

Marrying up: getting ahead in New France

BY PAUL WELLS • Picture the colonial sons and daughters of France four centuries ago and, a little later, of England. Huddled against the winter snow. Thousands of miles from home. Cut off from the imperial capitals.

Also: diverse. Cosmopolitan. Social-climbing. Everything the folks who stayed in Europe would take centuries to become.

That's the topsy-turvy but compelling picture that author and polemicist John Ralston Saul painted for a roomful of Canadian and French senators last week in Paris. The occasion was a two-day conference on relations between France and Canada over the past 400 years. The conference's second instalment will be held in Ottawa later this year. The 400-year figure was hardly random: this year is the 400th anniversary of Quebec City's founding. Céline Dion and Cirque du Soleil will help with the festivities too, but the assembled

recovering from three centuries of Enlightenment doctrine, whose guideline for nation-states was: "eliminate contradiction."

Most Western democracies are based on a common cultural identity, language, and often a common religion. Canada, divided and isolated from the beginning, didn't have that luxury, Saul said. "Canada has been, for four centuries, an experiment against the European and American nation-state—out of weakness, not strength."

From Samuel de Champlain's arrival onward, the new settlers had to work with the First Nations. Over the years, European and Aboriginal Canadians often built sophisticated relationships, Saul said. "Their approach would have horrified the leaders of Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries: 'Why didn't you clarify? Simplify?'"

Instead, the colonists of New France and their British rivals preferred accommodation. When newcomers intermarried with Aboriginals, "they were marrying up," Saul said, struggling to find a way to translate the concept into French. "They were marrying the people who knew where they were, how to organize things, what they could eat, and who knew the only source of income—



SAUL: Life in early Canada demanded complex relationships

senators thought nobody would object if some history-oriented brainstorming accompanied the show business.

Saul, who is completing a new book on Canadian identity, was the conference's keynote speaker. "A poor Celt who sometimes takes himself for a francophone," he called himself. "But then, what is a francophone in the end? It is somebody who wants to be one."

In France, where visitors with funny accents are sometimes greeted with exaggerated bewilderment from the locals, such a broad definition of "francophone" can be provocative. Saul said that's because France is barely

the fur trade—which is to say, they knew the economy."

Those habits of accommodation led to the Great Peace of Montreal of 1701, one of "the essential pre-constitutional moments in Canada's history," a treaty between New France and 39 First Nations.

"This is something we need to change in the speeches of our leaders," Saul said. "And therefore in the minds of the people who write the speeches for our leaders. And therefore in the computers where they go to get the information for their speeches. They keep saying, 'Canada is a young country.' It's not young. Four centuries is not young." M