

Our Heritage Defined

A Fair Country probes our cultural amnesia

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If you had noticed election candidates stating little of substance about our economic system, aboriginal issues or the nature of Canada, perhaps it was because they were lost in a psychological mess of ideas about who they are and where they come from.

This psychological point drives John Ralston Saul's latest book, *A Fair Country*, a stinging assessment of public- and private-sector leaders paralyzed by a "colonial inferiority complex."

For Saul, there are big realities that Canadian elites -- political, business and bureaucratic -- haven't got their heads around. We are fundamentally the product of our aboriginal heritage, as much as French or English. We believe in peace, fairness and good government, more than any notion of authoritarian "order;" and we have our own circumstances and history, thank you very much -- in spite of elites who imagine the great mothership, Britain or the U.S., to be the source of all that is prudent.

A Fair Country builds on ideas laid out in Saul's earlier works like *Voltaire's Bastards*, which revealed clever, self-serving managerial types using powers of reason to hypnotize and manipulate ordinary citizens throughout history.

A Fair Country aims at Canadian elites: corporate CEOs reaping millions by selling off Canadian assets; university academics lacking the courage to stray from colonial mythologies; politicians bent on suppressing public discussion; public service advisers fawning to impress American powerbrokers.

These people, Saul contends, have been sending mixed messages, leaving Canadians in a state of confusion. We are unique, and yet we shouldn't be; we see how we are, and think we should be different. We are in denial, in need of therapy.

If that is so, the first segment of *A Fair Country*, entitled *A Metis Civilization*, is an excellent first step to recovery. By seriously examining aboriginal influences in Canadian history, Saul goes some way to curing the ongoing dysfunction suffered by -- not Aboriginal Canadians -- but by mainstream Canadians.

"The single greatest failure of the Canadian experiment so far has been our inability to normalize -- that is to internalize consciously -- the First Nations as the senior founding pillar of our civilization."

Case in point: Canada's cultural diversity owes more to aboriginal world views than to European ideas about cultural and racial purity that prevailed until quite recently, and warped our sense of Canadian history. With that in mind, Saul wonders why more has not been made of events like the Great Peace of Montreal (1701) where around 1,300 ambassadors from 40 First Nations reached agreement with each other and leaders of New France.

"It is fascinating just how little effort has been extended in modern western history on the possibility that (a multicultural society) was actually an idea, not a misfortune or an accident . . ."

Saul finds aboriginal influence in military tactics that loomed large from the War of 1812 to the North-West Rebellion and the First World War. And what of Canada's distrust of nationalism, lack of enthusiasm for imperialistic wars, avoidance of brute force unless necessary? What about our willingness to seek a middle way, our instincts for fairness? What about peacekeeping and medicare?

A consequence of Saul's vision is that Western Canada assumes greater significance in the Canadian story. The North-West Rebellion was the lowest point in Canadian history because a monolithic force used violence on culturally diverse minorities. "Here was the model that we must avoid."

Yet, Big Bear and Poundmaker emerged as "some of the greatest leaders Canada has produced."

It was Metis and First Nations and their alliances with newcomers that defended against Manifest Destiny; and the existence of Alberta owes more to Metis Jerry Potts "than to the standard short list of policemen, politicians, land speculators and other businessmen who are often cited as provincial heroes."

Whether or not one agrees with all of Saul's claims his main argument makes a lot of sense. Cultural amnesia could explain this country's bizarre reluctance to address aboriginal concerns or to fashion an identity that seems credible.

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