

THE Q&A: JOHN RALSTON SAUL

LaFontaine, Baldwin responsible for implementing foundations of modern Canada

Author John Ralston Saul says Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin laid down the groundwork for the legal system, a professional civil service, bilingualism, and more.

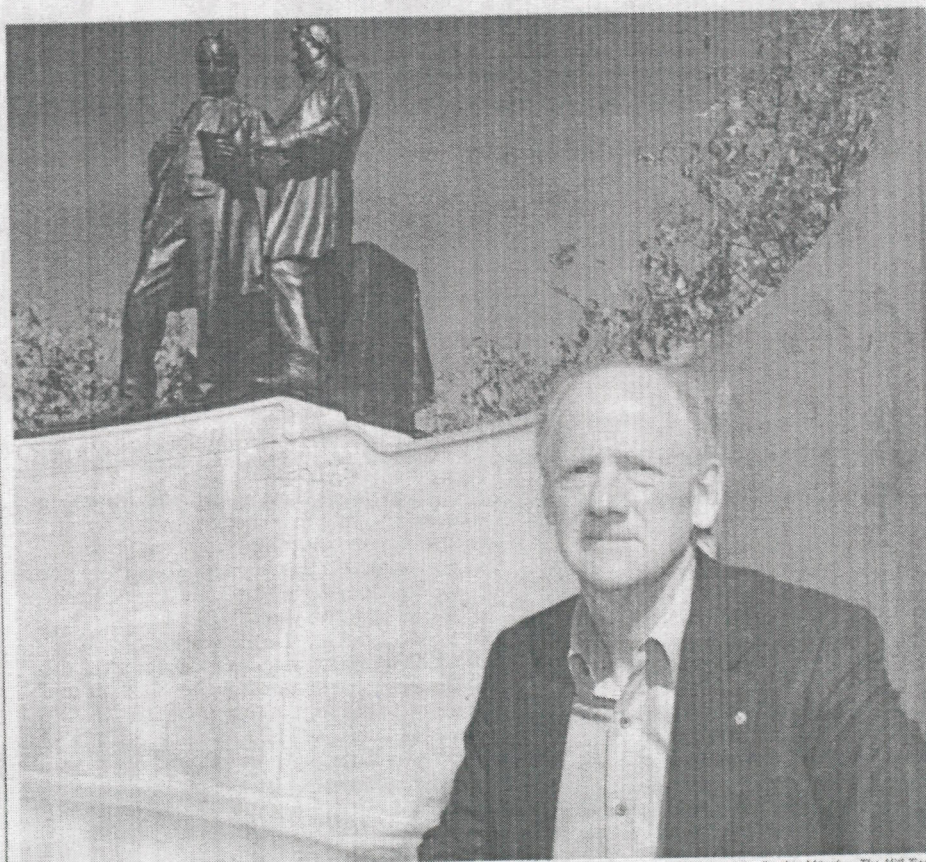
By BEA VONGDOUANGCHANH

Contrary to most of what we've read in Canadian history, John A. Macdonald is not the father of Canada, argues John Ralston Saul. Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin, for three years in the mid-19th century, were the ones who laid the foundations for the best of modern Canada.

"In *A Fair Country*, I argue that we have these aboriginal, Métis roots, and now I'm arguing that the parallel to that on the political side is the great ministry of LaFontaine and Baldwin in the creation of Canada. Those are the two pieces that explain modern Canada at its best as opposed to at its worst," Mr. Saul told *The Hill Times* recently during a stop in Ottawa for the launch of his latest book, *Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine & Robert Baldwin*.

The book is the last in an 18-book series of biographies on Canadians who shaped the country, called *Extraordinary Canadians* by Penguin Canada.

Mr. Saul, the series editor, said LaFontaine and Baldwin were responsible for implementing the foundations of the modern Canadian



Photograph by Cynthia Munster, *The Hill Times*

Here's Johnny: John Ralston Saul says Louis Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin were the first to

You also wrote "the ongoing dramas of Canada, positive and negative, were shaped and energized as if in perpetuity by these two men and their great friendship." What do you mean by this?

"They're not typical or classical politicians, quite shy in many ways. ... They become each other's closest friends and that friendship allows them to discover that you can do politics differently. There's a different kind of loyalty. It's not only about power and interest, it's actually about loyalty to each other and this gives them the courage to for example, in the riots of 1849 to not respond the way the imperial government would've wanted them to respond, with violence ... but to actually invent this new approach of holding back, not opening fire, not jailing people. ... That really lies at the heart of what they did."

Why do you think they chose to go a different route?

"I think ... because there was no possibility of us really being only anglophone. When the crisis came in 1837, there was no simple answer of what to do. You couldn't go down the road that people went down in other places. And, somehow in that confusion—and that drive from the grassroots and that confusion of, 'What are we going to do with the situation because the French Canadians aren't going to disappear?'; 'What do we do?'—a handful of people came up with this new approach. ... They actually invented a new approach toward creating a new nation state. It was very intentional, not accidental, not reactive. It was an intentional invention."

state including the legal system, a professional civil service, bilingualism, and public services such as education and health. They were the first to renounce responding to violence with violence, Mr. Saul said, and they were instrumental in building a united country regardless of race, language or religion. "What lies behind everything they were doing was an egalitarian, inclusive idea of Canada," he said.

Mr. Saul is the author of several best-selling books including *Voltaire's Bastards*, *The Unconscious Civilization*, *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World*, and most recently, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*.

When it comes to why Macdonald is given credit, and not LaFontaine or Baldwin, for Canada's founding, Mr. Saul said it's because there were improper frames that were put to the dominant storylines of the time.

"In the late 19th century, you had really a rewriting of Canadian history. A lot of it was done by academics who came from Britain to basically take positions in our universities. It was the height of the empire. There was a sort of sense that you had to come up with explanations that fit with the dominance of the empire," Mr. Saul said. "There was this atmosphere that things had to somehow fit in with the imperial model and in a way, they rewrote our history to reflect that."

Why did you want to oversee the Extraordinary Canadians series?

"This is a whole other way of describing Canada. You take 20 of the key people in the shaping of the country as it is now, and you get wonderful writers to interpret their lives. When you put it all together you have this sort of portrait of modern Canada."

In your introduction you wrote that "Canada as a democratic federation was structured and first put in place not in 1867, but between 1848 and 1851," with LaFontaine and Baldwin. Why do you say that?

"Because the big change in direction in Canada came with first the coalition that turned into a great friendship between LaFontaine and Baldwin, the realization that Catholics and Protestants could work together, that francophones and anglophones could work together and therefore it might be possible that there could be all sorts of other kinds of people who could work together. In other words, the rejection of the European, U.S., monolithic idea of nation state that is one religion, one language, one race, one mythology. They could be multiples. They invent that in 1840.

"When they come to power in 1848, which is a really tough slog to get there, in three

years, they put through hundreds of laws which change completely the direction of Canada. That is the foundation of the modern state, the whole legal system, professional civil service, bilingualism, anti-violence approaches, municipal democracy, public education, public universities. ... And then, in 1849, with the big riots, not responding to violence with violence, but responding to violence with restraint.

"So they invented modern Canada at its best."

Why do you think Canadians don't see LaFontaine and Baldwin as the founders of Canada? Why is it John A. Macdonald?

"Part of that was this idea that the British wanted to get rid of us, and John Macdonald was the happy receiver of the British disinterest in Canada and that he was of course pro-British and Canada popped out of tin in 1867 as if from nowhere and it was invented. ... If you brought Macdonald and Cartier into this room and said, 'So, how'd you get the ideas? The stuff you got right,' because we can now see what they got

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LaFontaine, Baldwin represent best of Canada

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right and what they got wrong, and they'd say 'Oh, it was very simple, you know, the model was set by LaFontaine and Baldwin and we're just fulfilling that model.' That's what they would say, but of course people like the biographers of Macdonald want to believe that this was our Washington, well, no it wasn't. The basis of our country was put in place in the 1840s, the early 1850s."

What was the most significant or surprising thing you found out about LaFontaine and Baldwin?

"It's a long list actually, but I think the most interesting thing is ... realizing they were real friends and that they were each other's closest friends. ... The second thing was how exciting they were as people, that really Baldwin was driven by a certain extent the unique love affair and tragedy of losing his wife at 25. It's just so central to his life. ...

"And LaFontaine, who was always considered to be cold and distant, and pompous, very difficult person, I suddenly discovered that ... the whole of the political career for which he's famous, he was in physical agony most of the time. He was either in bed, unable to leave the bed because he was in such agony undergoing all sorts of strange treatments [for inflammatory rheumatism], or when he was in public, he was often in agony. So as so often with people who are in physical pain, he withdrew behind a wall. ... And so I suddenly realized that for a century and a half, people have been interpreting LaFontaine as cold and distant, and difficult, whereas in fact he was a man in suffering all the time, physical suffering all the time and with enormous courage was going in public and leading."

How do you think they would feel about Canada now, how it turned out?

"They in many ways represent the best things, so they would be upset about the things that didn't work out. They would think that security was mishandled at the G20 that one should not allow security forces to become dominant in any situation. They should not be setting public policy. They would be very happy to see that bilingualism has worked out relatively well. I think they would be very excited by all the arguments of diversity in Canada ... because they were the kind of people who were interested in opening up and imagining the other."



Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine & Robert Baldwin,
by John Ralston Saul
Penguin Canada
253 pp., \$26.

Going back to what you said about how the two always showed restraint in politics, you said they would've been considered weak at that time. How do you think they would view Canadian politicians today?

"I think you can go through Canadian history and you can see moments when we follow the LaFontaine-Baldwin tradition and show restraint and are very careful and eschew violence and there are other moments when we are clearly slipping in a direction which would be something used more comfortably in Europe or the United States. So I think they would just go on a case by case basis. But they would not be in favour of this idea that order above all, that order comes ahead of citizens' rights. The most important

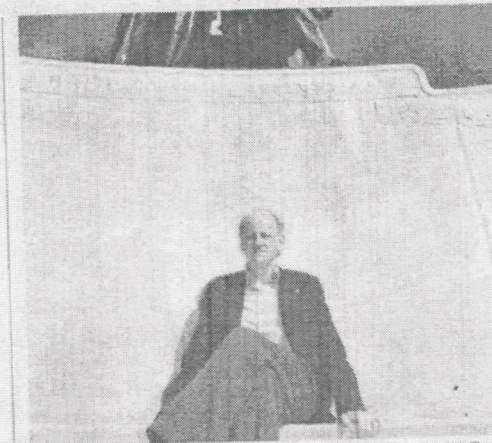
thing for them is the relationship between citizens and not allowing events to divide citizens, even if it means that you are faced by some pretty uncontrollable situations."

How do you think their ideas were able to last in Canada?

"I think because it was invented and it was right for the place. As in every country, you have the interesting forces and the uninteresting forces, the positive and the negative forces so the negative forces here are always attempts at return to colonialism. 'Well, we better do it the way ...,' and then you look to either the United States or Britain or Europe, [and say] we better do it their way. ... That's the colonial history in Canada. ... The whole history of Canada is a tension between the original and intentional project of the great ministry."

Who should read this book and why?

"There are a lot of people who think they know about Canada and really haven't looked at how its history unfolded and I was thrilled by the way people responded to *A Fair Country*. I would have tall Celtic men in their middle ages coming up to me and saying, 'You're absolutely right, we're a Métis country.' And you think, 'Gosh, okay, there's a mindset.' ... So I think in the same way, I hope people will respond to this book by saying, 'So there is a reason why we like ideas like restraint, non-violence, peacekeeping, why we're quite good at the idea of immigration and citizenship. Where does that come from?' Part of it comes from our aboriginal roots, and the other comes from this social and political tradition which LaFontaine and Baldwin are the fathers of, pioneers, the inventors of in a way. It could be read by teenagers, grandmothers, people with a lot of education or not a lot of



Photograph by Cynthia Monstar, The Hill Times

Modern Canada: Author John Ralston Saul, pictured in front of the Baldwin-LaFontaine statues on the Hill, says Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine are Canada's founding fathers.

education. I think it would be good for politicians to read it, but you know, at the end of the day, it's more important that a lot of citizens read it, 'cause they're the people who tell politicians what to do."

Who is your favourite extraordinary Canadian?

"I don't think I have a favourite. You know, what's fascinating for me is that I thought, is the list perfect? No. Are there things missing? Yes. Would I love to do another six to 12 of them? Yes, because there are all sorts of holes that could be filled in, but in the not most perfect world, these 18 books with these 20 characters give you a very good sense of what we've done that's interesting in the country."

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