

Saul's Ottawa 'Truths'

In his latest book, leading Canadian intellectual shines light on the failings of our national capital and the people who live here

Paul Gessell

The Ottawa Citizen

Thursday, September 18, 2008

Now that John Ralston Saul has been away from Rideau Hall for three years and safely back in Toronto, he has decided to tell us what he really thinks of Ottawa.

Some won't like what he has to say.

- According to the pop-philosopher husband of former governor general Adrienne Clarkson, the National Capital Commission and municipal government grovelled in a "colonial" mindset by intentionally spreading the "humiliating falsehood" that Queen Victoria, rather than Canadians themselves, picked Ottawa to be the capital.

- The city's decision to block lanes of traffic on streets bordering the U.S. Embassy was a "desecration" of the capital and one more example of a craven colonialism.

- Decision-makers care so little about Ottawa being "a real capital" that condos for "lobbyists" and embassies of "dictatorships" are given pride of place on the ceremonial route.

- The Ottawa that exists beyond federal government institutions ignores its obligations to be the bilingual capital of a bilingual nation.

- Politicians and bureaucrats are uninterested in reading anything more complicated than short briefing notes.

- Generally, the elite of Ottawa and the rest of the country are "mediocre" and wouldn't know a good idea if served one at Tim Hortons.

- Former prime minister Brian Mulroney and the RCMP treated Canada like a "banana republic," one by accepting cash-stuffed envelopes from a German businessman and the other by "throwing" the last federal election by announcing mid-campaign that the governing Liberals were being investigated regarding the possible leak of sensitive budget information on income trusts.

These and many other insults, ruminations and quick-fix solutions to long-standing problems are contained in Mr. Saul's newest book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*. Mr. Saul is often described as one of the leading intellectuals of Canada, in large part because of his internationally celebrated books commenting on contemporary society.

Outside Canada, Mr. Saul is held in high esteem in many European countries, especially France.

The main thesis of *A Fair Country*, published by Viking Canada, is that Canada is really a "Métis civilization." Our natural inclinations, whether in family life, art or military adventures, are to do things the "aboriginal" way, the homegrown way.

but our elites always feel they have to import ideas from Britain, France, the United States or elsewhere. Consequently, we have become a colonial-minded country of anti-intellectual mediocrity.

Ottawa's aforementioned failings constitute part of the evidence Mr. Saul presents in *A Fair Country* to back his thesis. But Ottawa-bashing is only a small part of the book. There is so much more, including a particularly savage attack on Conrad Black, the Canadian entrepreneur turned British lord turned American jailbird.

Lord Black, Mr. Saul argues, was never a real "capitalist" because he never created wealth, only dismantled wealth.

"He has only created one thing -- one newspaper (National Post) -- and even that he couldn't hold on to for more than three years. Apart from that, his career has been largely about stripping corporations. Destroying them. As the most visible voice for Canadian capitalism, he has had a negative effect on how most Canadians imagine the marketplace. In fact, I can't think of anyone who has had a more negative effect on how Canadians think of the market."

Furthermore, Mr. Saul argues, Lord Black made "the ultimate colonial gesture by throwing away his citizenship in order to join an arcane, powerless British institution." He is referring to Lord Black's decision to surrender his Canadian citizenship so he could accept an appointment to Britain's House of Lords.

Some folks might find irony in Mr. Saul's attacks on the supposed colonial mindset of Canadians. Mr. Saul's wife held the ultimate colonial job in Canada from 1999-2005 serving as the Canadian representative of the British-based Queen. Mr. Saul, then known as His Excellency, rode his wife's coattails to cocktail parties around the globe in his role as vice-regal spouse.

In citing our supposed colonial obsession, Mr. Saul makes no mention of life at Rideau Hall, although the book is dedicated to a former governor general, the woman simply named on the dedication page as "Adrienne."

When it comes to queens, Mr. Saul's choicest words are reserved for Victoria, or at least the way she has been presented to us.

Dec. 31, 2007, marked the 150th anniversary of Ottawa being named the capital of Canada. The National Capital Commission and the City of Ottawa staged celebrations last year to mark the occasion. But the celebrations, Mr. Saul charges, were built on "falsehoods" about a "distant and wilful queen."

The choice of Ottawa as capital was made by politicians in Canada, Mr. Saul argues, giving Victoria no option but to go along with them. But NCC and city officials perpetuated the myth, Mr. Saul says, that Victoria chose, to the horror of Canadians, "a remote little city" at the junction of the Ottawa and Rideau rivers.

This myth was perpetuated by NCC documentation about the anniversary to promote tourism and to "grovel in colonial gratitude." The colonial mindset dictates that someone outside the country makes the big decisions, Mr. Saul says. Therefore, a distant Queen had to have chosen Ottawa.

"To misuse your institutional obligations by spending millions of dollars to knit and then wrap a false, kitschy and highly colonial myth around the neck of a serious country is a betrayal of your responsibilities. More important, it is a betrayal of the reality of Canada and its citizens."

Another aspect of grovelling colonialism cited by Mr. Saul occurred after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States when authorities in Ottawa agreed to reduce lanes of traffic on the streets bordering the east and west sides of the American

The move had nothing to do with security, Mr. Saul says, and everything to do with "the weakness" of Canadian authorities.

"It was part of their fear that any non-compliance with a Washington wish might be anti-Americanism. I'm not simply saying that they fear being perceived as anti-American. Much more important they seem to fear that any action, however sensible, which is not actively pro-American, must be anti-American."

One of the streets "desecrated" for the Americans is Sussex Drive. The street has been further "desecrated" by allowing "dictatorships" to erect embassies alongside those of our democratic allies and the homes of the prime minister and governor general. Mr. Saul does not name the allies nor the dictatorships. But here are the names of some countries with Sussex Drive embassies: France, South Africa, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Giving honoured places to dictatorships matters, Mr. Saul writes, because it reflects the widely held notion that "Ottawa isn't a real capital" but a place chosen by a wilful, distant Queen "who knew no better."

Mr. Saul also finds the political elite of Ottawa to be anti-intellectual. He says they only read briefing notes and are afraid "to think and lead" and craft daring policies.

"They act like colonial politicians, afraid to shape events by acting as if they could be at the centre of new ideas."

The bureaucrats are no better. "The colonial mindset always prefers public silence as an expression of loyalty to the compact. And so, the RCMP brings a self-serving form of unnecessary secrecy to every subject. There is no admiration for the discussion of ideas in Ottawa among civil servants. There hasn't been for a quarter-century."

A Fair Country is not Mr. Saul's only provocative book. In 2001, shortly after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S., Mr. Saul produced *On Equilibrium*, a book that took potshots at U.S. President George W. Bush.

Mr. Saul lived in Rideau Hall at the time. The Conservatives, then in opposition, thought a vice-regal spouse had gone too far and pilloried Mr. Saul in the Commons for a few days. And then the controversy disappeared.

This time, debate over Mr. Saul's ideas may last longer. Mr. Saul will be in Ottawa Oct. 19 to discuss his book and to kick off the annual Ottawa International Writers Festival at Library and Archives Canada. The public is invited.