elements should be discussed concurrently. In doing so, the participants effectively plucked the national unity debate from the legalistic, constitutional pigeonhole where Canada's leaders have kept it, and placed it squarely amid the daily concerns of every Canadian.

Their imaginative approach led them to produce a wide-ranging 16-page statement of "joint suggestions" for reinventing the nation (analysis: page 26; text: page 52). It also confirmed the theory that led *Maclean's* editors to convene the forum in the first place. Even as unity commissions and task forces crisscrossed the nation in the wake of the collapse of the Meech Lake accord a year ago, a critical element was missing from the national debate: real dialogue. While those commissions have been valuable in giving many Canadians a chance to air their complaints, they have not provided a forum for productive discussion of the issues among Canadians with differing views. It seemed likely that if that kind of forum could be created, some novel recommendations would emerge.

To that end, *Maclean's* presented a challenge to its regular polling firm, Toronto-based Decima Research: to identify the main patterns of thought that together provide a portrait of the national psyche, then provide names of people who fall into those categories. The first part of the process, known in modern polling circles as "cluster analysis," took several months (Decima's process: page 62). Next, Decima staff began phoning Canadians with an 83-part questionnaire, searching for the people who correspond to those definitions. By early May, *Maclean's* had a shortlist of 35 Canadians with firmly held beliefs that spanned the spectrum of six clusters of thought, ranging from so-called Firm Federalists through compromise-seeking Peacemakers to Hard Quebec Separatists.

Then, through a series of follow-up interviews, *Maclean's* reporters



and editors narrowed the field to 11 articulate potential participants, from Berwick, N.S., to Richmond, B.C., all willing to defend their points of view, and all of them interested in meeting with people of differing opinions. By agreement with Decima, *Maclean's* chose one other participant, a native Canadian, from outside the process, because traditional telephone polling methods do not achieve a representative sampling from widely dispersed small native communities. With that, a group of six women and six men was in place (profiles: page 12).

Meanwhile, *Maclean's* had also undertaken a search for the best possible assistance in leading the group to a productive discussion. All leads almost invariably pointed to the breeding ground of modern conflict

# ERDICT



ARTWORK BY DAN FELL

resolution practices, the Harvard Negotiation Project based in Cambridge, Mass. Expertise in the new negotiation methods has been growing rapidly in Canada over the past decade. But Canadian practitioners would inevitably bring an emotional stake, and regional bias, to the process. As well, most of them are practising techniques that they, or their teachers, learned at Harvard. As a result, *Maclean's* chose the strongest possible combination of objectivity and expertise, and called on the services of the guru of conflict resolution, Harvard University law professor Roger Fisher. A veteran of dispute settlement in many of the hot spots of the world, Fisher, 69, developed the theory of "principled negotiation," in which the search for common interests replaces argu-

ment over non-negotiable demands. He and two of his colleagues accepted the challenge of helping divergent Canadians rediscover the interests they share (their technique: page 58; profiles: page 66; their report: page 68).

The encounter took place from June 7 to 10 at the Briars, a picturesque resort 80 km north of Toronto on the shores of Lake Simcoe. Its 1840s-vintage main building and spacious, treed grounds provided an attractive backdrop for a crew from the CTV television network, who recorded the weekend's events for a special edition of the public-affairs program *W5* on Sunday, June 30.

Did the participants save the country? That was never the intention of *Maclean's*, Decima or the negotiating group in undertaking the project. But the conclusions that they reached, and which all of them signed, point clearly to the social, economic and political problems that frustrate Canadian nationhood. More hopefully, they also indicate many of the ways in which these representative Canadians believe that those problems might be solved.

Many of their dozens of suggestions challenge specific institutions to take on particular tasks, from school boards arranging more student exchange programs within Canada to the office of the prime minister initiating a national economic plan to identify and take advantage of Canada's competitive strengths. They also call for a broad range of political and constitutional reforms primarily aimed at making government more directly responsive to the wishes of voters.

The two Quebec separatists participated fully in an exercise aimed at designing a better Canada, and one of them ended the weekend saying that she had to seriously rethink her beliefs. They also agreed, along with the native participant, that despite their inclinations, the pros and cons of *all* the various constitutional options should be examined thoroughly before Canadians reach any final conclusion. Their joint declaration said: "And before making any decision to abandon the goal of a Canada for all Canadians, we should look with equal care at what would be a realistic vision of a sovereign Canada, a sovereign Quebec and self-government for the First Nations."

Did the event provide any lessons for the country as a whole? Twelve Canadians, representing widely divergent views of the country's problems, demonstrated that a discussion that followed a course radically different from traditional negotiations can lead individuals away from rigidly held positions and into a concerted effort to define and defend their collective interests. In the end, all 12 strong-minded participants, chosen for their differences, put their signatures on a single vision of a way towards a better Canada. Remarked Richmond Crown counsel Richard Miller, while not budging from his Firm Federalist position: "I changed from trying to convince the rest of the group to buy as much of my ideas as possible, to reaching an agreement that would make all of us satisfied." Added Montreal lawyer Charles Dupuis, a self-described sovereigntist: "I observed the willingness of people to listen. That may be a start."

Constitutional Affairs Minister Joe Clark has laid the groundwork for a new 30-member parliamentary committee to study the unity issue, starting in the fall. But so far, he has not committed the government to bringing non-politicians into the process, or to providing for constructive dialogue. Even the government's just-completed consultative initiative did not do that. The Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future, chaired by former journalist Keith Spicer, spent \$27.4 million trying to "deepen the dialogue" by listening to about 400,000 Canadians in public and private meetings, telephone calls and mailed-in reports from local gatherings across the country.

It will report on June 27. But its process rarely allowed participants to move beyond reporting on the problems to discussing possible solutions. As Nova Scotia regional co-ordinator David Hyndman said to Spicer at a May debriefing session, "In most cases, the dialogue never took place." The experience of the *Maclean's* forum indicates that if a national dialogue ever does take place, it would be an extremely productive process.

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