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Canada: A Welfare State That Lost Its Way

by Jim Creskey

A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada

By John Ralston Saul

Viking Canada

340 pp. \$34

The good news is that Canada's unique capacity for success can be found like a buried treasure in this country's history. The bad news is that not only has it been buried, but it has been intentionally covered up.

Now, all of a sudden, Canadian history is starting to sound like an archival whodunit, and if this is exciting for its own sake (which it is), it's even more important for the present and future.

We have John Ralston Saul to thank for this discovery. But it is a discovery in the way that the first European arrivals discovered the interior of Canada. In truth they didn't discover, but were shown the way by the aboriginals who lived here.

Ralston Saul, in the course of his research, was also shown the way and now his sharp, inviting prose passes on what he's learned in his latest book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*.

Historian, political philosopher and prolific author, Ralston Saul has made his mark as Canada's foremost "public intellectual." He has also found himself in an unusual vantage point as the husband of governor general Adrienne Clarkson when she held the post from 1999 to 2005.

During that time, Ralston Saul was able to see Canada's political, bureaucratic and business leadership up close. Should this worry Canada's leaders, who Ralston Saul refers to as the "castrati"—the castrated ones? Some of them, yes.

But first, some history.

From the first days of contact between Europeans and Aboriginal Peoples, something very different began to happen in Canada as opposed to other colonial establishments.

Some Thoughtful Provocations From John Ralston Saul

Victorianism: Made us think that Canada must always be the supplicant of a great power.

Quebec's debate in favour of increased secularism is a replay of France's two-century battles between violent forces of state religion and secular revolutionaries.

Early civilization: In Canada's history it was the hunter-gatherers who were stable and the farmers who were nomadic.

Marshall McLuhan and the NHL: Sending them off to the U.S. are examples of Canada's colonial inferiority complex.

Canada's courts lead now, not the politicians, civil servants and academics.

Energy: With a sensible east-west energy policy, Canada would be stable during the difficult economic times ahead, while Alberta would not be shackled to policies set in Washington.

Health Care: Not such an obscure problem. You begin by removing the most obvious barriers: the shortage of doctor, nurses, beds and operating rooms. But you do it fast...

Foreign Policy: Our elites don't want the citizenry at large thinking seriously about foreign policy. After all, they

themselves don't take it seriously.

Foreign Policy in the Arctic: We could try to think of the Scandinavians as real and essential allies.

The North: We undermine our own sovereignty position by presenting Inuit citizens as fragile survivors instead of as the source of Canada's power and legitimacy.

The RCMP: It brings a self-serving form of unnecessary secrecy to every subject.

Canadian business leaders have sold off more than half our manufacturing into foreign hands. Managers managing situations with narrow utilitarian thoughts.

French-Canadian settlers working in the fur trade, Scots who built the Hudson's Bay Company, and British military officers embroiled in war and politics; they were all colonists like few others.

The difference between them and colonials in other parts of the world was that they were encouraged to marry into Aboriginal families. Champlain, for one, had actually ordered it. This wasn't a policy that came from London or Paris. In fact, the capitals abhorred the idea of their colonials "going native." It was a homebred Canadian idea, and the result was survival and improvement.

Aboriginals were a more advanced civilization, given Canadian conditions, more advanced than the newly arrived Europeans. And what they had to share made it possible for the new arrivals to eat well, dress well and live in relative comfort as well as succeed politically. Marrying an aboriginal was, for most Europeans, marrying up.

This continued through early Canadian history, putting aboriginals, and their view that relationships were more important than blood, at the heart of the Canadian power structure in trade, politics and defence.

The ranking British leader on the northern edges of the American colonies was Sir William Johnson. His second wife, Molly Brant of Six Nations aristocracy, gave him enormous influence in the territory at play during the Seven Years' War. He was not alone. The Alberta Lougheeds and Sir James Douglas in British Columbia, to mention a few, were examples of Canadian leaders who were married into aboriginal families.

Soon the country became home to a large growing Métis population. It was also home to aboriginal ideas like "the common bowl." aboriginals found the French and English acceptance of poverty in their midst, frankly, uncivilized. The eventual developments of immigrant rights and services, one-tier health care and public education all grew out of this experience, says Ralston Saul.

When Canada first took shape as a political democracy more than 200 years later, its leaders were able to draw on strengths unknown anywhere else in the world from generations of racial and religious mixing and co-operation.

Canada's French, English and aboriginal pillars firmly supported founding fathers George-Étienne Cartier, John MacDonal, and others when they hammered out their core vision of what they wanted their new country to be. Protestants and Catholics, working together, wanted to be free of British control, but they had visions of an immense fairness that drew on what aboriginals had taught them.

They found an expression of it in their own Judeo-Christian roots, taking as inspiration Psalm 72 because it contained the one idea they believed most essential for Canadian politics. From it came the Canadian motto: "Peace, welfare and good government."

If that's not how you remember it, if you think the Canadian motto is "Peace, *order* and good government," Ralston Saul wants to change this widely accepted notion.

The founding fathers drew from one of the Biblical texts that without equivocation calls for the political leadership to devote its energies to the welfare of its poorest citizens. "May the king judge the poor fairly; may he help the needy and defeat their oppressors," says the Psalm.

When Canada's first democratic government got to sit in Parliament, the first law they passed followed the lead of Psalm 72. They put a tax on the shipping companies, some of the biggest businesses of the time, and used the money to improve the conditions of new immigrants who were given inadequate support after they arrived.

This ethic of social justice, while imperfect in practice, was still unprecedented and became the basis for a new little country in a big land.

Unfortunately, one new wave of immigration arrived in the 19th century that had the opposite but enduring effect on how Canadians regard their past and their present. Among this group were Ralston Saul's own ancestors, the Orangemen.

Protestants from Northern Ireland, they stepped off the boat with a deep hatred of Irish Catholics, which they quickly applied to French-Canadian Catholics and then to the Aboriginal Peoples and any other minority group that appeared to

get in their way. Their harmful influence joined up with the remnants of the old Family Compact, the Chateau clique and a Quebec Catholic hierarchy that defensively embraced a reactionary, ultramontane rigidity.

In a few generations they were able to twist the Canadian political discourse away from its 250-year-old roots and reattach it to the imperial aspirations of Victorian Britain.

When the British Empire faded, says Ralston Saul, the same school of thought sought to make Canada the vassal of the United States.

Ralston Saul has little patience for today's "managerially minded" Canadian leaders, especially those of the past 15 years, who occupy lives "of sedated despair, downsizing their roles into one that is passive and reactive."

In foreign affairs, he is convinced that Canada, which has more foreign service officers in its Ottawa headquarters and fewer embassies and consulates where they are most needed, is a failure. A historical comparison: The date of the unstoppable decline of the British Empire was the year when the number of naval officers in the Admiralty in London overtook the number of officers on ships.

The signs of failure are most evident at the top: Canada has had a new foreign minister every 1.6 of the past 15 years. It can take that long, says Ralston Saul, to learn how to get around the Pearson block without getting lost.

Canada's business leaders whose idea of success is selling a company they don't own to a foreign enterprise also get ranked among the castrati.

For Ralston Saul, "the managerially-minded always fear the past and future." Why else, he says, would they have decided that we must once again be dependent on natural resources for three-quarters of our wealth? Only speculators with no mind for the next generation would allow that to happen in a developed country.

But there is hope even if Canada's "Washington-obsessed" elites have lost touch with the inclusive, complex spirit that brings together aboriginal ethics and the multi-racial contributions of generation after generation of poor and working immigrants who became citizens more rapidly and in greater numbers than in any other country.

Now the aboriginal population, thanks to a higher birth rate, is returning to numbers closer to the days of pre-European contact Canada, which is about two million.

There is a lot of political and journalistic hand-wringing about costs associated with this growth. But, says Ralston Saul, "Our leaders would be better to think of the aboriginal population growth as a remarkable second chance for the country."

"Canada has no model for the world," says Ralston Saul. "But the long Canadian experiment with complexity and fairness have never appeared more modern."

Ralston Saul says he was horrified to learn that many, if not most, of Ottawa's elites don't get to read much more than briefing notes.

Here's the chance to call his bluff by buying and reading a copy of *A Fair Country*. Only good, common good, could come of it.

jim@embassymag.ca

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