

*Larry Shook interview with Robert Marshall who was assistant managing editor of Maclean's at the time of their "The People's Verdict" initiative and wrote the introductory report at the beginning of that issue of the magazine. The interview has been lightly edited for readability.*

Robert Marshall: It was ours and nobody in political circles took ownership of it. And so it really, you know, created a momentary stir and then people went on with their agendas as before. It's really difficult to get inside. We did get some politicians involved in it, to come and speak to the participants and help them make some of their suggestions. They needed a little bit of a guideline along the way. And that was very useful, but those people then didn't then exactly take it themselves and run with it. Nor did we really expect them to. We brought them on to add some guidance, some experience with actually dealing with these things, so that the participants that we chose from across the country would be able to ask them questions as they go, "Would this be a reasonable thing to do?", that kind of thing.<sup>1</sup>

So we ended up not really... We created quite a fuss. It was raised in the House of Commons. It was discussed nationally. One of our partner TV networks, CTV, had their cameras there to record the event throughout the weekend that we worked on this blueprint. I think they did a two-part program on it and got some pretty fair numbers for it.

We frankly did stretch our resources to the limit in order to do it. We didn't have the resources to stay on top of it on a regular basis. Although people who participated in it would have been happy to do that. They made it very clear that they found this exercise to be an exciting one that they would be happy to keep involved in. We simply didn't have the resources to keep it going.

Larry Shook: So was it *Maclean's* hope that a seed would have been planted and somebody would have kept it going?

RM: Yes. Our hope was that we would have established a couple of things: One, the fact that a dialogue involving people from all parts of this country speaking to each other and discussing their differences face-to-face made a big difference. Since that time there has been a tremendous upsurge - at least for a few years - in things called "town halls" where politicians (including the prime minister) would get in front of a selected audience representing the country and submit to their questioning and then the people there would talk to each other. Unfortunately the prime minister got hammered in a couple of these and didn't really like them very much...

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<sup>1</sup> It is likely that Marshall is speaking here of *Maclean's* second "People's Verdict"-like initiative; see page 4 in Bruce Wallace's interview. There is no indication in the original "People's Verdict" magazine or TV coverage that any politicians were present as resource people at the earlier event.

LS: Which prime minister was that?

RM: This was Jean Chrétien. He accused the CBC network which had set these up, of having kind of fixed the questions against him. He really took this very personally.

LS: Was there any substance to his concern?

RM: It is very hard to say. When you set up something like that, you do have people all across the country, all hooked up, all ready to go. Any phone-in radio show somebody will pre-interview whoever's on the line saying "What do you want to talk to him about? - Have some ideas." So, in fact they were capable of saying, "OK, we're only going to direct hostile questions to the prime minister." They say they did nothing of the sort, though. They say they tried to make it as even-handed as they possibly could. There's no way of really getting to the bottom of this.

LS: Let me back up just a second if I could, and refer to the introductory reporting that you did to that exercise. At the time you wrote, "The time was short, the pressure was intense and, still, they managed to work some magic." Why was it magic? What was the magic that you witnessed there?

RM: The fact that at the beginning of the weekend there was a *tremendous* disparity in opinions. If you go through this to the dialogue of the weekend, you'll notice that a couple of Westerners were unable to even contemplate for a second what a couple of Quebecers were saying. There was a lawyer from Richmond, BC, named Richard Miller, who turned out to have a very powerful personality. He was anti- any concessions to Quebec. There was another lawyer from Montreal, Charles Dupois, equally powerful. In the first few minutes of this exercise they were head-to-head, they kind of sussed each other out in their positions and were very critical of each other. The two of them formed an incredibly firm friendship by the time the weekend was over. They ended up admiring each other immensely. And coming to understand each other's point of view a whole lot more. Both of them were marveling at the end of the weekend how much more they understood about the opposite point of view. Neither one of them changed their mind, but the found lots of common ground. Now that's the magic we were referring to: They were the best example of it, but there were many, many, many other subtle ones where Quebecers with some federalist tendencies had those reaffirmed and sort of celebrated their Canadian-ness. Other people, their awareness level shot up enormously in the course of this. These people were all chosen because they had some interest in the process, but not necessarily because they were deeply involved in what was happening.

LS: Later, just a couple of paragraphs below that excerpt that I just quoted, you identify that "the imaginative approach" that was involved entailed "real dialogue". Is that the source of the magic?

RM: Well, that's part of it. First of all you bring people together and allow them to talk with each other and hear what the other person has to say, face-to-face. We've got a very big country - so do you - these are enormous countries. If one region has a resentment

against another region, it is very difficult for those residents to actually get to the truth of matters without the filters that are in place. And those filters have always prevented individuals in Canada from understanding.

I'm going off a little bit on a tangent, but one tool or method of increasing Canadian understanding - that an awful lot of people have been promoting for many years without a lot of success - is travel. There have been many politicians as well as others in this country that have looked for ways to promote travel by Canadians. In a lot of cases there are great exchange programs going on across the country to allow high school level Canadians to go and live with people in other parts of the country and get to understand those other parts of the country. There's also been a lot of proposals for tax deductions on travel within the country so people, if they travel at least two provinces away or something like that, would get to have some sort of tax deduction on their travel. None of which has ever been translated into policy. But there's a general recognition that that kind of thing helps. So what we were trying to do was bring people together and sort of put that theory to a test and say, ok, we're going to sit these people together. They're going to be forced to interact with each other for long hours at a time. What's going to come from it?

But then we also added to that mix the expertise of the Harvard Negotiation Project, the conflict resolution techniques that Roger Fisher and others there have had an enormous amount of success with in other parts of the world. Whether using those on the actual citizens of the country would work in the same way as they seemed to have worked on a more remote group, that is, the leadership in other settings - labor or international or whatever. And they worked extremely well. These people were very good at what they did and the people there took to them.

Our conclusion was that that kind of technique could be used more effectively in other areas of Canadian dialogue. If we have national conferences to discuss issues well, maybe there should be some kind of conflict resolution specialist there to help them overcome their differences, to help them try to isolate what it is about their differences that they should be focusing on in order to try to resolve them.

LS: So the combination of those elements was the apparatus that was being tested there and that you see as the source of the magic that you witnessed.

RM: Yes. And our conclusion was that *anybody* could do this. Having done it here, it showed that we could continue to do it. And Roger Fisher got a lot of business out of this - he got quite a few calls on the basis of this. I'm not sure whether they did anything for any government of Canada as a result of this thing. If you can find him through Harvard - if he is still connected with them - another person to talk to there is Rob Ricigliano [one of Fisher's associate facilitators in the "People's Verdict" conversations]. He's brilliant. He was very strong and I would really recommend you track him down. Last I heard he was still in touch with somebody here just a couple of years ago. He'll remember it quite well. He's a vital guy.

LS: I gather from the recording he, too, was quite moved by the outcome.

RM: Yeah. He was in tears at the end. That was great. That's true. And the people *loved* him. The panel just loved him. He was the one who most got to their hearts. Fisher is a more intellectual, aloof sort of character, lots of leadership qualities about him, but not the same human touch that Rob brought to it.

LS: So I wanted to ask you about that, as well. From reading the reporting, you get a very strong sense of the emotion that was involved at the resolution. You were there and saw that. How do you understand that emotion? Where did it come from? Why were people so stirred by the experience?

RM: To me it was like any kind of crisis when it comes to a head, it brings out these emotions. Canadians are not flag wavers. In fact, we take a sort of determined pride in not being flag wavers. But that doesn't mean we can't be touched by references to our country, to our nation. This is one case where after this - you could almost call it grueling - they were pushed into decision-making deadlines a lot faster than they really wanted to be. They felt a lot of pressure on themselves, and when they got something that they felt strongly about and felt they were pleased with and it seemed to them to represent some sort of key to keeping their country together, they found that very emotional. And I think overtiredness by the end of the week had a role to play in it. I think everybody was feeling pretty strung-out by the time we finished. These people were also socializing in the evening. They were getting to know each other, hanging around the bar, and really having a very, very good time of it. They ended up forming some very good friendships, kept in touch with each other afterwards and so on. So I think that was part of it: They reached a kind of climax in their quest and sort of broke emotionally when they came out of it. Including Rob, which was interesting to see, because he's been doing this a lot.

LS: I want to follow up on that, but weave in this other interesting consideration. There was an interesting sidebar that you included in that editorial package with the head "Elected People Must Decide" on page 48. The lead says "While the *Macleans*' forum was producing its vision of a Canada in which politicians would be more responsive to their constituents, a 17-member parliamentary committee was putting the finishing touches on a report [with a somewhat different slant.]" etc. So *Macleans*, with the help of its polling firm, the Harvard Negotiation Project and so forth, was exploring the possibilities of this potentially deeply consultative and dialogic process of government. There was an analogous (I gather) subject being discussed in parliament, but the conclusion was, as Mr. Edwards said, that elected leaders must decide. And so I got the impression as I was reading that, that here on the one hand was a process being discussed that would enable a great deal more citizen participation and reflection in the decisions made by elected people, but parliament at that moment was discussing a modification of the process and essentially rejecting such an idea. Is that a fair interpretation?

RM: If you ask us, yes. We don't have a completely fair interpretation, but we do obviously have an interest in this. So maybe we're not the best source. We did see that line that, after all, elected people must decide, as a bit of an example of the deaf ears on

which this was going to fall. That if people who are in elected positions take the idea that they are here to make the decisions and nobody else is, then we're in that sort of John Stuart Mill conundrum of what does an elected official do and how much is he responsible to the electorate. This is the conundrum that elected officers face. They have to be counted on to make decisions in the best interests of the people they represent, but they also have to be counted on to listen to people. This is a big, big, big debate in Canada as it is in the States. We have a lot more pressure now for recall legislation, for instance, some of which has been put into practice in British Columbia, trying to throw elected officials out of office for not keeping their promises to the electorate, for not consulting them properly, and so on. I don't think any one has yet worked in achieving that end, but its been tried.

What we were seeing happening at the time that we did this exercise, was very little recognition from anyone we spoke to that this was how government was going to go. What we did see, though, was a great deal of lip service - it does seem to be more like lip service because it disappeared - attention to the kind of town hall things I talked about, and politicians talking more about listening to the people and that did happen for several years. But I wouldn't say it is a big feature of government and certainly is not something that governments get themselves reelected on. They don't promise to have town halls. They don't promise to set up citizen consultative committees or anything like that. And there's not a huge groundswell of demand for them to do that.

LS: In this country, I think it has been 10 or 11 years now, Elizabeth Drew, the political writer for *The New Yorker*, did a piece that created quite a stir, called "Money and Politics." It just chronicled the extent to which corporations, through lobbyists, are now effectively pretty much managing the process of governance in the U.S. And the issue just gets hotter and hotter and hotter, although there's probably a fair amount of fatigue in the American public now around this issue. But in this country - and I know from many friends in British Columbia - there's a perception in BC, certainly around forestry issues, that representative government is not taking place, or at least what the government is representing is not the interests of the public. It's industry interests; it's corporate interests. And that's a huge issue in this country. Do you have a sense of just how much of a chance this approach to consultative government has in the context of modern political reality and if it does have a chance, what needs to be changed in order to give it a chance?

RM: Not really, no. The issues you're talking about are issues here, too, of course. There's the socialist national party, the New Democratic Party, makes a big issue of that in any election. They constantly are making the point that from their perspective our government is in the hands of major corporations. Globalization has made that problem even worse and, in fact, the government's hands are being tied not even by Canadian companies but by large multinationals. If people are concerned about that, and I have no doubt they are - it's certainly in our letters to the editor and that kind of thing - you remember the Multilateral Agreement on Investment that finally run down and died a sad death late last year. Canadians generally were delighted that it didn't go, but they were frightened that it could even have been contemplated to that extent. And there was a lot

of basic panic over that in editorial columns, op-ed columns, etc., in Canada - the concept that even more shots are going to be called by the multinationals, that even less decision-making is left in the hands of the individual voter.

That concern certainly was big last year because MAI died and isn't so far showing any signs of being resurrected. It's not a big issue. We've had a provincial election here in Ontario and that kind of issue really didn't come up. The Conservative government, which is basically pro-business, pro-laissez-faire government, got handily reelected despite two parties screaming that it didn't represent the people, that it was basically representing Big Money. It had delivered some tax cuts and was promising more, and clearly hit the right nerve with Canadians. Ontario is the biggest province in Canada and the economy is booming, largely due to the enormously successful American economy. But the government was able to take some credit for this booming economy - their argument being that giving money back to the people - or lowering taxes - brought more money into the economy and created a stronger economy.

So, yes, people are concerned about that, but when you look at the actual results of their concerns, you see that it doesn't stop a very strongly pro-business government from getting reelected in Ontario and it certainly doesn't stop the Liberal government in Ottawa from being a fairly business-oriented government. They've found a nice middle line. It's very difficult for them to be attacked from either side these days because they've sort of co-opted both the social mandate - which they take quite seriously - and a really strong hard-headed businesslike approach to government, so they're being quite successful with that combination.

LS: Right. In this country during the Clinton/Bush presidential election, there is that famous line from Clinton about what the governing issue really was in that election: "It's the economy, stupid". *[RM interrupts to clarify that the phrase was coined by Clinton campaign strategist James Carville.]* And clearly there's every indication that that's the ethic that that administration is operating out of now. Keep a chicken in every pot - and that's what the country is really concerned about. And so the idea is that it's kind of a litmus test of our values: What do we really believe in in modern society anymore? Is it issues of freedom, democracy, social justice, or is it purely pragmatic "What's in it for me?" kinds of considerations. And the debate is always raging that emerges from the Elizabeth Drew kinds of reporting that shows that there are these *huge* sums of money being spent by multinationals and funneled into the political process by lobbyists. But when you really weigh those two considerations, what's causing the politics and government that we have? Is it the manipulation of vested interest groups or is it really a reflection of what's in the modern public's heart these days? What's your take on that?

RM: Well, it's a major question. I'll tell you one thing: Canadians were very puzzled by the collapse of Hillary Clinton's health care initiative. From our perspective, we've only had a government-legislated health care system here for 30 years, but it has become perhaps our most solid identifying factor. Canadians *equate* health care with being Canadian. Anybody who has tried to fiddle with our health care does it at their own peril. There's just a *total*... I'm old enough to remember the debate as it went through and the

accusations that this was creeping socialism and that the Communists were behind this and it was very emotional; the rhetoric level was extremely high. I can remember being swayed by it, thinking, "These doctors are the best people to make the decision. Why take it out of their hands and put it in the hands of some faceless bureaucrats?" etc., etc. Well, we have fallen in love with our health care system. In fact, we've only wanted to expand it more and more in this country. We see it as a great failure of the Americans to look after the weak in their society through a universal health care system. It's monumentally, fundamentally seen in Canada that way, as a lack of compassion on the part of Americans. And we thought that if a Clinton government couldn't do anything about that, then who could? What president have we seen - well, Jimmy Carter was another example - who could so easily speak from his heart about the pain of others. It's almost a cliché with Clinton. But if *he* can't, if his administration can't make any headway on this, with the kind of public support that it has had, then you understand the nature of the vested interests he's up against - and they are obviously extremely powerful. They make the gun law look weak.

But I was going to say as well that there are Canadians who see that health care is a sign of weakness in our society. I have to say that: there are a number of people who always are expressing their opinions, that that's our downfall, that we coddle our people too much. And those are the people who tend to want to move to the States, who say, "I can take care of myself. I don't need any government to take care of me. I will buy the insurance I need and I will live a good life." And we get a lot of letters from those people living in the States, saying "I've done it." And we get letters from Canadians saying, "Yeah. Well, you're paying more in your insurance than you would be in paying taxes here, so shut up!" It's one of those very classic arguments. Nobody can win it. It's just a matter of preference. But the Medicare model wins by a mile in Canada. It's just not going to be touched.

LS: Finally, particularly now with the benefit of 8 years that have lapsed since you did that, do you have any advice for anybody who is interested in attempting to institutionalize the process you experimented with.

RM: I could break that into a couple of levels. Journalistically it was a wonderful exercise. It got us a lot of attention, which is one of the things we have to do. It got people talking. It won us several awards. We think it was quite effective in that respect. We are, after all, a business enterprise. We're out there trying to shake things up a bit and get people to pay attention to us - and that really did that as well as anything we've done in the past decade, that's certainly among them.

As for anybody else taking it up... Would we do it again? I'm not sure, because the result - although we thought it was fascinating and interesting and showed a lot of promise for the kinds of decision-making that *could* be made - I suppose it suggested such a daunting and expensive change in the way we're doing things. If the government put together the resources to call representative conventions together on all sorts of policies and get people talking and so on, it could cost a real bundle. They've already done that, they would say: They have the House of Commons where people come and do that. And they

presumably offer the argument that a member of parliament from Prince Edward Island meets a member of parliament from Saskatchewan on a regular basis in caucus meetings and in the parliamentary restaurant and in all sorts of settings and they learn to understand each other and they are able to carry back a message to their own voters that helps further the national message. Those things are in place to some extent - and I think it's naïve to think that the kind of exercise we did - and simply because we saw some success in it - is going to revolutionize the way people do government.

LS: What strikes me as a marked departure from the House of Commons exercise and the exercise in representative government that we have in this country and what you pioneered, is the very sophisticated use of your polling firm. That combination of portraying the true psyche of the country at any given moment and then methodically selecting representatives of that point of view is *quite* unlike anything that operates in the U.S. - even though the statement that you just made I'm sure would be made by every US elected official, that we already have representative government.

RM: I hadn't mentioned that earlier in my remarks. That was a fascinating exercise. I was deeply involved in that for several months as we worked out our lists and went through them and pre-interviewed and did all that sort of stuff. I found it just absolutely compelling. And the extent to which people we were talking to really wanted to get involved in this was really quite something to see, too.

Frankly, you'd have to wonder whether the method we chose was truly the right one. It would take doing it quite often, I guess, to get some sense of that. We were very satisfied with the method. But what do you test it against? How do you know whether we really did a very good job of getting the people we were looking for? We applied what was available. The firm we used, Decima, is a very, very well established polling firm with the best resources you could ask for. So we were certainly able to create the kind of base of respondents that we needed to create our group. We were able to sort of dig into this space and say "Now, we're underrepresented on this kind of thing. Where do we get them?" or "We don't have a good geographical balance." We ended up with the same number of men and women. We ended up with people representing the demographic differences - quite varied: money, education, age, you know. We liked what we got. If we did it again, we may have found a group of people that didn't interact as well. I don't know how you finally get a group... We got a group of people who really did set off the chemistry among each other - including one fellow who was determined to move to the States and did, within a year, for precisely the reasons I've been talking about: "This is a coddling society. It'll never go anywhere unless it gives people a chance to rise on their own two feet." He felt very strongly about that - and got a lot of antipathy from the rest of them, *everyone* else disagreed with him heartily and couldn't stand to hear him making this pitch.

LS: That was Colin...



RM: Yeah. And he made himself quite unpopular by the time it was over. But it didn't change his mind at all. I mean he just stuck to his guns - and good for him. He had his way of looking at things. He went to California, I believe, and wrote to us from there.

Anybody *could* do it. How successful they'd be doing it, or what it really means... I guess what happened is, although we produced what we thought was an incredibly logical and workable kind of proposal, I guess for other people who are equally devoted to this particular cause, they probably thought what they are doing had just as much value as this one did. Unless we are able to devote ourselves to furthering it ourselves and taking it to whatever limit we could and trying to create the forums that would promote some of these things - for instance, I mentioned that traveling thing. I think that is one of the recommendations, if I recall, that all Canadians be encouraged to travel.

LS: Yes, it is. Are there any informed critics or skeptics of what you did, who you recall, who you would refer me to?

RM: I can't recall any, to tell the truth. I don't recall anybody taking us on, saying this is just the wrong approach. I think it was *The New Yorker* that once said that most boring headline in the world would be "Worthy Canadian Initiative". I think in a lot of cases this was seen as a worthy Canadian initiative: They're doing the right thing so you can't really damn it. It was going in the right direction. *[They both laugh.]* So no, I can't. What I could do is ask our library to look at our letters column in the issues following that, to see if anybody surfaced with some damning criticism. I just can't remember off-hand.

LS: That would be fascinating. If there was a knowledgeable, credentialed source who said "We're already doing this." Or "Look, this doesn't represent any particular innovation over what already happens in the House of Commons." That would be interesting to follow up on.

*[They close with arrangements to get further information to Larry Shook, which we have no evidence was ever gathered and analyzed.]*