

'It's an auto-castration. We've had some periods where our elites functioned well, but we don't seem able to sustain it.'

JOHN RALSTON SAUL TALKS TO KATE FILLION ABOUT RACISM, OUR 'METIS' CULTURE, AND OUR ELITES' INABILITY TO UNDERSTAND PROBLEMS

Q Your new book, *A Fair Country*, opens with the startling claim that Canada is a Metis civilization, not a European one. What does that mean?

A: You have to put aside the racial idea of the Metis. I'm referring to our way of imagining ourselves, our way of acting and thinking. We believe the roots for what we do come from Europe and, increasingly, the United States. Actually we're much less European than the U.S., which is structured completely out of the Enlightenment and European 19th-century ideas. And we are really the product of the first 250 years of our 400 years as a civilization, the product of experiences between newcomers and Aboriginals, when Aboriginals were either the dominant or equal players, depending on where you were in the country. We are a blend of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, but the driving ideas underneath are the Aboriginal ones.

Q: How is not understanding this, or not agreeing with it, problematic?

A: If you persist in believing that your essential influences are A when they're in fact B, then you're not able to deal with yourself as a country, as a people. You're always grasping for explanations that are based on the wrong source, and that makes it very difficult to reach your potential, because you're slowing yourself up the whole time.

Q: What aspects of Canadian society can we not adequately explain to ourselves?

A: Single-tier health care, for example, or our kind of federalism—when you search for where these things come from, you don't find philosophical, historical or political sources in Europe. And, most interesting, where do we find the explanation for our quite successful approach to immigration and citizenship? Of course there are some difficulties, but how is it that we manage to take in one per cent of the population in a year? How is it that more than 80 per cent of the people who come to Canada become citizens within four to five years, whereas the number in the U.S. is 40 per cent and the European number would be seven or eight per cent, and they're having difficulties? How is it that we're so relaxed about this idea that there's somehow a marriage possible between what people bring and what people become?

Q: Most people would say our comfort stems from Trudeau-era innovations and immigration policies. But are you arguing that it really stems from a tradition going back 400 years, when the Aboriginal peoples more or less welcomed European settlers?

A: That's right. We did not somehow miraculously change overnight in the 1970s. If you take the long view, you see Canada attempting to open up in an egalitarian way much earlier. In fact, the problems we've had—our dark moments, our failures of racism and exclusion, everyone knows the list—came when we tried to apply European approaches. In the late 19th century you have this big arrival of pro-Empire English, and they get their way

in many areas, one of which is a linear, racially based idea of citizenship. But the original idea in the 17th century was this Aboriginal, circular one: non-racial, community-based, family-based, where you have an endless negotiation about how you include people and how you redefine the circle. When you look for the roots of what we did in the 1970s, they all go back to the Aboriginal approach.

Q: Although you say it's another kind of insult to romanticize Aboriginals, your analysis is entirely positive. Do you have any criticisms of the legacy of the First Nations?

A: They were not able to, obviously, work out how to come through the 19th century and deal with us. Their population was destroyed by the diseases [introduced by European settlers], which meant that they lost their ability to continue their negotiation, and they moved from two million to 100,000 in a very short period of time. To have a population literally reduced like that makes it difficult to ask what they did wrong. The classic Western thing is that we're constantly taking an approach to the Aboriginals designed to show that they're not up to it, or they're a problem—all those racist approaches of the 19th century—and now it's, "How sad what's happened to them, and of course it's partly our fault, but how very sad." It's the new way of being racist about Aboriginals.

Q: What are the alternatives?

A: One would be to focus on what we can learn. Think of the Arctic, where our approach to the question of sovereignty continues to

be very European. We base our claim on the silliest of things, the claims of British explorers, which is very dubious since they just came and went and weren't interested in Canada in the least. It also highlights the fact that we aren't really a northern people, if our only claim to the North is through someone like Franklin, who didn't know what to wear, or eat—really, he was just a fool, in Canadian Arctic terms. That way of thinking leads you to the law of the sea, which is a European idea: water separates people, and you basically only own land. In the European tradition, rivers are seen as divisions between peoples. But in the Aboriginal tradition, rivers are seen as the glue, the highway, the linkage between people, not the separation. And that's the history of Canada: our rivers and lakes were our highways. In the Arctic, the Inuit are saying, water and land are the same, they're an unbroken unity. In the winter you travel on the ice because it's the linkage and the easiest way, and in the summer, you move around on the water. We should say, "The real source of Canadian legitimacy and sovereignty in the Arctic is the Inuit, and the Inuit are right to think about water in terms of linkages rather than divisions." We'd have all the environmentalists behind us, we'd be rewriting sovereignty laws in a way that suits a northern country.

Q: So why isn't it happening?

A: Why are we spending taxpayers' money working to find the ship of some British failure who had nothing to do with Canada, as opposed to working on a whole new approach to Arctic sovereignty law based on the Canadians who have been there for thousands of years? When you get down to brass tacks, the issue is that we're not thinking of Inuit as Canadians.

Q: You call the Canadian elites "the Castrati." Who castrated them, and why?

A I think it's an auto-castration, the result, again, of not seeing ourselves in terms of our own reality. We had some strong periods where our elites functioned very well, but we don't seem able to sustain it. We had a very interesting period from the Second World War until the late '70s, in terms of politics, business, talking about ourselves internationally. But we seemed to run out of steam and slip back into a reactive, Euro-American approach. Furthermore, when we do succeed, we don't know how to take credit for our successes and build on them. So virtually no one in the world knows that the anti-land-mines treaty was a Canadian treaty. We were one of the two leaders of the anti-apartheid movement outside of Africa, but at the last minute, the British, French and Americans, who basically sup-

ported apartheid, moved in and took credit for what we worked on, and we didn't know how to grab hold and hang on. The International Criminal Court is basically a Canadian project—nobody knows that.

Q: What are the elites' major policy failures, in your view?

A: There are a lot of problems we've been faced with that are not actually that difficult to deal with, but we've failed to deal with them, and that's a failure of the elites. For example, health care. Our problem was created through a very peculiar social science idea that you could save money by limiting the number of doctors, nurses, beds and operating rooms. It's a cynical suggestion: "The problem isn't that people are sick, but that they think they're sick. Remove the essentials for treating sick people, and they'll go away." The elite has been unable to admit it manufactured the crisis through the political and economic decision to limit the essentials. The problem could've been solved already, quite easily, by putting effort into increasing the number of doctors, nurses, beds and operating rooms. It's almost as simple as that. And if I'm wrong, the way to find out was to see whether by creating a surplus, the waiting lines would disappear. But instead we've had small initiatives, endless studies, and endless discussion of whether we ought to adopt a two-tiered, European approach, without any suggestion of how the European system actually works. Having more people going to the private system does not remove the pressure from the public system, it simply removes the concentration on it.

Q: Failure can't be completely attributed to the elites. What about the electorate?

A: Democracy of course requires strong demands from the public. The public couldn't have been clearer on health care: election after election, they vote in favour of a single-tier system. And the elite comes back and says, "This is terribly complicated," and basically distracts everyone and goes off in another direction. The same thing with poverty. We don't seem to be able to produce an elite that's willing to deal with it.

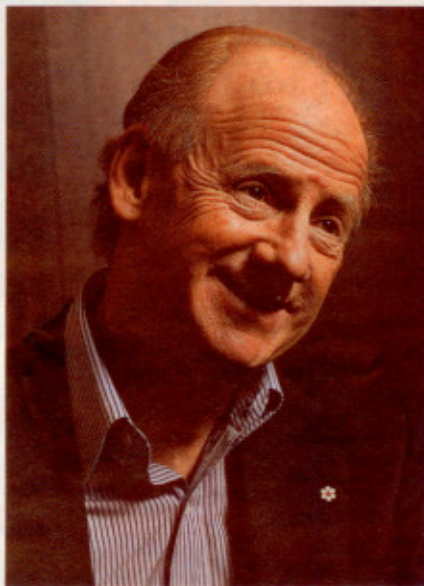
Q: You paint a dismal picture of Canadian economic prospects, mainly because of our reliance on commodities and foreign ownership. If these are such big problems, why are so few people sounding the alarm?

A: After the free trade debates, people felt the issue was finished. I don't know any other country where the elite concluded, "Because we're opening up to more trade, therefore it's naive or protectionist to be concerned about ownership." Every other country thought there was a connection between ownership and wealth creation, that's why they have rules limiting foreign ownership

to a much lower level. In Canada, there's a surprising worship of managerialism versus ownership and wealth creation. There's a real problem in this country with believing that management is the answer to our problems. You know, we just sold a major company to Brazil, and the discourse around it was there was absolutely nothing we could do, this was all part of globalization. Then a few weeks ago, a Canadian company tried to buy a company in Brazil and the Brazilians just said no. Period. There wasn't even a debate.

Q: Is there a parallel between what our business elites are doing in terms of selling off companies to foreign owners, and what the Aboriginal peoples did with the land treaties?

A: If there's a link, it's the lack of a sense that you're actually the elite of a place. Talking to people in other countries, you sense immediately that they understand what their



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responsibility is. Whereas here, there's the sense, "Well, why would we want to own anything? Someone else wants to own it." Am I saying there should be no foreign ownership? No. I'm talking about the desire for risk, desire to own, desire to lead—to be a real business elite, not simply managers and employees. Once you no longer have the ownership, you lose the creative space and the energy, you become a passive rather than active factor. This isn't about patriotism, it's about using the marketplace properly. Really, if you believe in capitalism, why would you want to be an employee? ■