

The Experts' Report

The Harvard conflict resolution team sums up—and finds cause for optimism



A team of conflict resolution experts from the Harvard Negotiation Project and Conflict Management Group of Cambridge, Mass., headed by law professor Roger Fisher, guided 12 Canadians in discussions about the future of the country during the Maclean's forum held at the Briars, north of Toronto, from June 7 to 10. Their report:

In Canada today, as in every other important conflict with which we have dealt, people are reasonably saying "no" to what they hear themselves being asked to do. The Briars participants identified four questions confronting Canadians:

1. Should we agree to independence for Quebec?
2. Should we accept a stronger federal government?
3. Should we accept a weak federal government with strong provinces?
4. Should we agree to self-government for the First Nations?

Today, a majority of Canadians appear opposed to each proposal—and for good reason. None of them has been worked out in practical detail. Each has been advanced unilaterally as a position that meets the wishes of some people. None was designed to meet the interests of most people. Each proposal is advanced as a big decision to be made before working out practical, operational details. But most Canadians are reluctant to head off into a vague unknown. There does not appear to be a sufficiently clear picture of each alternative future.

Canada may have problems, but it has done well—so well that for much of the world, Canada is often a model. Understandably, Canadians still see faults and want to do better. But we wonder whether the right questions have been asked. Are different languages and cultures really the problem? After all, the people of Switzerland do well with four languages. Canada's primary difficulties may lie neither in cultural differences nor substantive problems, but rather in how citizens deal with those differences and problems.

Just as a bitter disagreement between husband and wife about separate bedrooms or where they should live inspires talk of divorce, disputes over language may lead to talk of separation. But neither location nor language is the real issue. A troubled relationship is. And no agreement on a substantive issue will cure that troubled relationship.

We have for some years studied how people successfully deal with their differences—what works and what doesn't. We are not experts in

substantive areas, such as the Canadian Constitution. We focus on the process of conflict management. We don't provide substantive answers. We help people ask better questions, and then try to provide an effective method to answer them. Unfortunately, many people have no interest in process. They say: "I don't care what road I take, as long as I end up where I want to be." But where they end up usually depends on what road they take. The many years of unsuccessful discussion in Canada suggest that the past process is not an effective means for dealing with the nation's problems.

The 12 participants at the Briars found a different road. They found that exploring underlying interests was more effective than arguing over

respective positions. They jointly developed an array of options that might serve the interests of all Canadians. Then, they suggested specific, constructive steps to bring it about. This is the sort of process that we recommend for Canada.

The specific action plan suggested by the participants at the Briars is not really the lesson of the weekend. We—and they—were sure better ideas were out there. The real lesson is that a dozen people, selected for their differences and representation of various major Canadian viewpoints, could work so well together. Over a weekend, using a systematic process of analysis and discussion, they could deal effectively with their differences and agree on a large number of suggested actions. And if a dozen citizens without major resources could do that, we suspect that Canada's leaders, with the help of their constituents and millions of dollars in resources, could do it, too.

But citizens need not wait for their leaders. Individual citizens of Canada, individually as well as collectively, can probably make a far greater difference than they assume. At least two million readers of this magazine are being exposed to those ideas and sugges-

tions. Citizens can plan, in detail, possible futures before choosing one, or abandoning any idea. How *exactly* would a united Canada meet the interests of Quebec? How *exactly* might a separate Quebec handle the interests of native Canadians, currency and trade? Confront the problems, not each other. Be creative. Work with others, using the collective talents, experience and points of view. Talk and listen. Draft and redraft. Make decisions *only* at the end of the process. No province will lose. The best ideas will win.

ROGER FISHER, STUART DIAMOND and ROBERT RICIGLIANO



Diamond (standing), Ricigliano and Fisher: process

PETER BRIGG/MACLEANS