

# I MAY NOT BE THE GREATEST

*But I'm greater than you. By Jesse Brown*

## Hypothesis

Nationalism, like fungus, grows best organically. To our credit, we Canadians generally have failed to provide dank enough mental basements for the spores to take hold. But that hasn't stopped our government from shovelling the occasional load of fertilizer down our throats, to artificially stimulate patriotic growth.

First, we were given those "Canadian Heritage Minutes," but it seems like the folks behind them are running out of 19th-century Manitoban drinking-straw inventors to lionize. So the flag has been passed to the CBC, which is now waving it furiously with the "Greatest Canadian" contest and TV series, an attempt to finally settle that burning dinner-table question, "Who's better: John Diefenbaker or John Candy?" The rules, announced last spring, state that any Canadian can nominate any other Canadian, dead or alive.

Without hesitation, I nominate myself.

## Method/Apparatus

To research my campaign, I study the CBC's index of suggested nominees. I am pleased to discover that Céline Dion and Anne Murray finally share space with John A. MacDonald and Louis Riel. Alexander Graham Bell is also on the list, suggesting that, if your accomplishment is significant enough, you can be born in Scotland and work in the United States but still be considered a Canadian if you drop dead in Nova Scotia. Dan Aykroyd is included, speaking well of our nation's compassionate ability to overlook the embarrassment of the *Coneheads* movie. The names on the list vary wildly, but everyone mentioned is felt to embody in some way the traits that the CBC feels make Canada great: legacy, pride and genius.

I've always felt that if anything makes Canada kind of great, it's that we don't care about legacy, pride or genius. If I'm proud of anything, it's that I live in a nation that is ashamed to be nationalistic. And if *not* caring is what makes Canada great, then I *am* the Greatest Canadian, because no one could care less than I.

I type up these sentiments on a web page, [www.jesseisthegreatest.ca](http://www.jesseisthegreatest.ca), and accompany them with a photo of me at my best. I hit "send," and my candidacy is launched. My only campaign promise: if I win, I will move to the U.S., like all great Canadians.

## Observations

As we say in politics, my campaign picks up instant momentum. An email I send out to friends spreads virally, and soon my supporters number in the dozens. I decide to "go negative" early, challenging my rivals' claims to greatness. No mercy is shown to opponents simply because they happen to be dead. Tecumseh, for instance, is touted as a front-runner because of his lifelong efforts to ensure the future safety and prosperity of all native people. "Nice job, Tecumseh!" I quip. Humbled, he offers no reply. I cripple David Suzuki's campaign by pointing out that the environment has only gotten worse since he's been on the job. Coincidence? As for Pierre Trudeau, I steer clear of the issues entirely and hit below the belt with a few choice words about Maggie and Mick.

The *Toronto Star* runs a feature on my candidacy. The reporter asks what great things I've done to deserve the precious votes of my fellow Canadians. "I once ate an entire pie," I answer with confidence. Soon I am accommodating requests for radio interviews. "I'm just like Muhammad Ali," I boast on Saskatoon talk radio, "but without the boxing."

The CBC is forced to respond. "He's not going to win," an anonymous CBC staffer is quoted as saying. Could this be a reference to the small print in the "Greatest Canadian" rules? There is, after all, a stipulation that nominees must have made a "significant contribution" to the shaping of the country. Though how this applies to suggested nominee and noted yodeller Wilf Carter, I am unsure.

After further deliberation, CBC spokesperson Julie Dossett presents the public broadcaster's official position on my campaign. "We would never dream of stopping him," she proclaims judiciously, while offering the gambling community an inside tip that the CBC is "pretty con-

fident that, frankly, the Top 10 will be figures you have heard of."

As events progress, I do indeed sense an increasing threat from famous names —like Mulroney. Not Brian, mind you, but his negligible son Ben, who becomes the focus of another joke campaign. Ditto Don Cherry, whose sweaty followers use their votes to show solidarity against the CBC over Grapes's contract squabbles. A disc jockey out west copycats me, pumping his listenership every morning to send his name in, and some kid named Mark Baese nabs the URL "Greatest-Canadian.com" and posts his own site, forcing me to share the "everyman" vote. I'm getting used to the idea that I may not be voted "Greatest Canadian," but it sure will smart not even to be ranked the Greatest Self-Promoting Jackass.

The nomination period closes. I realize that I forgot to vote.

## Conclusion

The CBC boasts that the contest has been a huge success, as 139,433 nominations were received for about 10,000 different nominees. So who took the top 10 spots? And who will win top prize?

Who cares? They're not me. I come in at No. 121. My placing seems disappointing, until I consider that there are more than 30 million people living in Canada, 99.99999 per cent of whom I am officially greater than (this includes you).

The whole experience leaves me with a feeling of mediocre superiority. I know I'm better than almost everyone, but not quite the best. I didn't do much to earn it, but as long as I don't make too much noise, I won't have to do much to keep it. I am sort of great, but I am not the greatest. I am Canadian. □

