

Larry Shook interview of Bob Lewis who was Maclean's managing editor at the time of "The People's Verdict" initiative. The interview has been lightly edited for readability.

[As the interview recording began, Lewis was apparently explaining the expense of the project and if they'd be able to do it today.]

Bob Lewis: ... We'd probably have to get some more advertisers involved. The [Canadian TV] network and ourselves, we split the costs. I think we picked up transport and lodging or something like that. I can't remember offhand. There was a kind of 50/50 division.

Larry Shook: Do you have a recollection of roughly what that cost you?

BL: I really don't. I'm thinking something on the order of a hundred grand, perhaps. Maybe 75-100,000 probably. It may not have been that much. It may have been a total of 80,000. Before we ring off, I'll just ask my assistant. She tends to remember this stuff better than I do.

LS: Great. One of the things that I was intrigued by that I asked Mr. Wallace about, was what *Maclean's* hoped to accomplish in doing that package. In my first read-through it was "My goodness!" It's as though a team of journalists pointed their telescopes at deep space and discovered heaven. I mean, the potential for super-charging democracy that your process seemed to outline just hit me between the eyes. I was wondering what you all hoped to accomplish and if you were basically pleased with the outcome.

BL: Well, as journalists obviously we didn't know how it would come out. It wasn't that we didn't care. We were immensely curious about what would happen if we brought people together from across the country to tackle a thorny issue that had caused a total national impasse. Fortuitously, it worked. It could have been a total disaster - which of course we would have also dutifully reported in great detail. But at the time I think it was an important eye-opener for a lot of Canadians.

The thing about this was that when you were there, it was amazingly emotional. I mean, people cried, people hugged each other, people came together - and the atmosphere was electric. And that includes all the rest of us hard-bitten journalists, too. We were very moved to see this. I think what came out of it was the sense of an underlying fundamental patriotism and willingness to try and make this country work. And that included an avowed separatist from Quebec and a hard-line national one-government guy from the West. It included people from the labor movement. It included business people. I mean we picked the people quite intentionally through a kind of exhaustive system of cluster analysis and regional balance and gender balance and you name it. It was a pretty representative group.

There were some low points, to be sure. And lots of head-banging. But that we were able to come out of it and actually draft a document at a time when the governments in the

country couldn't do it was, I think, a real eye-opener certainly to our readers and to a TV audience that sat and watched it.

LS: Did that have any impact on government?

BL: I think it did. I don't want to be unnecessarily boastful. But I think it did. In fact, it presaged an actual deal that almost happened in Ottawa among the government leaders, right down to 3-4 key points.

LS: What deal was that?

BL: Well, there were two attempts: Meech Lake, which... I don't know if you want to get into all that.

LS: Well, Meech Lake preceded your package, right?

BL: But that had been a total failure. Well, I shouldn't say a total failure, but it had foundered. Then there was the Charlottetown Accord that, if memory serves... *[interrupted by a phone call]*.... So there was a kind of a real sense of despair and crisis in the country that somehow this ongoing stand-off between the representatives of Quebec and the representatives of the rest of Canada was going to go on yet again for another generation or more. And I think we contributed to a softening in hard-line positions. I think people were able to see that men and women of good faith could come together, recognize their differences, and try to work around them and sort out problems. In the end, the official government exercise didn't succeed either. But that had to do with the fact that the people of Canada roundly rejected the formula in a referendum.

LS: Today, eight years after you did that reporting, do you see evidence of a lingering impact?

BL: There were a lot of elements that did lead to something, that resonate today. We obviously weren't the only people to raise these issues. But non-constitutional issues like training and university education and the like have come to fruition. There was a kind of a populist tone to a lot of the stuff having to do with governments and there was talk of reforming the system in this document that they [the *Macleans*' participants] approved. One of the things that they advocated was lifting the parliamentary whips in the government situation, allowing more freedom for members of government to vote their conscience rather than toe the party line; guarantees for representation from aboriginal peoples; fixed terms for members - that whole kind of populist bag that you're familiar with in the United States as well - recall and a whole bunch of things like that. A lot of those sentiments which were expressed in this document have also been amplified and some of them have been implemented in the legislatures of the country. There is a recall provision in British Columbia, as you may know. There were a lot of things that helped to further the public debate: for example the direct election of senators. I mean, that still hasn't happened, but that was in this document. There was a whole bunch of stuff about reforming electoral process and setting national standards for social programs. There was

just a recent attempt by all the governments in the country to do that very thing, with a kind of elaborate signing-on - from all governments including Quebec - to a health care proposal, that there would be a minimum set of standards for national health care. As I go down this list [of the "People's Verdict" recommendations] - while we wouldn't have been the only people to discover [these things] - the endorsement with the signatures of these people was, in itself, an interesting moment: these diverse folks put their signatures to the bottom of this piece of paper.

The fundamental dilemma still remains: The problem of two founding nations versus ten equal provinces. That conundrum still hasn't been fully dealt with, because Quebec still hasn't signed on to any formal deal. So it would be wrong to say that we solved Canada's national unity issue. But I think we went a good way down the road to shedding light and understanding on some of the more arcane elements of the debate. And I think most important of all we demonstrated that good will between people with different points of view is probably key to the whole thing. If we were going to resolve the thing for good, I think it's going to have to be this kind of spirit that brings people together.

LS: You mentioned a moment ago the emotion that folks felt as a result of their participation. It's obvious in your reporting. And I got a copy of the documentary from the filmmaker as well, and of course you really see it through that. In fact I'm kind of amazed at how well people were able to manage their emotions even before the catharsis at the end because there certainly was some very earnest, heart-baring talk among those folks. What's your impression of where that emotion came from? Why was it so moving to the participants and even the observers, as you said?

BL: Well, one reason I think was that for too long this whole matter - these various matters - had been the province of men in suits on television. And there is a real frustration, I think, on the part of people that they were powerless to do anything about any of this stuff. And yet every night they would watch these seemingly endless meetings and a parade of bickering politicians. And I think for once this group felt, well, here's *our* chance to show these buggers that we can do it differently.

LS: (chuckles)

BL: I mean there really was an element of that. You could sense that in the chit-chat around the tables at night and what not. I wouldn't want to be grandiose about it and say there was a kind of sense of history, but I think there was certainly a sense of competition, that they damn well wanted to succeed where these men in suits wouldn't...couldn't and didn't. And also I think there was something we've seen in some of the other work we've done in terms of our annual poll of the mood of the country: that there is a quiet patriotism in this country which is not of the flag-waving, hand-on-the-heart American variety, but it's fairly profound. And I think that came out at this meeting.

There was one moment when this lawyer from British Columbia took this guy from Quebec to Stephen Leacock's grave and this was the first time this guy from Quebec had

ever heard of Stephen Leacock, who was kind of a legendary Canadian humorist - if that's not an oxymoron - well it isn't, I guess, since half the comedians in Hollywood are from Canada - and this guy had his eyes opened. He'd never heard of Leacock. This was all sort of off-agenda, right? It was a personal thing. They became friends. In fact, they used to visit each other. When this guy was traveling down east, he would go and see the guy in Quebec. The guy in Quebec would visit this woman in New Brunswick, in this little town and brought his kids down there. These people all stayed in touch after this, which I found fascinating - that they had become this mini little institution. I don't know if today they still have little reunions or not; they probably do.

We had a second session with this same group at a different place. And then we did one on deficits and the budget.

LS: I don't have the deficit article, but I was sent your follow-up article. But here's the thing that you d...

BL: Again, not just directly flung out of our work, but there's been several other manifestations of citizen power since. There have been kind of consumer revolts about issues like cable television and much more of a feisty electorate. I suppose indirectly we probably helped to contribute to that, as well. Certainly on the part of this little group, there was a sense of empowerment for a few days and a lot of pride in what we produced and what they produced, a real sense that they had made a difference. They all left that place feeling they had made a real contribution. And you could sense that in the follow-up afterwards. They kept in touch. They sent each other clippings and they were interviewed in their local communities. A lot of them had profiles in their own communities once they had gone home, and they would be interviewed on subjects when it was appropriate.

LS: You've not been in touch with them in recent years, I guess...

BL: I haven't, no. I regret that. It would be nice to do that at some point.