

The gall of Saul

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On July 1, the National Capital Commission estimated that about 460,000 people gathered in Ottawa's core to celebrate the nation. There is no doubt Ottawans and Canadians love their country. The question is: Do they love Ottawa as their capital?

Sadly, the answer is probably no. Years of hearing of unpopular national decisions made by "Ottawa" have tainted the reputation of the city. Many Westerners feel alienated from Ottawa and its central Canadian orientation. Not a few Ontarians just don't care about the city. Some Quebecers are overtly hostile to the capital as a symbol that stands in the way of their nationalist aspirations. Atlantic Canadians are far removed from the city and northerners don't give it a second thought.

Washington, D.C., gets the same level of respect in the United States. There are interests which when they speak of government with distaste, they spit "Washington." Perhaps it's distance or politics or bias, but Washington gets a bad reputation.

You expect this kind of gut reaction from the man on the street in Medicine Hat, less so from the former vice-regal hubby and pop philosopher John Ralston Saul. One would expect less vitriol and more encouragement in his comments on Ottawa given the post entrusted to him by the people of Canada. His choice of tone might be bad judgment but, given his former position, his criticism should be taken seriously.

And, unfortunately, much, not all, of what Mr. Saul says in his new book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada* is right.

Decision-makers in the federal government are not excited about Ottawa, Mr. Saul says. He's correct. Thus you get the national auction of the Portrait Gallery of Canada when it should be located here. We have a fumbling, directionless city council that is lost on urban planning, transit and the environment.

Mr. Saul says the city does not take its bilingual responsibilities seriously, which is probably true. He's correct when he says most politicians and bureaucrats dwell on the superficial. He's probably wrong about our elites being mediocre -- after all Mr. Saul is part of the elite.

Nevertheless, when visitors come to Ottawa, they say it is pretty but you don't hear awe-inspiring. It's not compared favourably to other G8 capitals. It's a nice place to live but a tad short on the uplifting scale.

Ottawa is not a city that inspires and we need our leaders and its citizens to create that place. It should be a shining example of what Canada is and can be, as a nation and as an urban entity. For in a far-flung country of few people and much geography, there needs to be a place that binds us together in spirit. And that place should be Ottawa.