



A call to arms against governing elites

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More of our economy is in foreign hands than that of any developed democracy. One reason is that Canada has perhaps the easiest foreign takeover rules in the world. Another is corporate greed.

The CEO of one of the largest companies, recently sold, when asked off the record how he could have let something of such essential value to the Canadian economy escape, replied: "You don't understand. I made a hundred million."

He was doing nothing illegal, only operating in a system that "overpays managers and sets them up to profit from the selling off and breaking up of the companies they have been hired to run. Instead of rewarding them for creating wealth, the system encourages managers to become personally rich by destroying their companies. This is legalized fraud."

Strong words those, written by John Ralston Saul, one of our leading public intellectuals and author of such global bestsellers as *The Collapse of Globalism*.

His latest book, *A Fair Country – Telling Truths about Canada*, comes amid the current financial crisis triggered by corporate rapacity.

Any Canadian reading the book, or learning about its content, will think of Canada differently and think hard about whom to vote for on Oct. 14.

Foreign takeovers don't really create wealth, Saul says. "The buyer usually uses the wealth of the company to finance his taking control. Often, the buyers use the company like a car in a wrecking yard – they cut it up and sell off the pieces that can make them quick money."

Yet, he says, Canada's political and corporate elites have long argued that "any Canadian interference in the buying and selling of corporations across borders would damage Canada's international position and, in particular, our ability to export products."

The falseness of the warning was proved in April when Ottawa bowed to public outcry and stopped the sale of MacDonald, Dettwiler, maker of Radarsat-2 satellites, to an American corporation. There was no international outcry. Not surprising, given that the U.S. and others guard their own economically strategic assets.

What, then, explains our political and corporate timidity?

Our ruling elite's "insecure, colonial mentality," Saul says.

They see Canada as an American appendage, as their predecessors saw it as Britain's. They are loyal to American military adventures, as their predecessors were to Britain's. It makes them "feel important to be at war in the shadow of a great power. ...

"It is this character weakness that got us into trouble over Maher Arar; caused our refugee rules to be changed to suit Washington; causes our serious newspapers to give more coverage to the Academy Awards than do serious U.S. newspapers; discouraged our elites from leading an interesting public debate on Iraq and anti-terrorism; makes Toronto business people to think that bringing a National Football League team to Toronto from a declining U.S. city is a sign that

Toronto is becoming an important place. The possible effect on the Canadian Football League is of no concern to them."

It is this attitude that's returning Canada to its "assigned role as that of a source of raw materials for the U.S. That's what peripheral colonial societies are for."

The attitude also partly explains our democratic deficit, with the elite rarely delivering what Canadians demand: fix medicare; end child poverty; reduce economic disparity; and maintain an independent foreign policy by keeping a distance, say, from the U.S. way of waging war in Afghanistan.

"This entire pattern I am describing does seem improbable. The insecurity, the self-loathing, the incapacity to act, the fear of owning, the resurgent colonialism. What's all this doing in the oldest, continuous democratic federation in the world – a G8 country, rich, peaceful, comfortable? How could its elite slip so effortlessly back into old colonial habits?"

Haroon Siddiqui's column appears Thursday and Sunday.

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