

IDEAS

Original - and aboriginalNOAH RICHLER
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A FAIR COUNTRY

Telling Truths About Canada,

By John Ralston Saul

Viking Canada, 338 pages, \$34

Print Edition - Section Front

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A plain but telling litmus test of the impact of a new book is whether you find yourself acting by it. Already, having read *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*, John Ralston Saul's argument for Canada as an aboriginal-minded society, I find myself talking more easily about the colonial encumbrance and the influence of first nations on our national consciousness. *A Fair Country* may be wishful thinking; it plays conjurer's tricks with history and, quite deliberately, creates new founding myths. But it is also a brilliant and timely argument about Canada's complex nature and our country's best future course.

What a relief it is to read something so observant about Canada. Here we are in the throes of an election, when ideas about our history and identity should matter enormously, but you will find no such acknowledgment in the discourse of our politicians. They would do well to read this book. They would learn, for instance, that the contempt our governing lot has shown toward the previous idea Canadians had of the country - as a fair, multicultural and peacekeeping one - even as they demonstrate a craven deference toward the military and economic imperatives of the United States, is a symptom of minds still, in effect, colonized.

Saul's "truths about Canada" include a damning exposition of our postcolonial shackles, a detailed historical case for the reversion of our national credo to "peace, welfare and good government," and a condemnation of Canadian business as mediocre, uninspired and wanting. All of these arguments are derived from the core idea of *A Fair Country*, which is that Canada is a polity fashioned in neither the European nor the American mould. Consequently, Saul argues, we should not be imagining ourselves in the tradition of either, but instead recognize the country's distinct nature, born of this land, and the integration, not just interaction, of settler and aboriginal life.

Saul begins by establishing the country's aboriginal pedigree. He makes the case that negotiation and a sense of fairness have guided the country since the days before its modern conception - when, note, the Fathers of Confederation succeeded in making Canada the first country to have parlayed, rather than fought, its way to independence and out of Empire. This is a resounding point, a fundamental truth about Canada that has been dramatically reinforced at critical points in our history: in Lester Pearson's deft resolution of the Suez Crisis

and Pierre Trudeau's patriation of the Constitution; in Quebeckers' reliance (by and large) on the ballot box to achieve their ends; in Thomas Berger's ground-breaking report on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Enquiry, published in 1977, and so on.

We are, Saul says, a complex and not a "monolithic" nation because of this history of negotiation and continual renegotiation. An end goal of fairness, achieved through what Saul calls "minimal impairment," and a recognition of the Other by those who have properly imagined themselves into this country has resulted in a kind of "métissage" of the spirit and a national sensibility that is entirely *sui generis*. In effect, we have been seated for over two centuries within the aboriginal Circle. But, Saul complains, we have not yet developed an appropriate vocabulary to know, discuss or take advantage of these defining aspects of our national character. And so we misrepresent ourselves even to ourselves.

To this end, Saul offers up a few terms for a new lexicon. He speaks of "complexity," "orality" and "*interculturalisme*," and borrows other terms, such as *witaskewin* (describing "how people, not necessarily coming out of the same nation, can live together") from Cree.

The first concept has always applied. A community that relies on negotiation must recognize the Other with respect and hold in balance principles of co-existence that are necessarily more complex than those that simpler, "monolithic" nations entertain. But there are problems with some of the other terms, and with the foray against the corporation that, not for the first time, Saul makes. "Orality" defines first nations historically, and is not just an influence on aboriginal expression but on that of Canadians generally. This was Ted Chamberlin's lucid argument in *If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories?*, an important predecessor to this book.

"Orality," however, is less useful as a culturally defining trait day by day, as most of the properties of the stories, negotiations or deeds we describe as "oral" - their malleability and response to present circumstance, the idea of being reasonable or of statutes not being fixed - can be attributed to written documents just as easily (this country's extraordinary and defining Charter a case in point) and vice versa.

Recognizing first nations' oral accounts of history, and the rights to property that ensued, was Justice Berger's revolutionary act. However, one of the more ironic vindications of Saul's ideas about the vigorous interchange between settler and aboriginal cultures is that oral stories that tended to be folklorically regarded as universal and inclusive are now wielded, with all the bludgeoning force of competing written histories, as proof of difference in the increasing tension between aboriginals and the Canadian government and developers. Also, the legacy of centuries of negotiation between Canadians and their distant governors, from the Hudson's Bay Company through the present day, has taught aboriginals the worst of Empire's bureaucratic bad habits. The fair resolution of land claims may have roots in orality, but acrimony even between first nations is on the rise as aboriginals invent their own company structures and rely on the custom of written deeds. What place does "orality" truly have in these communities now?

Occasionally, Saul's own loyalties get the better of his arguments, as in his effusive praise of the report by Gérard Bouchard and fellow philosopher Charles Taylor on the "reasonable accommodation" of new Canadians in Québec following, among other incidents, the rural town of Herouville's having established, in January, 2007, "rules for immigrants." On the one hand, the news from Herouville was amusing proof of Canada's all-pervasive culture of treaties, negotiations and charters. But on the other, the incident was demonstrably racist, and no amount of Saul's precious extolling of Bouchard and Taylor's coining of the term *interculturalisme* convinces that the report was not another moment of qualified tolerance on the part of Canada's most self-consciously and pro-actively "monolithic" community.

In the assault on corporate Canada that is the book's third section, Saul applies his ideas about citizens still colonized in their minds in order to attack the curtailed ambitions of CEOs in business and industry who are content to be employees and managers (albeit fantastically well-remunerated) rather than Empire builders. The term he relies on inordinately is "elites," vaguely defining groups he blames for everything from the country's mediocre economic performance to our apparently narrow idea of Canadian literature. (These accusations are sometimes comic: Do we really need to have read the almost entirely untranslated work of the Alberta Icelandic farmer, Stephan G. Stephansson, to understand that Canadian literature has many roots?)

Who are these "elites"? Saul's attack on corporate Canada may be scathing, but would be far more effective if we had a better idea of where the buckshot is scattered. Sure, he blasts Conrad Black, not hard to do, but

almost all of the people he actually names are his own "elite" associates or philosopher pals, sometimes to the detriment of his own argument.

Peter Munk is certainly a great social benefactor but, as chairman of Barrick Gold, he is essentially a miner. His industrial accomplishment has been the extraction of wealth and not its creation - and that is the core of the Canadian problem. As much as any of the impediments of having been a colonized society, Canada's problematic legacy is an inordinate dependency on resource extraction that started with the Hudson's Bay Company and continues in the Athabaskan tar sands. Nothing could be more antithetical to the creative economy.

Occasionally, Saul's yearning for Canada as a "Métis nation" stretches credulity. It is hard, for instance, to reconcile Canada's history of residential schools and its ongoing climate of aboriginal poverty, racism and diminished opportunity with the assertion that, a century and a half ago, marrying a native was "marrying up."

And yet, the inversion of attitudes Saul is attempting through his reconfiguring of history is a welcome, necessary step toward Canada's better realization. It is high time that some of our dominant founding myths - such as Canadians being, ever since the days of the United Empire Loyalists, the (cowardly) progeny of people in flight - were revised, and this cannot be done without the telling of a story that, at first listening, shocks. Joseph Boyden, one of the few novelists Saul cites, did this with *Three Day Road*, in which Cree snipers fight alongside other Canadians at Ypres. For any who have read that extraordinary book, it is subsequently impossible to consider either founding story - of the nation formed through Canadians' discovery of each other in the trenches, or of our aboriginal pedigree - in isolation. After Boyden, the two were inextricably intertwined.

A Fair Country is a continuation of this overdue national enterprise. (Novelists, it should be noted, have for years been exploring terrain that Saul, sometimes irritatingly, believes to have occurred previously to no one.) The pity of it is that while Saul offers up a few new words, and his honing of the rarefied distinction to be made between "interculturalism" and "multiculturalism," or 'welfare" and "the good" may clarify the debate in some circles, he offers no policy suggestions at all, and so, frustratingly, leaves Canadians short of a path of action at this most critical time. But we are a Métis nation, certainly, and it has never been so eloquently said.

Noah Richler is the author of This is My Country, What's Yours? A Literary Atlas of Canada.

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