

Bridging divides: Turf, Truth and Trust

Jan-Christian Sorensen introduces the Victoria Forum, a global platform for building consensus toward common goals



In the five years since its inception, the Victoria Forum has carved out an international reputation, bringing together diverse policy makers, academics, business leaders and change-makers in civil society for meaningful discussions aimed at creating positive and sustainable solutions to global issues.

The third edition of the Victoria Forum – co-hosted by the University of Victoria (UVic) and the Senate of Canada – will take centre stage and command the attention of an ever-growing community of like-minded local, national and international leaders at the University of Victoria from August 28 to 30, 2022.

The Forum was established by the Gustavson School of Business at the University of Victoria, with financial support from TELUS and Vancity. Dean Saul Klein and Associate Professor Adel Guitouni were instrumental in creating the Forum, together with Sébastien Beaulieu, a Canadian diplomat and Adjunct Professor in the Gustavson School of Business.

The inaugural Forum, co-hosted by Global Affairs Canada, took place in 2017. It sought to go beyond Anglophone and Francophone to mark 150 years of Canada by addressing the country's wider and much more complex diversity, and particularly the relationships with Indigenous Peoples, with an aim of advancing sustainable socio-economic progress. It resulted in a report that included 38 recommendations and was widely hailed by leaders at various levels of government, business and civil society for advancing ideas that can be implemented to address urgent economic, environmental and social concerns.

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“We wanted the Victoria Forum to offer a welcoming space for everyone, where community and thought leaders, intellectuals, students, and all parties interested in spearheading real change can mingle and have meaningful conversations around topics that are important and vital to everyone,” says Guitouni.

The initial plan was to convene a second in-person Forum in 2020, but the pandemic forced organisers to adapt, opting instead to host a series of virtual webinars and events, culminating in a second Victoria Forum in late 2020.

The overarching theme of the upcoming 2022 Forum – *Bridging Divides: Turf, Truth and Trust* – was defined in 2019, but has been brought into sharper relief by recent events. Existing economic, environmental and societal rifts were exposed and exacerbated during the pandemic and have been intensified by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

“When we talk about divisions on social, environmental and economic levels, all of this predated the pandemic, but Covid-19 only further exposed those divides like the fragility of our economic system and supply chains,” says Guitouni. “After the consultation process of the last Forum, we pinpointed that a great many of these divisions are related to the land, homes, culture and people so this is why the ‘turf’ aspect is an important lens through which we can identify solutions to bridge divides.”

Guitouni sees the other two lenses – ‘truth’ and ‘trust’ – as ones that are inextricably linked. Especially since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, finding consensus, common ground and cutting through the negative clutter and noise can be a tall order in a world that seems increasingly at odds.

That’s especially true considering the proliferation of 24-hour news cycles and social media platforms that often seem to amplify division rather than focus on shared beliefs and values that promote a sense of optimism and unity of society.

“At the time of the first Forum, what was dominating the news cycle and rhetoric was the idea of ‘post-truth’ and fake news, so we decided we needed to start talking about truth and exactly what truth means,” says Guitouni. “The pandemic has exposed more of that. What was once considered science and objective truths are being questioned. Everyone in society and every opinion is being called into question and that is being amplified by social media, so that’s why we need to talk about truth and use the lens of truth to explore divides.”

When it comes to bringing sides closer together, accounting for the erosion of trust that has occurred in society is fundamental. ‘Trust’ inevitably becomes a critical endpoint of the discussion spectrum that will be the Forum’s major focus this year.

Regarding positive outcomes that the Forum has already been able to shepherd, Guitouni points to the discussions that were held surrounding responsible investing and aligning finance with purpose at the 2017 Forum, which played a part in the creation of the Vancouver Island Impact Investing Hub at the UVic campus in 2020.

The Hub operates at the intersection of climate action and the fast-growing segment of impact investing and sustainable finance



The inaugural Victoria Forum drew 400-plus attendees in 2017 to address diversity and inclusiveness.

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and aims to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon, inclusive and resilient economy by expanding access to impact capital and co-creating innovative finance solutions.

“We are proud of that achievement,” says Guitouni. “At the time, responsible investing was emerging in the news and we brought experts, investors, politicians and members of communities together for workshops that led to the establishment of the Hub, which is becoming a beacon for engaging parties and collecting data on this kind of unique, forward-thinking approach to investing responsibly.”

At the 2022 event, the Forum and the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) will team up to introduce a landmark international declaration related to the power of sport in advancing truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples around the world.

“We have been working with the CGF since 2019 on this important declaration for the power of sport when it comes to bridging divides with Indigenous Peoples around the world,” Guitouni says. “That is a prime example of how we are trying to take some of these initiatives and push them to be implemented – to not just talk, but walk the talk as well.”





In parallel to the plenary panels and roundtable sessions centred around the theme of bridging divides, a number of other events are planned for the 2022 Forum, including: a collaborative conversation on arts and culture with the UVic Faculty of Fine Arts and the Royal BC Museum; an idea hub and international essay competition organised by the Global Business School Network to highlight innovative ideas and youth voices on social, economic and environmental issues; a conversation on the future of business and management education; the exploration of music as a universal language for bridging divides; and a specific focus on newcomer and Indigenous relations in the context of globalisation and reconciliation.

Guitouni views the work that has been accomplished thus far through the Victoria Forum as a major step in bringing people and groups from all walks of life together to engage in meaningful discussions for the benefit of all citizens of the world, not just those here in Canada.

“When we first envisioned the Forum, our goal was to create an open and inclusive space where individuals and organisations from a wide

spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives could come together to discuss ideas about diversity and inclusion in the 21st century, break down silos and explore different perspectives,” he says.

Looking forward, Guitouni sees the Forum as an institution that will continue to convene events and contribute ideas and recommendations to a variety of organisations. The aim is to see it become a beacon for business, citizens, decision-makers and intellectuals seeking to make the world a better place, in much the same way as the Halifax International Security Forum beckons stakeholders concerned with safety and security to that city each year.

“I’m proud of what we have been able to achieve thus far,” he says. “We’ve been able to establish the Forum as a viable and trustworthy platform that crosses boundaries, encourages a spirit of collaboration and builds consensus toward common goals and solutions to benefit us all, but there is still plenty of work to do when it comes to bridging divides.”

The 2022 edition of the Victoria Forum takes place August 28 to 30 at the University of Victoria. For more information, go to victoriaforum.ca.