

Gauntlet News - Canada's mysterious identity explained

Story by: [Doug Horner](#), Gauntlet News
Story date: Thursday, October 16, 2008

John Ralston Saul is a Canadian intellectual, a prolific author and essayist and very active in many cultural and political organizations around the world. He was recently in Calgary and gave a lecture at the Vertigo Theatre on his new book *A Fair Country, Telling Truths About Canada*.

During his speech, Saul struck emotional chords with his audience because he discussed relevant issues in a manner that elucidates their connection to people. His assessment of the current malaise of the Canadian health care system inspired the most passionate response, as he identified its specific cause and then laid out pragmatic solutions.

A Fair Country describes how Canada developed as a unique place and the distinct mythology that originates from this time. Saul argued the contemporary Canadian elite are incompetent because of their inability to solve problems or even effectively discuss them. He attributed this failure to a colonial mentality that still perceives Canada as a derivative of Europe or the United States.

In an interview with campus radio station CJSW, Saul expressed his hope that the book would instill a stronger sense of Canada as a real and unique place by reconnecting Canadians with an overlooked aspect of their history and mythology. He argued that Canadians are different and that Canada cannot be defined by the traditional model of a nation state.

"We spent 250 years building up something in which the newcomers essentially absorbed what they found here, which was about two million Aboriginals living in very complicated and very powerful civilizations," said Saul. "They gradually fitted in and not simply just in terms of what to eat and what to wear, but in terms of how to deal with other people and how to live in a non-monolithic nation state in which there is no natural majority."

According to Saul, these early years were critical to the development of a mythology that planted the seeds for Canadian concepts such as multiculturalism, peacekeeping, social welfare and egalitarianism. He said that even though the myths are still the guiding principles of Canadians' actions, citizens are no longer consciously aware of them because they were covered over in the late 19th century by a flood of English and Irish immigration and a resurgence of the obsession with imperialism and empire.

"We never removed that stuff that was glued on top of our memory, so all I am trying to do is scrape that away and in doing that I hope I reveal the real basis of our actions," said Saul.

A Fair Country also discusses some of the characters that contributed to the creation of Canada. Sir Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine was the first Prime Minister of a democratic government in Canada and Robert Baldwin was his second in command. In April 1849, an angry mob burnt down the Parliament in Montreal and these leaders reacted by placing the welfare of citizens ahead of the British mandate to preserve order.

"They somehow understood something that no one in the United States, France or Britain could grasp," he said. "This was a very violent time and riots were being put down everywhere by soldiers firing into mobs. These guys in this little colony somehow instinctively understood that they didn't want to divide their society and that if they opened fire they would create a division that would be irreparable."

In a monolithic nation like the U.S. or England, there is a single idea of the state that everyone must

adhere and conform to. Canada, on the other hand, was founded by three different cultural groups, the Aborigines, Anglophones and Francophones, and so allegiance to one single conception of the nation was impossible. Saul argues that because of this unique non-monolithic foundation, leaders like Lafontaine and Baldwin were better equipped to tolerate uncertainty and rebellion.

Saul confessed that he has not been this excited about a project since he wrote Voltaire's Bastards and the reaction to his attempt at unearthing a Canadian mythology has been emotional.

"Right away people have started stopping me in the street and saying, 'You know you are absolutely right, I never quite thought of it that way, but this is it, this is us.' "