

I am Canadian! Deep-thinking author puts a Métis spin on the age-old Canadian national identity question

Winnipeg Free Press

Updated: October 5, 2008 at 02:50 AM CDT

ANOTHER deep-thinking tome by another intellectual about the elusive Canadian identity? God help us. Say it isn't so.

Be comforted. This one is different. It's gutsy and exciting. It will start heated and overdue arguments.

And it will have special resonance in Manitoba, where, for historical reasons, it is most likely to be easily understood and embraced. John Ralston Saul, husband of the former governor general Adrienne Clarkson, has been named "a modern prophet" by Time magazine, and is no stranger to Canadian readers.

He is the author of five novels but is best known for his non-fiction trilogy *Voltaire's Bastards*, *The Doubter's Companion* and *The Unconscious Civilization*. He is widely considered to be one of the world's most influential thinkers.

In his latest work, he suggests a new and believable understanding of how Canada has come to be what it is: an imperfect refuge from much of the world's established madness of bloodletting and

empire, a space lit, against all odds, by a curious faith in the accommodation and inclusiveness of others.

Saul takes on the Really Big Questions of this country's nationhood.

Why do Canadians long for decency rather than supremacy at home and on the international scene? Why do we find conventional patriotism embarrassing?

Why haven't we settled into a marriage of convenience with our American neighbours, when many other countries would have seen this as an easy and suitable path to security and power?

Canadians have been arguing for four centuries over which influences have been most important in forging our character: Catholic? Protestant? French? British?

More lately, we have pondered the impact of non-European, Asian, African values on our way of thinking and being.

For Saul, it's as plain as the nose on our face.

Canada is a Métis nation, deeply indigenized, kept afloat on the currents of aboriginal beliefs.

Colonists of all origins "married up" into established aboriginal families when they arrived, ultimately blending and shaping a new, pragmatic

culture of mixed-race farmers, ranchers and traders.

The result was the internalization of aboriginal ideas, specifically belief in mutual dependency, the need for partnership, the all-important circle that recognizes and adapts to newcomers, and the pursuit of reconciliation.

These were the hard lessons aboriginals had learned from the land, forged from the struggle to survive and prosper on it.

According to Saul, these beliefs explain the prevailing Canadian character, and much of the book celebrates Canada's subsequent brand of humanitarian achievement and exercise of "soft power" in the larger world.

This ideas are likely to find favour in Manitoba, which is said to be founded by the Métis prophet Louis Riel and is now home to one of the country's largest and most influential aboriginal communities.

The problem, Saul explains, is that Canadians are in a state of denial. Not yet understanding and admitting our roots, we have not given ourselves permission to be fully who we are. Nor have we given generations of elite leadership full authority to take us in the direction our hearts

want to go.

That makes for a conflicted and cranky population.

Sounding at times like Dr. Phil McGraw of TV fame, Saul maintains that once "we can embrace a language that expresses our story, we will feel a great release. We will discover a remarkable power to act and to do so in such a way that we will feel we are true to ourselves."

Until then, Saul argues, we can hardly expect Canadian leadership to be anything but passive, hesitant and downright dysfunctional -- not to mention mean-spirited -- when compared to the evolved but inarticulate intuition of ordinary citizens.

Ever the cautious optimist, Saul is hopeful that Canadians will escape the bonds of colonial insecurity and recall the unique origins of this country. That, he writes, will unleash a progressive energy the world desperately needs.

A Fair Country has the potential to change the way Canadians see themselves forever.

It offers a romantic and heroic vision, and it's a stirring and unpretentious read.