

THE VANCOUVER SUN

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Looking at the future. From left: Tom Hutton, professor at the UBC School of Planning; general surgeon Nadine Caron; event sponsor Rudy North, and architect Omer Arbel.

Dreaming a dream of B.C.

A group of thinkers gathers to imagine our future. The discourse is heartfelt and inspiring



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VANCOUVER SUN

EVERY ONE of B.C.'s four million inhabitants should get this chance: To retreat to the forest, sit with highly accomplished, good-hearted people from all walks of life and brainstorm about what this province should look like 30 years from now.

That's what happened this week from Sunday to Wednesday on a hilltop overlooking Howe Sound and the snow-capped Coast Mountains. Doctors, architects and Indian chiefs joined writers, planners, university deans, business executives, charity directors and federal public servants in drawing up a roadmap for making this province — which is so rugged, physically, culturally and politically — a better place.

Even though the far-reaching project might sound naive to some, participants were encouraged to be bold and reminded that humans — armed with optimism and a sense of purpose — can make massive change happen rapidly: Look at the sudden fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the remarkable rise of global democracies, the economic explosion in China and the stunning advances of the past decade in computerization.

Fuelled by a \$500,000 grant from Vancouver financier-philanthropist Rudy North, and matching dollars from Simon Fraser University, a group of 16 women and men from across the province got together with notepads and flip charts to start a unique four-year project called Imagine B.C.: Dialogues on the Future of British Columbia.

They confided. They clashed. They commiserated. They publicized to exhaustion. They put



Thomas Homer-Dixon, B.C.-raised author of *The Ingenuity Gap* and a specialist on how societies can respond to complex change: 'I'm very worried about the state of the world right now.'

Photos by STUART DAVIS, Vancouver Sun

their hearts and souls into pondering what could be, should be, in the future for this province they know and deeply love. And as true British Columbians, they never complained about the week's pouring rain.

But they did worry about the traumatic ups and downs people experience in this province, which they believe is unnecessarily polarized. It doesn't seem helpful, they said, that B.C. jerks back and forth between right- and left-wing governments, with each immediately undoing much of what its predecessor put into place.

Is this the way, they wondered, for such a vast and diverse province to move forward economically, socially and culturally?

As they nestled into the relaxed elegance of Rivendell Retreat centre, the participants were asked to dream.

Dream about the kind of economy they'd like to see operating in B.C. by the mid-2030s. Imagine how that new economy would influence every other sphere of society: the environment, politics, arts, health and education — the proverbial whole ball of wax.

Their conclusions? The way forward they imagined stressed the need for a resilient economy, the creation of long-term wealth, its fair distribution, a protected natural environment, a sense of poetry in urban design and a shared mythology. Our wild salmon kept cropping up as a possible

icon for B.C., a symbol whose future well-being seemed to sum up the group's evolving concerns.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. There's no point in jumping too quickly to the group's conclusions — because the way in which the dialoguers struggled to come to agreement was just as important as any consensus they reached.

Their intense conversational journey highlighted the deep commitment so many long-time British Columbians have to this place — as well as their anxiety about some of the province's darker trends.

The larger picture

One of the Imagine B.C. group's pre-readings was an article by Sean Butler in *Saturday Night* magazine, titled *The Gross Domestic Product* — with the word "product" crossed out and replaced by the word "hoax."

The resulting essay on "The Gross Domestic Hoax" detailed how western industrial societies' prime index for measuring economic health, the GDP, makes no distinction between growth that is positive for society and growth that arises out of various disasters.

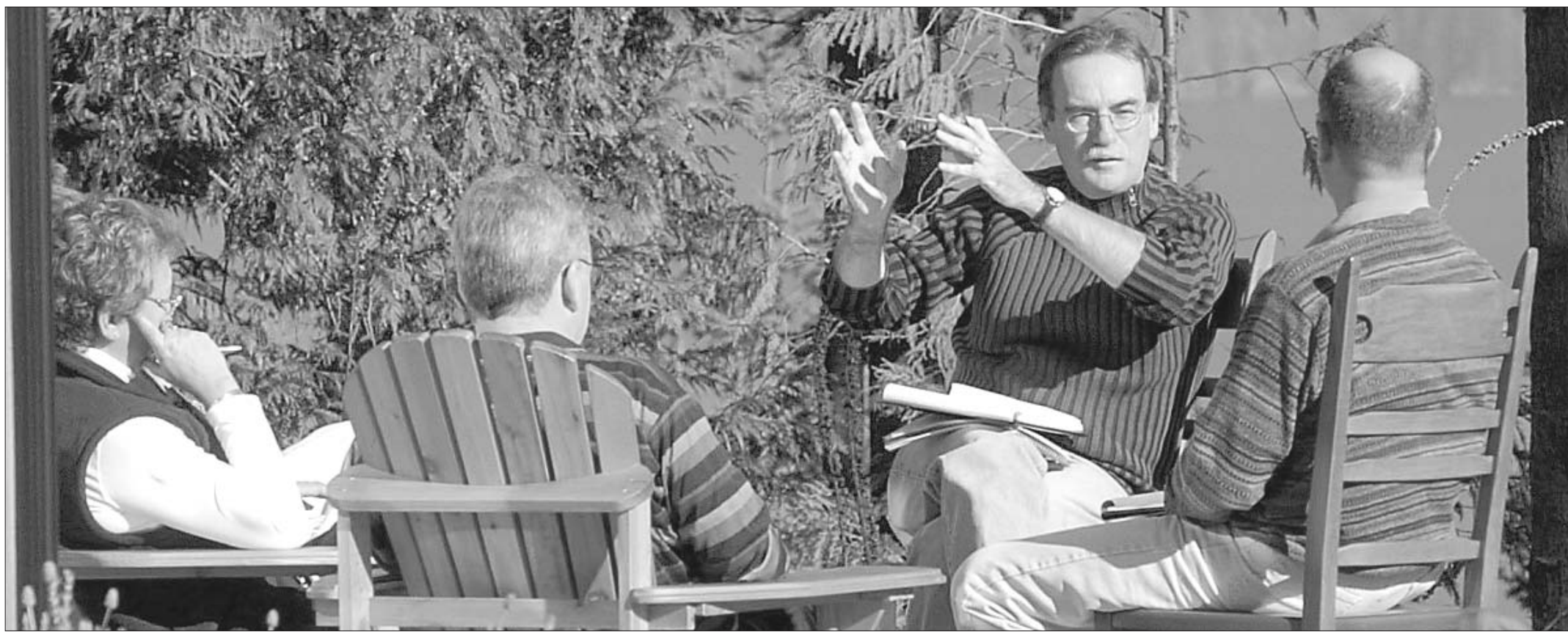
In the narrow perspective of GDP, for instance, destruction of the environment often creates a positive uptick in GDP growth. The article went on to describe how the GDP counts as "good" growth even if that spending that creates disease, kills people, crushes communities, causes divorce or leads to gambling addiction.

The readings set the group's sights on the larger picture, including alternative methods for measuring how economic growth can also translate into benefits for the ecology, for towns, for families, for beauty and everything else that makes life worthwhile.

The author of the new book, *The Defiant Imagination*, was invited at the opening session to inspire the participants to conjure up a grand vision, a "blue-sky" ideal for B.C.

Max Wyman, a former *Vancouver Sun* editor, talked about how humans who employ

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Author Terry Glavin talks with participants on Bowen Island. The salmon-loving Glavin told a defining story about the courage and ingenuity of the iconic fish.

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their imagination are engaging in a moral act, because imagining involves envisioning a world that is based on deep values. He called the act of imagination "a secular form of religious activity," saying it is "an attempt to make connection with the transcendent, with something greater than ourselves."

Feeling challenged after Wyman's urgings, the participants, all leaders in their fields, began to create a fact-based foundation for their talks. They decided they couldn't begin imagining where B.C. should go if they didn't agree on where this West Coast province is now.

They agreed there is already an essential British Columbian culture. But it's not as obvious as in Europe, with its grand stone churches and ancient books. They concluded B.C.'s culture is more complex than most because it's a mosaic, composed of many different traditions, from aboriginal to Anglo-Celtic to Chinese.

The group wanted to highlight B.C.'s positive qualities.

They raved about how B.C. is unique because so many of its inhabitants share a "spiritual" connection to the land. "It's always a short walk to wilderness," said David Helliwell, senior policy adviser to Stephen Owen, minister in charge of Western Economic Diversification. The group's thoughts about the delights and sanctity of nature were echoed by trail-running Dr. Nadine Caron, the first aboriginal female to graduate from the University of B.C.'s medical school.

The group also took pride in British Columbians' respect for ethnic and other types of diversity — celebrating how interracial marriages, rare elsewhere, are commonplace here. They called B.C. "a place of convergence" where Europe meets Asia.

They maintained, as well, that British Columbians make up arguably the most physically active, non-smoking, healthy population on the continent.

And they said that British Columbians have a long held a strong Utopian streak — that we can be characterized as having a general sense of optimism.

The group became convinced B.C. was a corner of the continent with "a culture of possibility," where rules are made to be broken and dreaming is encouraged. Then they faced up to B.C.'s darker side.

They acknowledged there are often bitter rivalries between people from different parts of the province — with some far-flung people on the eastern and north edges of the province feeling more connected to Alberta or the state of Washington than Vancouver or Victoria.

They regretted the province's contentious political climate and the ever-expanding divide between rich and poor. For their children's sakes, they were stressed about how difficult it is to get into higher education in B.C. Kevin Huscroft, co-founder of PMC-Sierra, one of the province's most successful high-tech companies, said, "With the high-school grades I had, I couldn't get into a B.C. university now."

They also fretted about the state of health care and the growing number of mentally ill living on the streets. They worried about scores of unresolved aboriginal land claims, as well as a crass culture of excess, which leads to wasteful and careless attitudes to the province's resources.

They also regretted that B.C.'s culture is becoming "homogenized," with international big-box retailers dominating the outskirts of too many cities. As architect Omer Arbel said, too much B.C. construction is shoddy, with edifices being built to last only 20 years. "If everyone feels so strongly about the beauty of B.C.'s land," he said, "why are so many of our cities so ugly?"

Breaking with our past

Having mapped out the province's pros and cons, the group began focusing on the question: What are the central challenges facing B.C.?

In the realm of economics, UBC planner Tom Hutton talked about how B.C. history has been dominated by crude exploitation of natural resources, from forests to fish. The dean of arts and social sciences at SFU, John Pierce, added that British Columbians are having trouble breaking out of their past as "hewers of wood and carriers of water." Many also spoke about heartbreaking disparities between rich and poor, from region to region and household to household.

When it came to education, everyone agreed intense learning was the key to health and prosperity in what Pierce said should be a "knowledge-based economy." But they fretted about access to education and provincial governments' see-sawing short-term agendas, which were shortchanging so many young people.

In regards to culture, the Imagine B.C. group heard from Vancouver-based artists who said the province already had a unique reputation for "edgy" and "risk-taking" work in dance, theatre, music, painting and film. But they also recognized that many British Columbians have an inferiority complex about who they are — and think they'll only be "world-class" when we



John Pierce (left), dean of arts at Simon Fraser University, and author Max Wyman, whose views on imagination challenged the group to define the present before picturing the future.



From left: Susan Papadionissiou, United Way director; author Donaleen Saul; facilitator Nancy Hall; and Jan O'Brien, vice-chair of the B.C. Labour Relations Board. O'Brien's dream of a 30-hour work week for everyone raised reservations about excessive idealism.

become like somewhere else, particularly somewhere in the U.S.

During formal discussions and later, over a wine-filled dinner at Bowen Island's Blue-Eyed Mary's pub, participants listened to a cellist play a suitably edgy version of Jimi Hendrix's *Foxy Lady*. They came around to thinking there is too little interest in heritage in B.C. and a sad emphasis on sameness in urban-suburban culture and design. As Arbel said: "I believe we can have poetry in our architecture."

As for the hot-potato sphere of government, many yearned for a brighter day when British Columbians wouldn't be forced to make harshly partisan political choices.

Hutton, who worked directly with both Mike Harcourt and Gordon Campbell when they were mayors of Vancouver, praised Harcourt for trying to build bridges and tone down partisan prejudices. Hutton worried that Campbell, after being elected in 2001, is allowing the province to return to its polarized roots.

Indeed, they asked how to shape a more creative way to proceed, so we can cobble together a British Columbia that aims to benefit all its inhabitants.

Challenging the status quo

Thomas Homer-Dixon, Victoria-raised author of *The Ingenuity Gap* and a specialist on how societies can respond creatively to complex change, was brought to Bowen Island to help the fledgling group think globally before acting locally.

"I'm very worried about the state of the world right now," said Homer-Dixon, who heads the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Toronto. He has been speaking around the world on how societies can brace themselves to survive and prosper through rapidly increasing global shocks.

Citing the near-apocalyptic threats of unparalleled climate change, looming oil shortages and increasingly sophisticated terrorism, Homer-Dixon urged the group to challenge denial-filled status-quo thinking, which currently favours the elites.

Homer-Dixon asked the dialogue participants to recognize the complexities of B.C.'s problems,

foster ingenuity in building a more "resilient" provincial society, encourage decentralized experimentation and promote a switch among British Columbians from hedonistic to transcendent values.

In response, the gathered group tossed out a host of visions for what B.C. should look like in the 2030s. They ranged all over the map, from Wyman's idea of slapping a 100-per cent tax on fossil-fuel cars to the philanthropist North's noble hope of creating a culture that draws the best and brightest from around the planet — not necessarily to earn the highest bucks, but to enjoy the richest lifestyles.

By Wednesday morning some in the group had hammered together a rough "consensus paper." It tried to reflect a thousand points of light, a cascade of insights the group had tossed out. But participants soon sweated over whether the hastily drawn document was adequate.

As they discussed, they agreed they'd work individually on polishing a group statement over the next couple of weeks, before meeting again in November at SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, which is coordinating the four-year province-wide brainstorming session.

Meanwhile, the group generally agreed upon a number of things they wanted for the next generation of British Columbians.

For starters, most participants wanted to make education the province's top priority. Advanced study of science, technology and the arts, they said, is the best way to respond to unpredictable change. Education, they believed, will inevitably lead to the realization of well-paying jobs that are eco-friendly.

Thoughts diverged, however, as the group went deeper into economics.

Jan O'Brien, vice-chair of the B.C. Labour Relations Board, worried about the mushrooming of low-paying jobs in B.C. and dreamed of everyone having to work only a 30-hour work week, which would take care of basic family needs and ensure every child has a healthy start to life.

But North, a mutual fund manager, and Pierce, the specialist in community development, were among those cautioning against excessive idealism. They said B.C.'s economy has to be designed to create more wealth before it can be distributed in greater amounts to the many people who

need it at the bottom of the ladder.

Having said that, people did think it was possible to somehow strike a better balance between the haves and have-nots.

On a controversial note, B.C. writer Terry Glavin asked everyone to think about the possibility of some day, in the name of sustainability, actively stabilizing B.C.'s population. But when dissonance began to grow over the proposal, veteran mediator Tony Penikett suggested it was likely a "wedge issue" that could lead the group astray.

Health was a continuing core of debate, with participants concluding that Canada's common-good oriented health-care system, despite imperfections, has advantages over the individualistic U.S. model. But Sophie Pierre, chief of the St. Mary's band in the East Kootenay, was among the many who urged British Columbians to adapt their sense of selfish "entitlement" to costly health care by also being responsible for their own physical and mental well-being.

The public policy ideas and suggestions kept coming and coming. The group's collective well of visions for B.C.'s vibrant future never dried up. But, eventually, it was time for everyone to return to their busy globe-trotting schedules.

The shape of B.C.'s future would remain open-ended, until the next gathering of Imagine B.C. in the months and years to come.

Saluting the wild salmon

In the four days of discussion, the thinkers never tired of talking about how wonderful it would be for British Columbians to come together under the image of an icon, a shared symbol.

And, slowly, an image for the province kept rising above the surface: Of a wild salmon; glistening, primal and threatened.

Everything about B.C. and its future can be brought together in that gorgeous image, participants mused. The salmon has always been central to native Indian culture. Even millions of non-aboriginal British Columbians identify and feel passionately about the salmon and its future. The salmon could also be a unique unifier of B.C.'s conflicting regions — because it's crucial to people on the coast, but also to those of the Interior mountains, where it spawns.

Participants were asked to reflect on the significance of making B.C.'s prime symbol a fish that, in parts of the province, has been suffering unprecedented decimation. The participants concluded that it's a warning to this province, but one laced with potential for change.

If we restore the bounty of the province's salmon, participants said, we will be restoring the land and our own health and wealth, in the most holistic sense of the terms.

The attempt to develop the metaphor of the wild salmon ran through the last hours of discussion — and even extended to the return ferry ride from Snug Cove back to Horseshoe Bay.

On the ferry, participants spontaneously gathered in a circle near the tiny cafeteria. Huscroft, the high-tech electrical engineer and corporate leader, challenged the salmon-revering passion expressed by Glavin, author of the award-winning book, *The Last Great Sea: A Voyage Through the Human and Natural History of the North Pacific Ocean*.

Huscroft — who admitted he'd surprised himself over the four days by realizing just how much of an environmentalist he was — nevertheless suggested it wasn't enough to just dream impossible dreams about returning the salmon habitat to its untouched splendour before Europeans arrived.

The group needed a symbol, Huscroft said, that would convey that British Columbians had a realistic plan for the future, which would inevitably require humans' engineering expertise to build an ecosystem that will support the salmon's revival.

Glavin, never shy about relating fish stories, told of how, many years ago, some returning Fraser River salmon east of the city of Mission responded to the industrial destruction of their creek's spawning grounds by flopping themselves on to a wet patch of nearby farmland, where they laid and fertilized their eggs.

The gutsy salmon died after completing their life cycle. But their offspring returned years later to the same patch of land. And so later did their offspring. The farmer, realizing what was happening, permanently allowed part of his field to become a vibrant new spawning ground — out of respect for the hardy salmon's ingenuity.

As the ferry was about to dock, the group realized maybe they'd just discovered the symbol for B.C. for which they had been looking. Not just an image of a beautiful wild salmon in the role of victim. But an image of a bold, fearless, creative salmon that can help construct its own destiny.

As Glavin and others then recognized with a smile, the ideal icon for B.C. may well just be: The salmon as engineer. □

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Imagine B.C. program director Joanna Ashworth invites readers to send their dreams for the province's future to Imagine B.C.'s website at www.sfu.ca/dialogue/imaginebc