

# REMAKING CANADA: THE ROLE OF THE PEOPLE

BY DAVID V.J. BELL

As we approach the end of the current millennium, Canadian democracy will face an important challenge: what role (if any) will "ordinary Canadians" have in shaping the future of the country?

Until recently, this question would scarcely have been raised. Canadians' belief in deference was legendary. Students of political culture repeatedly concluded that ordinary Canadians were quite happy to allow tough political decisions to be made by trusted elites. Some celebrated this cultural trait for it permitted "elite accommodation" to function smoothly. Others saw it as a regrettable (but probably permanent) legacy of our non-revolutionary past.

## MEECH: THE FIVE-LETTER WORD

Much has changed in the heat of constitutional struggle over Meech Lake and Charlottetown. Meech was a powerful symbol that connoted closed decision making and the absence of consultation. The First Nations made it into a verb — a five-letter political swearword. Native leaders vowed that the spectacle of eleven white men in suits, meeting behind closed doors to decide Canada's constitutional fate, would never be allowed to happen again. Many others agreed.

Indeed, Canadians have catapulted "from deference to defiance," a rite of passage marked dramatically by the defeat of the Charlottetown Agreement, which had been endorsed by all premiers and the federal government. Perhaps for the first time in Canadian history, the elites

were soundly rejected, their recommendations deemed unacceptable by a majority of "ordinary Canadians."

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But the result has been a constitutional stalemate. The elites are now reluctant to act. No provincial premier is prepared to undertake a project of constitutional revision. However, "The People" have no mechanism to participate in constitutional review. This despite "The People's Commission" chaired by Keith Spicer and designed to facilitate broad public involvement; despite the Montreal rally which, for many Canadians, symbolized their commitment to renew efforts to transform and thereby rescue Canada; and despite the use of the referendum for constitutional change. The latter mechanism has so limited a focus that it can merely serve as an expression of support or opposition at the end of a much more complex process of constitution drafting which, in the case of Charlottetown, was entirely elite-dominated.

The outcry over the closed nature of the decision-making process has changed nothing. Under the *Constitution Act, 1982*, the provincial premiers still have a hammerlock on constitutional change. They are incapable of acting and are determined not to open up the process.

## THE "72 HOURS" PROJECT

The CBC initiative "72 hours to remake Canada" must be evaluated in this context. Under the able chairmanship of Thomas Berger, 24 "Citizens of Canada" were brought together for three days to see if they could reach agreement on principles for a revised constitution for the country.

Three resident expert advisors (Guy Laforest, Kathleen Mahoney, and Peter Russell) and numerous guest politicians and other leaders presented their views to the group of 24. In the end, the group reached a remarkable consensus. They developed a new language to express old but, nonetheless, important principles that define Canada's identity and to articulate the basis for a continued association between Quebec and the rest of Canada.

The CBC project was preceded by an extensive survey that revealed public opinion on the key issues relating to constitutional change. In some respects, the survey findings revealed a mirror image between Quebec and the rest of Canada. There was general agreement that the Federal Government should make "constitutional offers" to Quebec prior to another referendum on sovereignty. Whereas 80 percent of those in Quebec favoured the inclusion of distinct society as part of such an offer, however, this proposal had only 43-percent support in the rest of Canada, and practically no support (9 percent)

if it were to involve "special powers" different from those enjoyed by other provinces. Indeed, a plurality of non-Quebecers favour the status quo. But according to the survey, a slight majority (51 percent) of those in the rest of Canada would give Quebec additional powers rather than face the prospect of Quebec independence. Divisions on other matters remained strong and compelling. A plurality of 36 percent of those in Quebec think the present system benefits the other provinces to Quebec's disadvantage. Precisely the reverse view is held by an even larger 45 percent outside of Quebec.

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One interesting outcome of the 72 hours spent together by these "Ordinary Canadians" is the extent to which they were able to bridge some of these gaps in understanding and perception. Several of them expressed genuine surprise that Quebec's complaints about the federal system were largely shared in other parts of the country, particularly in the West. They eventually concluded that Quebec's concerns were fundamentally focused on identity and recognition as much

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as on demands for substantive or material benefits. And it was on this basis that they were eventually able to reach a consensus about the content of the statement of principles.

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Similarly, they all agreed that the primacy of the First Nations as the original inhabitants of this land must be acknowledged in the opening paragraph of the section on "The Canadian Community." Their statement is not a work of poetry, but it does express in plain and fresh language the possible basis for the reconstruction of our country:

"All Canadians must recognize that Canada has been built on the land of First Nations, that no honourable solution is possible without a commitment to justice for Aboriginal peoples, to the recognition of their inherent right (as political communities pre-dating the coming of the French and English) to govern themselves and to the provision of the means to their economic self-sufficiency.

We believe that Canada is not only a union of provinces and territories, but also a partnership of two founding peoples, two societies, two nations, English-speaking and French-speaking, which have welcomed a multitude of im-

migrants from every continent who have made Canada their home and we believe Canadians should nurture, indeed celebrate, this diversity.

We believe that Canada should recognize and affirm the fact that Quebecers are predominantly French-speaking people. Quebec is home to a culture unique in North America."

Despite the accomplishment of reaching a consensus on such challenging topics, the entire exercise was trashed by leading members of the "chattering class," including Lysiane Gagnon and Andrew Coyne. Both writers ridiculed the efforts of an inexperienced group of "uninformed citizens" who lack any official status. Both defended the unquestioned monopoly of elites on matters of such significance.

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In an eloquent defence of the exercise, Thomas Berger challenged the presumption of superior knowledge (if not omniscience) of journalists like Ms. Gagnon, who had predicted that the sovereigntists were "doomed to defeat in the referendum"

in a series of columns written a year before the results were known. He acknowledged that the 24 citizens were not linked to previous positions and commitments. On the other hand, their ability to come to the task "with open minds" was perhaps a precondition to their finding fresh solutions. Most significant is the personal lesson Thomas Berger drew from his involvement: "They persuaded me that Canada can succeed." In this time of gloomy, negative speculation, that alone would be worth the price of admission.

If we are to preserve and enhance democracy in the twenty-first century, we will need to pay much more attention to grassroots sentiment and the opinions of ordinary Canadians. We will need to find ways of drawing on their intelligence, spirit, and commitment to galvanize a sense of mission for our country. We will need to break out of the stranglehold of entrenched political elites who have shrouded constitutional change in past grievances and bitter memories. We will need to find a way for our political elites to become at least as visionary as the general public.

Notably absent from the views of experts or the deliberations of the 25 were environmental issues. Surveys have shown repeatedly that Canadian citizens have an abiding concern for the environment, which they place near the top of their public priorities. Canadian elites continue to ignore this fundamental concern and back away from demonstrating leadership in this vital area. A recent survey shows that environment ranks as the

second-highest priority for the general public, but only the twelfth out of 25 priorities identified by the elites. Canada's future will depend as much on our ability to "get it right" with respect to the environment as it will on resolving the Quebec problem, and both issues will require a transformation of Canadian democracy. 

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