

Victory for the common man



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CALEDONIA, ONT.

It was what Bob Salac called “a repair brokered by common people, not by leaders” — specifically, as it turns out, by a group of ringette dads, native and non-native — and so it was spectacular for that very reason.

Yesterday was the 84th day since the first protesters moved onto the disputed land behind the Canadian Tire, an occupation formally deemed illegal by the injunction issued soon afterward by an Ontario court.

What followed was at best an utter communications disaster — symbolized by the Ontario government’s 1-800 information hotline which, when Caledonia resident Lisa Herdman phoned it on May 14, delivered only a recording that gave her two-week-old news — and at worst an astonishing leadership void.

Unsurprisingly, that vacuum became a cauldron, and in the absence of information and direction, all else followed, including last weekend’s violence and meanness.

Into this breach came the regular folks and ringette fathers on both sides of the barricade, all of them weary, enraged and fed up to the teeth with their abandonment by Ottawa and Queen’s Park.

Steve McBride is one of them. He’s also coached the Caledonia ringette team for about eight years — the girls, who include his daughter, are now 14 — and over that time, gone to his players’ birthday parties on the Six Nations reserve and come to love them.

Ringette, for those not versed in girls’ games, is a hockey substitute created in the 1960s.

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Where talks failed, ringette won out

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It is played like hockey, on ice and with the same nets, but calls for sticks without blades and a soft rubber ring instead of a hard puck.

Early yesterday afternoon, Mr. McBride ran into some of his players' fathers, who "happen to be pretty high up" in the native hierarchy, as they emerged from the meeting where exhausted band leaders decided they were ready to pull down the barricade. "I have a lot of friends there [on the native side]," Mr. McBride said. "They want it to end. They want to go back to work. They look so tired."

At first, he went about the crowd of townspeople himself, begging folks to leave, his voice almost cracking with emotion and frustration. Then the announcement came, by my watch, at 1:23 p.m.

Michael Laughing, wearing a splendid headdress, and Jim Myer, a non-native whose pretty house on a little rise was caught inside and between the barricades, together walked the 150 metres from the native barricade to the line of people which was the town one, bearing a sprig of leaves in lieu of an olive branch.

Almost no one except those standing directly beside the little group could hear what was said, but suddenly, all these regular guys — Mr. McBride, a 40-year-old in sales for a robotics company; Mr. Salac, who is a product supervisor for a drywall manufacturer and the president of the Caledonia Corvairs Hockey Club; Jason Clark and Ken Hewitt of the Caledonia Citizens Alliance; Ralph Luimes, the chief executive officer of the Hald-Nor Credit Union, and others who took up the cry — were spontaneously rolling up their sleeves and asking the crowd of townspeople and the media horde to move off the road and back toward the Canadian Tire parking lot.

It was not accomplished without grumbling, but Mr. McBride had



NATHAN DENETTE/CANADIAN PRESS

Michael Laughing, left, and a nearby neighbour, Jim Myer, shake hands in Caledonia, Ont., yesterday.

an answer for them — "Let's be bigger, people" — and the half-dozen or so men were determined and insistent, and by God, it was accomplished.

Within about 10 minutes, Argyle Street on the town side was clear of people and ready for business.

Up the road, the natives began disassembling their barricade, considerably more imposing and solid, consisting of a downed hydro tower (part of the spoils of weekend vandalism that, at this writing, still saw about 4,000 residents of the area without power) and plywood partitions, which were erected earlier yesterday.

By 2:05 p.m., an old beater of a car was able to move slowly from the native end of the street down by the townspeople now lining the road, the two native men inside looking decidedly nervous.

A small round of applause broke out at the sight of the car.

A little later still, the native barricade was down, and the natives were busy repairing the road they had torn up just the day before, managing it, with trucks and vehicles, far faster than any municipal authority ever could have done — another nice bit of symbolism illustrating government impotence

and the good sense and efficiency of the common man.

By the time former Ontario premier David Peterson, asked by the current provincial government to bring the two sides together, arrived on the scene for his second visit of the day, the tension had leaked out like air from a tire.

"Thanks to the natives and Caledonians, and not the government," Janice Thibodeau said pointedly within earshot of Mr. Peterson, "it's going to be a peaceful day."

Her husband Kevin chipped in with his two cents. "We have it [peace] in our hearts," he said. "I know what this community is made of." Like many Caledonians, Mr. Thibodeau was sad and disappointed in "the lack of leadership" he saw, particularly as it affected the Ontario Provincial Police, who, their April 20 attempt to execute the injunction ending in failure, were left to watch over the townspeople as though they were thugs. "These fellows," Mr. Thibodeau said, "who are ready to put their lives on the line for us didn't have the direction they needed."

The sight of the police, lined up at the town end of things, their backs to the native barricade — as though, as Bob Salac said, the

townspeople were demonstrably armed and dangerous and the natives benign — was offensive to many Caledonians.

Mr. Salac, who grew up on a farm bordering the reserve, said the truce is fragile and there's much work to be done, and worries about "the damage that has been done to the kids. There will be that generation who remember the 'native thing that happened in Caledonia.'"

"We have to educate our kids, not that it's wrong to stand up for something you believe in, but the way it was done."

Steve McBride is hoping he can do that within a few days. His ringette team has its annual banquet this Saturday, and some of the native girls aren't planning to come. "A couple of kids, and they're great kids, have been into town, and gotten dirty looks. Word spreads." Mr. McBride is going to try to persuade the players otherwise.

How? I asked.

"By telling them this. There's good people here [in town] and there's good people there, and bad ones here, and bad ones there." This day, the 84th of the protest, the good guys won one.

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