

## A 'Métis nation'

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In *A Fair Country*, John Ralston Saul, one of Canada's foremost public intellectuals, does not merely challenge conventional notions of what it means to be a Canadian.

He fires an endless number of thought-salvoes, burns down ivory towers and creates a whole new dimension of discourse.

Saul asserts that Canadians have long been fed a false narrative about their history, their identity and their national character - a narrative that sprang not from the Canadian reality, but from the Canadian ambitions of European powers. He argues that Canada is not a civilization of English or French inspiration, but a "Métis nation." "The Indians were our Greeks - our Athenians, our Spartans," he announces, in one of the book's many striking formulations. By ignoring the "senior founding pillar" of our civilization, he submits, Canadians risk destabilizing the other two, for such unconsciousness results in a recurrent "colonial inferiority complex." Instead of taking risks and creating broad initiatives to solve large-scale problems, our administrative, business, political and intellectual elites exhibit, in Saul's estimation, a crippling passivity, particularly when challenged by "empire." In theme-based chapters that resemble overlapping conversations, Saul plausibly traces key elements of Canadian history, politics and culture to Aboriginal influences. He points out that intermarriage between settlers and Aboriginals was widespread before the 19th century; that such intermarriage was, for political and practical reasons, "marrying up," with the settlers integrating into Aboriginal life; that the pre-eminence of land and Aboriginal themes in Canadian art and literature is not accidental. Most important, he illuminates the previously obscured role played by Aboriginal concepts in major historical events. He describes the Great Peace of Montreal, the gathering in 1701 of 1,300 Aboriginal ambassadors with the leaders of New France, as arguably the "key moment in the creation of the idea of Canada," and notes that its organizing principle was the Aboriginal notion of "eating from a common bowl." "It was here," he continues, "that the indigenous Aboriginal ways of dealing with the other were consciously and broadly adopted as more appropriate than the European." Referring to concepts like Witaskewin ("continually renegotiated peaceful coexistence"), tawatutowie ("harmony achieved through balanced relationships"), and the model of society as an "expanding and mutating circle," Saul effectively demonstrates the relation of such concepts to traits exhibited throughout Canadian history, like the preference for negotiation over war, comfort with social complexity and the ability to absorb immigrants.

This fresh look at the past is the happy part of the book. Saul then proceeds, like the Dickensian ghost, to give us a sombre view of the present. In page after searing page, he argues that, over the past two decades, our elites have betrayed the "constant striving for fairness" that is the truest expression of our Métis nature. Methodically, he underscores our failures with respect to health care, environmental issues, the reduction of poverty and homelessness, the prevention of foreign takeovers and a host of other issues. These failures, Saul emphasizes, are crises of leadership, and occur in spite of large numbers of Canadian innovators, experts and activists in these very fields.

Such elite dysfunction, Saul asserts, arises from an "imperial view of the world": our policymakers are as alienated from the citizenry as those in any colony under foreign rule. As such, they reduce large policy questions to small administrative ones: who pays for what, when and how, and how much. Meanwhile, according to Saul, homeless citizens continue to "decorate" our ventilation grates. He concludes by hinting that our very integrity as a nation is at stake, and presents several bold policy initiatives that would create, in his view, a true "circle of fairness." The main strengths of this work are the high-mindedness of Saul's ideas, the honesty of their expression and the vast knowledge that

accompanies it.

The main weakness is a tendency to make unchallenged assumptions. For example, it is debatable in some quarters whether, as Saul asserts, Canadians "delight" in "our non-monolithic society" and are "doing better than ever at making the emotional adjustments necessary to live together." Furthermore, it could be argued that American society, which similarly boasts Aboriginal beginnings, also manifests concerns with fairness, inclusiveness and tolerance of social complexity. Saul's view that the United States is distinguished from Canada by its relentless focus on the monolithic nation-state, would benefit from a more nuanced examination of the United States's development.

Overall, however, this is that rare work of political thought that, by virtue of its daring, is both thrilling and sobering. One reads it with the even rarer sense that it had to be written.