

Canadian Heroes

Nation's greatest

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By James Cudmore

Terry Fox, whose courageous Marathon of Hope raised millions for cancer research and brought a nation together, is Canada's "greatest hero," according to a national survey conducted by The Dominion Institute and The Council for Canadian Unity.

Sponsored by the National Post, the survey asked Canadians to nominate their Top 10 "heroes." The results, submitted over the Internet, were staggering, and as submissions poured in the poll administrators had to refine their criteria and limit inclusion to Canadians who are now dead.

The decision tilted the results away from celebrities, such as Bryan Adams, Celine Dion and Don Cherry, and toward distinctly national icons, such as Mr. Fox, Frederick Banting (who won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of insulin) and Lester B. Pearson, former prime minister and father of United Nations peacekeeping.

"We didn't want this to be a pop quiz," says Kathleen Freeman a director of The Council for Canadian Unity.

"We wanted Canadians to think about the past, to think about heroes in a traditional sense rather than as media superstars" or literary figures, says Ms. Freeman.

As an addendum, Angus Reid was commissioned to determine what Canadians think of when they consider the idea of heroism.

Its survey of 1,500 households revealed that more than one quarter of Canadians believe that bravery and courage are the characteristics most identifiable with heroism. Honesty and trustworthiness came second, with integrity and honour falling third on the list of heroic values.

"It seems that heroes are represented almost as avatars for the values that we self-consciously equate with being Canadian," says Rudyard Griffiths, the executive director of The Dominion Institute.

"These values indicate a particular Canadian view of heroism," says Mark Kingwell, professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto and author of a coming book called *Canada: Our Century*.

"It is a very traditional list, though. These are heroes identified for personal courage, Terry Fox is exemplar of that, as well as for more traditional aspects like physical courage, which is associated with military heroes like Isaac Brock," adds Prof. Kingwell.

In addition to Messrs. Fox, Banting and Pearson, the heroes list also included such diverse Canadian personalities as Louis Riel, the leader of the Métis rebellions who was hanged for murder and treason and Laura Secord, the famous War of 1812 heroine who walked 30 kilometres to warn Canadian defenders of an impending American attack.

Heroes can be a powerful building block, says Mr. Griffiths, helping Canadians to see the past in context and provide a perspective from which to view our future.

"The past isn't a series of anonymous names and dates, it's a very subjective connection that we have with Canada's history," he adds.

“It’s a history of biographies. We wanted to get Canadians turned on to our country’s past by understanding the great stories contained within it.

“The results of this survey have debunked the myth that Americans have a monopoly on heroism,” says Mr. Griffiths.

“We just need to be a little more confident and aggressive when we speak our stories.”

The Dominion Institute is a national charity dedicated to the promotion of Canadian history and civics. The CCU is a national, non-partisan organization devoted to youth education and citizen participation.