

*Larry Shook interview of Maclean's editor Bruce Wallace who, after reviewing all the video footage of the entire event, wrote "A Weekend of Candor", the extensive blow-by-blow account of the entire weekend. This interview has been lightly edited for readability.*

Larry Shook: Let me begin with a comment you just made: You said that you "got involved". Is that a weighted word?

Bruce Wallace: No. These are fairly high profile things we did at the time. They were also filmed, so they became sixty-minute documentaries as well. I was the guy that actually looked at all the tapes. I think we had three different camera crews moving around. So I was the only guy that sort of saw every minute of the thing. At various times these groups would break off and have separate discussions. So because I had seen all the footage, I knew the stuff inside out and I pulled it together with the piece that I wrote both times: We did this with Fisher a couple of times – both on constitutional issues and once on the deficit reduction measure.

LS: Were those before or after "The People's Verdict"?

BW: I'm trying to remember. I think the first one was "The People's Verdict". And then we reconvened the group. The thing had aired as a documentary as well and egos grew around this thing, which is kind of interesting. I think the second one was filmed, as well. So there were two on the constitution and then there was one which was done with a different group which didn't use Roger Fisher's group. I think that was done on deficit reduction at a time when the deficit was a becoming a big political issue here. The questions sort of went beyond this, to talk about where you would actually cut and how you would make those decisions.

That one wasn't as successful. I think that one seemed to be more of an artificial push to a resolution, much more moderator driven. Whereas I think "The People's Verdict" and the one that followed were different. Canadians are pretty well versed on constitutional matters. I mean not at the level of lawyers but at the level of all the pressure points. So they can always get together and talk about these things. There's kind of a code that works, so the moderator plays the real moderator's role. I think with something more technical like deficit reduction and budgeting, you might be able to do it more easily now with people, but at that stage I seem to remember that the moderator basically pushed for a solution. There was a little more artifice around that one.

LS: OK. Now let's back up just a bit. Could you tell me whose idea "The People's Verdict" was and what the genesis of that project was?

BW: Our editor at that time was Kevin Doyle. Kevin's now with *Bloomberg*, out of Toronto, *Bloomberg News*. He was the editor of *Maclean's* at the time - and was for about ten years. And, frankly, it was his idea. I'm not sure how Fisher's work came to his attention. I think Kevin was very good at these ambitious things for the magazine to take on. It was one of his strengths.

The country was covering constitutional issues to death, and there was a need to come at some things in a fresh way and also to try to remove some of the elitism around the issue, because the country was moving towards a referendum. So anyway, to the best of my knowledge it was his

idea - and through force of personality he made it work. I think it was quite risky internally, corporately, too.

LS: How so?

BW: Well, it required quite a fair bit of money for us. And it was new. And no one really knew how it would work out.

LS: You know when I looked at that, it occurred to me that such an initiative in any society – including any democracy – would be risky for another reason, too, which is that obviously it's going much more directly to the governed and asking for their input than often modern governmental institutions are able to do. Did you feel any risk in that regard?

BW: Oh yeah, there was. Do you mean in that the whole thing could have blown up and you could have come up with a verdict that was unworkable?

LS: Yeah, this is what I'm thinking of: Obviously, even though I live just below the Canadian border, I'm not nearly as intimate with Canadian politics as I am with U.S. politics, but it's been a very hot issue in this country for twenty years and more about the role of vested interests lobbyists, etcetera, etcetera, in establishing policy.

And there's constant chafing in this country over that. And some pretty high profile journalists have commented on it. For example, the political writer with *The New Yorker* wrote a very searching piece a few years ago called "Money and Politics" and it really illuminated the extent to which the people's work is not being done in the Congress in this country. And so I looked at this People's Verdict project and I thought, "My goodness, here's a powerful national magazine who says we're going to go directly to the people and ask them what they want and then serve up that agenda for all to see." And I thought it was visionary...

BW: Yeah. I'm trying to think what that taps into in terms of traditions here. I mean, Quebec had had a referendum in 1980 with a huge turnout. That's sort of the most prominent referendum on these very issues in terms of how to make a new constitutional arrangement. In '92 we had another national referendum here. Again, with very, very high voter turnout.

LS: And these were over separatist issues...

BW: Yeah. Basically the first one was. The actual question the first time around for Quebec was, "Do you give the government a mandate to negotiate a new arrangement with Canada." Which was rejected. Then the '92 national referendum I referred to was a proposal for a new constitutional arrangement which involved all kinds of issues for various regions – like Senate reform and there was something for every interest group. It was defeated, but again with a high turnout. And of course Quebec turned around and did it again in '97, I guess it was. I think the voter participation in '97 was ninety-two or ninety-three percent. That was the turnout: It was really, really high.

LS: So, in that regard, it was not an exercise of the magazine getting way out ahead of society...

BW: Well, we don't have a lot of examples equivalent to propositions the way California legislatures have done or Colorado's tax on guns. We don't have that kind of tradition. Our referendums have been on big pivotal issues. There's the Second World War referendum on conscription and the '80 Quebec one. And then we did this project. But I think this was more an exercise: I mean I think the intellectual basis of this exercise was the notion you can have conflict, that there's a process of conflict resolution and a school of conflict resolution that allows you to move towards consensus from what seemed to be intractable positions.

That was more the drive, as opposed to this notion of consulting people. The Reform Party, for example, is very heavily based on the notions of referendum and the right of recall. It has grown up out of Western Canada. It began as a movement and is now becoming an official opposition, although things seem to have stalled in terms of growth. Referendum and recall are very much a part of their ethic and their culture. So, it is not a foreign concept.

LS: Do you have a sense of what the hope was at the magazine in doing this piece? I mean was it anything beyond a kind of conventional reporting objective?

BW: Do you mean in terms of outcome - did we have a preferred outcome?

LS: Not a preferred outcome, but was there a hope that this exercise could contribute to the process of dialog, governance, etc., etc.?

BW: Oh, yeah, very much so. I think the feeling was that if you can demonstrate that it works on an individual level – that people can come together, they can move beyond entrenched positions into consensual understanding – that you can set a model for people.

So people weren't just chosen at random out of a phone book. They were chosen carefully because they represented a demographic political group.

LS: Right. I saw that. It was a very sophisticated exercise.

BW: Yeah, that was key to it. I mean, you didn't want twelve like-minded people. You wanted people that came that showed how difficult it was with different beliefs but that you could bridge it.

LS: And how did you feel?

BW: I think if it had fallen apart, it may not have been the outcome we would have wanted. But I think our instructions as journalists there were to cover this like it was a meeting. Cover it like journalists - that was our assignment. So had it fallen apart we would have covered that, as well. We wouldn't have swept it under the rug if it had missed.

LS: Right. Did it have any noticeable impact in the country?

BW: The short answer would be “no” because the referendum based on many of the same principles [recommended by "The People's Verdict"] failed nationally. Those things get caught up in all sorts of other issues, so the referendum became complicated by personalities and other political agendas. So I wouldn't say it was a fair test of it. But I guess if you had to objectively look at it and ask "Did it have a positive impact or not?", then no, it probably didn't move that along. But they got an enormous amount of attention.

LS: Among the public? Among government officials?

BW: Among the public and among the elites, as well. I think the second time we did it... I'm trying to think if we had facilitators in there. They brought some politicians in. We had Dorothy Dolby who was at that time a kind of mid-level Tory politician, and David Peterson who is a former Premier of Ontario.

I know it got a lot of attention – and also because it was shown as well as a documentary, which was quite nicely shot. We had good locations for it. And then there were some good human moments of conflict and then of resolution, as well. It was good television. I would never have believed that it could have made good television. It worked.

LS: Wow. And it was broadcast nationally?

BW: Yes, yes it was.

LS: So your perception is that both the elites and the public were enthusiastic about the process. Was there some excitement about it? Some hope for its potential in improving public dialogue and governance?

BW: You know, I don't remember quite detailed enough in terms of how people specifically reacted at the time. So I wouldn't want to mislead you at all. This was a big issue in the country that we cut down a lot of trees to write about, that we'd burned up a lot of hours of television about. So, I think while what we did was different and distinct, it wasn't operating in a vacuum. There was a lot of noise about this at the time...

LS: Was there any editorial follow-up? What did you folks do after this particular package ran?

BW: I'm trying to think what we did the next week... I think we pretty much let it go as a stand-alone and then reconvened the group minus one person the next year. We also sort of had it down by then, about how to do it. But again, we covered it like a journalistic event. I wrote the main piece and that was the way I approached it: just pretend this is a real thing and just cover it, ups and downs.

LS: Uh-huh. Do you recall at the time, after you completed your reporting of the event, if you have any sense of what ultimate social impact it might have in the country? Did you have any expectations?

BW: No, I had my own sort of personal beliefs about accommodation. I think this was something that could prove the ability to extract tolerance from people in that kind of a setting. I wasn't Pollyanish about it though.

LS: Right... On paper, as you read this package, it gives the appearance of the potential for turbo-charged democracy. In other words, you can meld all this expertise. You can use powerful statistical sampling methodology. You can use the state of the art conflict negotiation methodology. In other words, you can profile the psyche of a society and you can shepherd its dialogue about volatile issues and you can get to a place where society is not now routinely getting, just about anywhere in the world. It's a very hopeful and promising looking exercise on paper and I'm just wondering is there something that I am missing and...?

BW: No, but you'd have to ask Kevin, actually. We may have actually called for a ... I'm forgetting the term for where you convene a meeting of citizens to thus form a citizen's task force...

Actually, you know what? In a way - I'm not saying this contributed to it - but in a way, it was on or slightly ahead of this wave of anti-elitism that was very, very predominate in Canada in the early '90's and grew into real strength in the '93 election that really whacked elites around and persists. It's more benign these days, but still is very much part of the Canadian political culture. Canadian political culture has always been fairly elitist. I mean, the country was founded and for a long time did its business simply by elites getting together in back rooms and knocking things out.

The reaction against this constitutional deal eventually evolved to the point where people said, "You can't let your elites disappear off behind closed doors and make deals. You can't exclude the people from the process." So, in that sense, it really struck a chord. That was one of the large, defining reasons why the Tories got turfed so brutally from power in '93, was this perception that they were elitist. That anti-establishment feeling really coalesced, and that's where the Reform Party comes from. That's where they drew their strength from this notion of referendum and recall and the ability to tell your MP how to vote on your behalf. That kind of thing.

I wish I could remember what the term is when you convene a... What did they call the group of people that gathered to write the U.S. Constitution?

LS: [Laughs]

BW: There's a term.

LS: Right. Right. Yeah, I'm blanking on it too.

BW: Oh - the filmmaker's name is Peter Raymont.

LS: And do you know how long the entire documentary was?

BW: It's 60 minutes.

LS: Oh, so it was just a single 60 minute long documentary.

BW: Yeah.

LS: I assume that tape is available for sale now?

BW: I think Peter will be able to zip you a copy pretty quickly.

LS: Great.

BW: And Kevin Doyle was really the prime driver on this thing.

LS: Great. Did you have any discussion with Fisher and his team afterwards? Do you have a sense of how they felt about the exercise?

BW: Yes, Fisher was very proud of what he had accomplished. He wanted a deal by deadline time, which was Sunday. He may have cut some corners to get there on time. It was very tough to get a deal. It really was very, very tough. When we came through the Saturday night... I mean that stuff in there in the story... it wasn't there to make the story look better. We sort of got to the brink of disaster and crawled back. I really thought it was going to break up.

LS: Uh huh..

BW: So he was pretty euphoric. Now his people were operating in Yugoslavia at the time and a couple of other places.

LS: I noticed that in the credentials that were included in the story.

BW: Do you know Fisher at all?

LS: I have a call in to him. I do not. I mean, I am somewhat familiar with his work.

BW: Yeah.

LS: But no, I've never spoken with him... What were you thinking?

BW: Strong personality.

LS: Yeah. Obviously his methodology is widely used and his book has been seen as a bible for years but certainly that approach to dialogue is not routine in the world today.

BW: No, it's not.

LS: Does it have more potential than what we are experiencing right now, based on what you saw there?

BW: Yeah! I liked it. It's a pretty basic concept. I don't know what kind of language to put around it. I think it's a good concept and the way he operates...it's very good to see it demonstrated even if it's obvious. I think once you see it demonstrated to you, you then embrace it a little bit more firmly because what he does is show how two opposing views, if they don't move, are doomed to collide for an infinite amount of time. He demonstrates to you how powerfully you feel about your arguments and then you can understand that the other side feels equally powerfully about theirs.

LS: Right.

BW: Since you're not about to give, then why do you think they're about to give? So therefore, why can't we find some third way, some alternate path. So it's not simply a question of you have to give up this, you have to give up that. It's let's find another way and stop banging heads. Which all makes imminent sense and takes about ten seconds to describe but it's valuable for people who are involved in a negotiation to see that happen. And I think it's applicable whether it's a country coming apart or how to resolve an office dispute, to a certain degree.

LS: Right. One thing that emerges quite clearly in your reporting is the emotion that people seem to feel after the breakthrough in the conclusion of the exercise. Do you recall that?

BW: Oh yeah.

LS: Yeah.

BW: You couldn't stop them from hugging.

LS: Yeah. [Laughs] What was that about?

BW: I don't know.

LS: Where did that emotion come from?

BW: I don't know. I don't know. It was extraordinary to see. But I think it was real. Some of these people stayed in touch with each other after.

LS: Uh-huh.

BW: I don't know if they still do.

LS: Uh-huh.

BW: But, yeah, it was kind of hard to be cynical about it. Because they're not playing to a constituency or anything. It's not like there is a vote in it for them or something.

LS: Right.

BW: In fact, more than anything, the concern that they were going to be on television back home was the risk of looking silly or something. So, it was pretty real and truly felt. It was a good weekend.

LS: The thing that I wondered about in reading the package, is whether this methodology gives people a way of gaining release from the prisons of perception. In other words when we hold a view about something, it's not just an intellectual, rational phenomenon in which we've added up all the facts and said well, "you know, this is two plus two plus two and this is the answer." There are other elements that contribute to our filters, our way of knowing the world. And many of us frequently experience that as a prison. I mean, I wonder what the people of Yugoslavia are feeling now. You know, to be grappling with these ancient animosities the way they are and now dealing with the animosities of NATO. My speculation about that emotion was, "Do you think it was because they experienced a freeing of perception somehow? Or was it just the warmth of reconciliation?"

BW: I don't know. I mean, it's not a Yugoslavia-style prison for them, right? I mean in addition to all the other identity politics that Yugoslavia has got right now, there's the real physical fear component which was not present for these people at all. Nobody was physically threatened by this. I mean the most dangerous thing that you will get in Canadian constitutional politics is sort of a lawyer mad at you. So they don't have *that* constraint. So there isn't that sense of relief from fear that might contribute to it.

I think people came together and they kinda liked one another. Maybe its just nicer to agree than to walk away mad.

LS: Right.

BW: People may be looking for ways to get along instead of looking for ways to break up. So, a sense of happiness in finding that. I mean let's face it, the Canadians... I wouldn't want to downplay the regional differences or try to deny them because they're all real and they're all there. But in the grand wash of life, we're pretty much alike.

LS: Right. Right.

BW: And for all the differences that Francophone Quebecers and Anglophone Quebecers like to think about themselves, as well, they're also very much alike.

LS: Right.

BW: That's not to deny the differences. I don't deny them or say that they're all fabrications or parts of people's imagination. They're real - but it's not a leap.



LS: In the video as it aired, were they able to capture both the conflict and the ultimate resolution?

BW: Oh, yeah, yeah. I've only seen it once but they talked to Peter [Raymont]. Peter as the filmmaker was pretty happy with the emotion that he got on camera. It was quite extraordinary to be able to watch something on the constitution that didn't make you want to reach for the clicker.

LS: Right. Have you had any follow-up with the participants?

BW: No. They've written a couple of times. I did foreign news for about seven years after that and when I was overseas, I got a couple of letters from people that said that they liked the stuff. A fair bit of time has passed and I don't know where they all are. One of the fellows, Colin, moved to the States. He wasn't a part of the second group because he couldn't get back.

LS: Would there be any way for me to track those folks down?

BW: I'm sure there is some set of phone numbers from then. Another thing: These people were very well treated, as well. They were flown in. It was a nice weekend. They were given gifts. They became minor media celebs for a while. The first one was the great experience. The second one was ok, but it was a little less. It had a different atmosphere to it. But the first one was real. It was such a long, long "Hail Mary" kind of thing that Kevin put up there. And it worked.

LS: Right. What would you suggest to me as the best way to see who might maintain phone numbers and contacts for them? Anybody at the magazine?

BW: Christine Johnston. She was involved in that one. She's the assistant to Bob Lewis, the managing editor at the time. Chris made all the arrangements. She had to deal with them all. Tell her you talked to me. I predict she will reach for all her medications. She's a very good person.

LS: All right, sir. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Wallace, for taking this time to talk with me.

BW: No problem. Whatever you do in the end, I mean just sort of generally, let *Maclean's* know, if you can.

LS: I sure will. I'm not exactly sure what Tom Atlee is going to do with this; he's just asking for an internal report from me. I think he is going to be doing some writing about this. We'll be happy to route it to you.

BW: That would be great.

LS: Very good. We'll get you a copy. Thanks so much, sir.