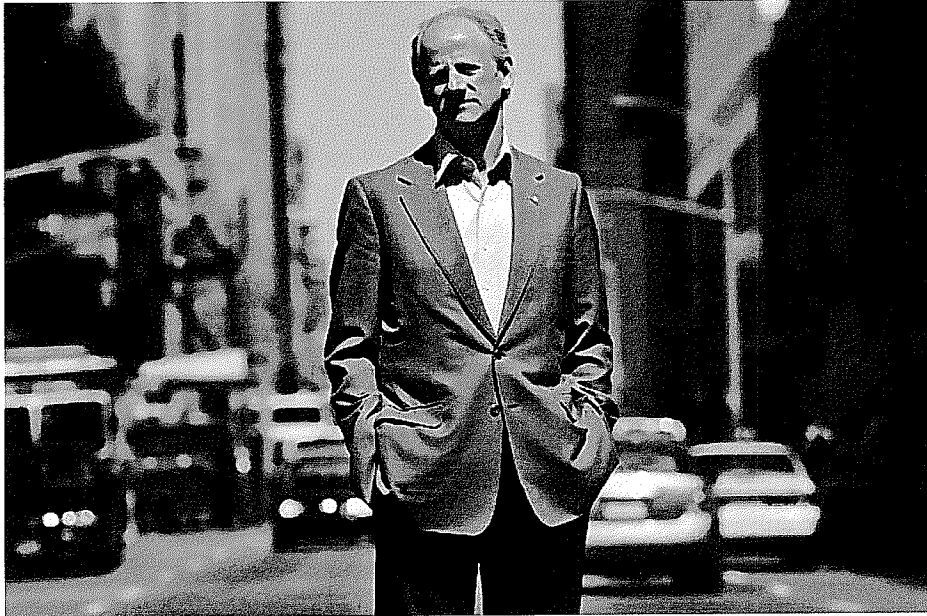


Aboriginal issue 'biggest unresolved, fundamental issue in Canada,' says Saul



The Hill Times photograph by Jake Wright
Author John Ralston Saul says of fixing the relationship with indigenous peoples: 'We have to wake up in the morning one day and say, "Acutally, there's one way to do this," and it's a massive transfer of power and money and immediate action on practical issues.'

By MARK BURGESS | March 9, 2015

Aboriginal issues should be at the centre of the upcoming federal election campaign, author John Ralston Saul says, calling it a matter of justice and ethics and the "single biggest unresolved, fundamental issue in Canada."

"It's a matter of justice. It's a matter of unethical behaviour by our governments and our civil services. It's a matter of the mistreatment of Canadians, both through not carrying out treaties, not respecting the Supreme Court, not respecting the rights of citizens. I think that if we have respect for ourselves, it should be the most important issue of the campaign, as opposed to a fear campaign," said Mr. Saul in an interview.

Mr. Saul's latest book, *The Comeback: How Aboriginals Are Reclaiming Power and Influence*, is a finalist for the 2014 Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing. That prize will be awarded March 11 at the Politics and the Pen gala in Ottawa.

In a phone interview with *The Hill Times*, the PEN International president and author of more than a dozen books, discussed omnibus bills and compared the federal government's response to the perceived threat from terrorists to its lack of movement in dealing with the 1,200 missing and murdered aboriginal women.

Mr. Saul describes *The Comeback* as a kind of 18th-century pamphlet that outlines the state of affairs to non-aboriginals. The comeback in the title is 100 years in the making, from a "terrifyingly low point" in terms of population, legal respect and "civilizational stability" to one of power, influence and creativity, driven by a population of educated and creative aboriginal thinkers.

He makes a comparison to the federal response to French-Canadian nationalism in the 1960s, which resulted in a movement of powers and spending on language and culture programs that he says saved the country.

Now Canadians need to move beyond guilt or sympathy, he says, and tell politicians they will vote based on how parties position themselves on aboriginal issues.

"Obviously if I write a book, I at some level am optimistic that this is possible," he says.

"As a Canadian I have confidence in other Canadians that we can find a way to make this happen. I really can't emphasize enough how the people who have acted with ethical decency and patience in all this are the indigenous people, and given us chance after chance after chance. We have to wake up in the morning one day and say, 'Actually, there's one way to do this,' and it's a massive transfer of power and money, and immediate action on practical issues."

This interview has been edited for style and length.

You open writing about Idle No More, and how the established leadership, both non-aboriginal and aboriginal, as well as the media, the experts "tried without success to shape or control this organic expression of frustration and anger." What do you mean by this?

"The longer this goes on, the more frustrated people become... The formal elected indigenous leadership is limited by its need to deal with the government. If the government doesn't move, they're locked down. What then happens eventually is that it boils over. It just will boil over.

"I think that Idle No More was a very important sign of what's happening and what's coming, and it's not going away. I don't know what the next boiling over will look like. I have absolutely no idea because the government, and the people of Canada, by allowing the government to not act, are creating the frustration which will lead to some kind of boiling over. You don't control that. Sure, one day there's some kind of violence and you'll see government rushing to talk about extremists and all the rest of it, but it will be entirely the product of the failure of leadership in Ottawa.

"That's why when people say, 'Idle No More is over,' they're completely misunderstanding what happened. What happened was you had a kind of very peaceful, very interesting proposal of new voices, new names, new sounds, new ideas coming out, and being patient, yet again, but being insistent. The blockage re-establishes itself. What will those people do next time around? I have no idea."

So it's not a question of what that movement achieved back in the winter of 2012-13 but what it augured?

"It's a process. Well, process is a bad word. This is how it's unfolding. We were offered an opportunity and we failed to rise to the occasion, so then something else is going to happen. It's just going to keep happening. It's not going to stop, it's not going to go away because it hasn't been dealt with.

We've had this sort of meeting about murdered and disappeared aboriginal women. We're told that basically there's no new money. What is it, \$5-million a year for five years for over a thousand people killed? Have you done a comparison with how many Canadians have been killed by terrorists in Canada and how much money's being spent on that? Just do a comparison. Twelve hundred Canadian citizens are killed in what is a pattern. You could call it a form of terrorism, a social terrorism, some sort of social breakdown. You compare that to how much money's being spent in an area where virtually no Canadians have been killed."

What do you attribute the government's refusal to act on that specific request to?

"I have no idea. It's a total mystery to me. I can't imagine why they're not acting. As a Canadian citizen I'm dumbfounded. If the answer is, 'We don't want an inquiry, we want action,' alright, where's the action? The action is not \$5-million a year—a complete absence of real action. This does not make me proud as a citizen."

You're critical of the use of omnibus bills and connected the two from 2012, C-38 and C-45, to Idle No More.

"I said very clearly that... most aboriginals don't see themselves as having been defended by Parliamentary democracy, quite rightly since they haven't been. Nevertheless, in this attack on Parliamentary democracy, the only people to go in the streets and stay in the streets and defend Parliamentary democracy were the indigenous people."

Do you have any ideas about why that was?

"Because they realized that Parliament was being used, misused, to damage two agreements which were solidly in place. It was an enormous step backwards."

Any ideas on why they were the only ones?

"I think Canadians have to ask themselves that question. If they don't believe in Parliament anymore, they should say so and then decide what it is they'd like in its place, because, at this point, Canadians are not standing up for Parliament.

"Again, I simply don't understand why Canadians don't care about their own democratic system. That's why I took the time to lay out the history of omnibus bills and how Parliament works and what the purpose of Parliament is. It's sort of a joke. People are acting as if what matters is whether you can get a vote through. They think that's what responsible government is about, to have a majority in the House. That's not what Parliament is about. You need to have votes from time to time but it's not called a 'Vote-ament.' It's called a Parliament.

"It's about talking. And the reason it's about talking is it's that process of debate which allows governments and oppositions to figure out whether they really disagree and to what extent, but it's also about getting the words into the air so that they spread out into the population, among citizens, in as many ways as possible, so citizens start saying what they think about things.

"You have to take the time. It's not about efficiency and rapidity. It's about taking the time to talk. Dictatorships do efficiency and rapidity. Parliamentary democracy is about taking your time to talk. It's the exact opposite of what we're getting and I think it's a very important detail...."

How has the Harper government performed on aboriginal issues?

"There's been basically no movement, apart from the [residential schools] apology. But the apology was not followed by action. The apology was good. Things like this transparency act on chiefs: it was sold as, 'We are going to find out who's cheating,' as if a lot of people were cheating. As the information gradually came in, frankly, the press played into the hands of those who were driving it by repeating endlessly one or two stories. ... There's a tiny number of the chiefs who could be considered to be paid a lot—a very small number, even smaller than I thought it would be. Did you hear an apology from the department and the government? Did you hear them say, 'Oh, well, isn't this interesting? They're very modest in their payment.' Did you hear the minister stand up and say that? He didn't stand up and say that, didn't stand up and say, 'We thank the chiefs for the incredible contributions that they're making for very little money.' Where was the acceptance of what they had discovered?"

How do you think aboriginal issues will factor into the election campaign in 2015, if at all?

"I don't think I can answer that. I would answer a different question, which is I think it should be the most important issue in the campaign. It's as simple as that. I do think it's the most important issue in Canada. It's the single biggest unresolved, fundamental issue in Canada. It's a matter of justice. It's a matter of unethical behaviour by our governments and our civil services. It's a matter of the mistreatment of Canadians, both through not carrying out treaties, not respecting the Supreme Court, not respecting the rights of citizens. I think that if we have respect for ourselves, it should be the most important issue of the campaign, as opposed to a fear campaign."

How do we get leaders talking about it more than, say, the economy or terrorism?

"I think I have a job, you have a job. My job is I've written this book and I'm going to talk about it, and I go around and I talk about it. It's amazing how many Canadians, an increasing number of Canadians, understand this. They then have to get themselves to the next stage, which is saying to politicians, 'I'll vote against you unless you deal with this.'

"And I think the press have to ask themselves some very, very serious questions about whether they're going to be railroaded into becoming the handmaids of fear or whether they're going to think about the justice in the Canadian state and the people who are treated with injustice. That's a real question of professionalism, I think, for the community of journalists, whatever media you're in."

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