



LaFontaine and Baldwin

19th century politicians fought for made-in-Canada democracy.

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by Mel Watkins

A new and splendid little book, a genuine gem by John Ralston Saul, may help take your mind off the dreariness of federal politics today, by telling you about little known years of yore when Canadian politics was remarkably creative.

It's part of the Extraordinary Canadians biographical series edited by Saul himself. The title is admittedly not a grabber: *Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin*.

If you haven't heard of these gentlemen, it's not your fault. They are two forgotten Canadian politicians from the middle of the 19th century, a francophone Catholic and an anglophone Protestant who worked together, in defiance of the lords of the British Empire, our own Montreal-based Anglophone elite and the bigots of the Orange Lodge, to create democracy in Canada that was actually Canadian-style.

An eloquent case study that shows Canadians are capable of thinking outside the box of empire — and should try doing it more often.

Saul's resurrection of these two turns out to yield a book that is pure gold for students of Canada. For the big question that Saul requires us to ponder is: how do we go about thinking about Canada, the better to know why we are the way we are, in this place?

This may seem like a silly question asked only by people who think too much. The point is, it matters whether our mind is mostly cluttered with ideas from elsewhere, all too often claiming to be universal but actually imperial.

At the margins of empires and of power — where Canada has always been, and still is — what seem like self-evident truths are really colonial, branch plant, derivative, thinking. To seek indigenous Canadian thinking may seem to risk the parochial. But, in fact, imperial thought imposed colonies as conventional wisdom is the truly parochial thinking.

Saul, who preaches and practices the proper study of Canada better than anyone since the great political economist Harold Innis — who was my own personal guru — has told us this before, notably in his excellent *A Fair Country* a few years ago. Now we have an eloquent case study

that powerfully makes the point that Canadians are capable of thinking outside the box of empire — and maybe should try doing it more often.

Today democracy runs rampant in the Middle East. In the days of LaFontaine and Baldwin the democratic contagion was sweeping the Western world. Far from being backwaters, British colonies, the provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, were at the forefront of the democratic nationalist movement in their insistence on elected legislatures, to which the executive branch of government was responsible.

When the Loyalists came, after the American Revolution of the late 18th century, the British split the old Province of Quebec at the Ottawa River to create the provinces of Upper Canada and Lower Canada. Then, panicked by the Rebellions in both Upper and Lower Canada in the 1830s, Britain created a United Province of Canada in 1841 in an attempt to assimilate the French Canadians.

As Saul argues, the British wanted to create a new country, along the lines of the dominant British and European model — that is, a unilingual state with a single dominant religion. This simplistic and racist model ran totally against the grain of what was needed in Canada.

Saul's new book tells the story of how LaFontaine, as Prime Minister, and Baldwin, his key supporter in the legislature, created in the province of Canada something new under the sun (which, famously, never set on the British Empire).

(Amazingly, on separate occasions, LaFontaine ran and was elected in the anglophone riding of North York in Canada West and Baldwin in the francophone riding of Rimouski in Canada East.)

Rather than the monolithic nation-state, they created a New World state based on diversity and fairness, respectful of the "other". They did it not through violence but by dialogue with, and directions to, the imperial authorities — who were slow and reluctant learners.

Remarkably, LaFontaine and Baldwin talked their way out of an empire. Faced with mob violence led by the anglo elite, culminating in the burning of the Parliament building (then in Montreal), LaFontaine and Baldwin refused to respond with violence. Audaciously, Saul sees them as being of the Gandhi and Mandela mold.

Baldwin and LaFontaine's achievements were the product not of imported thought but of indigenous thought, an historical fact that Canadians need to retrieve and hold on to. That made-in-Canada thought came not from the elites, but in spite of them — the elites who, then as now, were shamelessly pro-imperial. They called on British imperial authorities to deny self-government to the Canadian legislature and, when that failed, proclaimed an Annexation Manifesto, calling on the United States to take over Canada.

The story that Saul tells, and tells so well, is people's history at its best.

While writing in praise of Canada's specificity, Saul is conscious of this country's limitations and of the need for democracy to keep evolving. This book is about French-English relations, but in

A Fair Country he argued powerfully for truly including the First Nations in a diverse Canada. Our elites, as noted, remain what Saul calls "the castrati", with a slight interest in any democracy with depth.

Saul sees Canada for what it is, yet has a striking faith in its capacity to retrieve its roots and to live up to its indigenous potential.

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