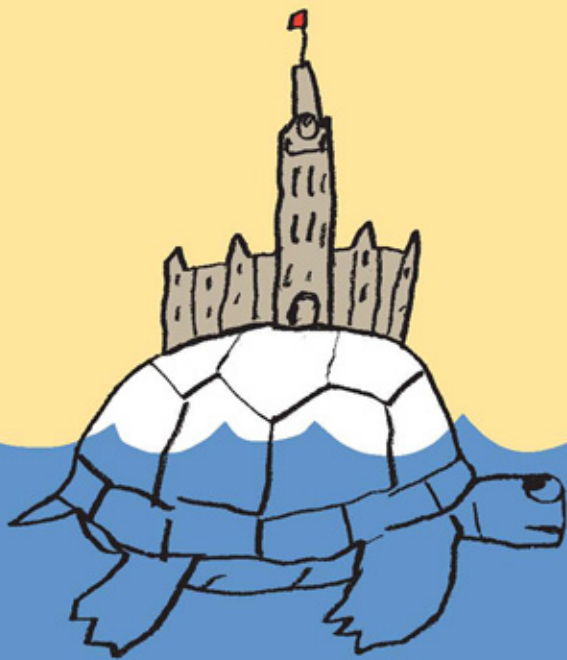


A FAIR COUNTRY

TELLING TRUTHS
ABOUT CANADA



JOHN RALSTON SAUL

THANK GOD FOR JOHN RALSTON SAUL. AT LEAST CANADA HAS ONE LEADING INTELLECTUAL UNAFRAID TO CHALLENGE THE FEEBLE ORTHODOXIES THAT SEEM TO CONSUME OUR ELITES.

DAVID MITCHELL, THE VANCOUVER SUN



What Shaped Us

We are a métis civilization.

What we are today has been inspired as much by four centuries of life with the indigenous civilizations as by four centuries of immigration. Perhaps more. Today we are the outcome of that experience. As have Métis people, Canadians in general have been heavily influenced and shaped by the First Nations. We still are. We increasingly are. This influencing, this shaping is deep within us.

When I dig around in the roots of how we imagine ourselves, how we govern, how we live together in communities—how we treat one another when we are not being stupid—what I find is deeply Aboriginal. Whatever our family tree may look like, our intuitions and common sense as a civilization are more Aboriginal than European or African or Asian, even though we have created elaborate theatrical screens of language, reference and mythology to misrepresent ourselves to ourselves.

Our leaders endlessly mull over our institutional and cultural inheritance from British parliamentary democracy, British and French justice, the Enlightenment, British liberalism, Western individualism with its important variations, U.S. populism, Judeo-Christian moral questioning, Athenian principles of citizenship and democracy, Western European philosophy, Western social democracy, Western capitalism, in particular its U.S. form. Frankly, once you get below the surface, I see very little in the way we use all of these that would ring familiar bells in Britain, France or elsewhere in Europe or in the United States.

Then, as if to offset all of these efforts made to conform intellectually, emotionally and structurally to the Western canon of ideas and actions, we set aside some time to praise ourselves for the great mix of cultures with which we so comfortably live. We point out that our friends and allies around the world are having trouble with similar situations. This talent, we seem to be saying, for living comfortably with diversity, is our particular contribution to Western Civilization. Yet we never seriously asked ourselves how that came to be. After all, if our civilization has been built out of the Western inheritance, how is it that the rest of the West is struggling precisely where we find the challenges quite easy?

Stranger still, in this process of examining our Western inheritance, and vaunting it, there is scarcely a nod, let alone a meaningful nod, in the direction of the First Nations, the Métis, the Inuit. There is no intellectual, ethical or emotional engagement with what their place might be at the core of our civilization. On the single issue of immigration and citizenship diversity, we seem unable to notice the obvious—that it is a non-racial idea of civilization, and non-linear, even non-rational. It is based on the idea of an inclusive circle that expands and gradually adapts as new people join us. This is not a Western or European concept. It comes straight from Aboriginal culture. But then, why bother to invoke the First Nations idea of the circle as a concept of inclusivity when you can fall back on Kant or John Stuart Mill? At best we manage a pro forma phrase about Aboriginals as one of our founding peoples.

Of course, we do worry about their situation from time to time; that is, we feel sympathy for them, particularly their children, some guilt about them, them over there, outside of our lives in small, isolated, unsustainable communities, usually reserves, or the poorest parts of our cities. But then we remind ourselves that these difficulties, even tragedies, are all caught up in complex negotiations involving civil servants and lawyers over money and land—land most of us have never seen, will never see. We are careful not to ask ourselves whether those indigenous people over there want our sympathy or are interested in our guilt. We don't ask ourselves whether sympathy and guilt are appropriate reactions. Of course, the Canadian government was right to apologize in 2008 for the destructive residential school system. It should and could

have done it in the 1980s or 1990s. And Canadians were right to believe that the apology should be made. It was an act of dignity as befits an adult nation. Yet we don't seem to find it odd that non-Aboriginals concentrate, when it comes to Aboriginals, only on what doesn't seem to work, so that we have no idea what or how much does work or how well. As Sandra Laronde of Red Sky Theatre puts it, "We are more than our issues."

Perhaps sympathy and guilt are inappropriate and paternalistic and insulting. Perhaps our sympathy is just a cleaned-up version of the old racist attitudes.

Perhaps those people, those Aboriginals, aren't over there at all because we ourselves are in the same place. Perhaps in some way or many ways, we also are Aboriginal. I don't mean in any legal sense. Perhaps the sympathy and guilt expressed toward Aboriginals are actually signs of non-Aboriginal self-denial—the sort of denial that makes us dysfunctional because we cannot embrace who we are. In colonial terms, this sort of denial is an expression of self-loathing.

And so through a maze of what non-Aboriginals believe to be problems, failures, poverty, communities out of sync with our urban view of ourselves, we see them over there, as we have for a century. We see them insisting on old treaties and bad land, which we forget that we made sure they signed and lived on. And when that land turns out to involve oil or some other wealth, we use every legal and administrative tool available to limit their ability to benefit from it. How could they possibly benefit, being such failures? Lost in this maze we cannot see how much of what we are is them, how much of what we think of as our way, our values, our collective unconscious, is dependent on what we slowly absorbed living with them or near them over the centuries.

Throughout the Western world in the second half of the nineteenth century, middle-class, pew-chained and empire-obsessed civilizations gradually slipped toward the paranoid fears of the twentieth century. Fear of what? Fear of the loss of purity—pure blood, pure race, pure national traits and values and ties. This delusionary indulgence in a purity that had never existed went further in some places than in others. But it flowered everywhere, and gradually, from the late eighteenth

century on, it led to an infantile rewriting of history as one of singular peoples—singular and exceptional. These singular peoples were therefore exempted from ethical principles when it came to dealing with impurity, that is, with people not of their pure clan. Even that proved an impossible challenge, given the reality of racial impurity. And so children of the Enlightenment around the world wrapped themselves in the psycho-sexual pleasures of fear. They turned their back on the central premise of humanist philosophy and set about fearing *the other*, then killing *the other* in a multitude of ways. The mixing of the Enlightenment and nationalism throughout the Western-dominated nineteenth century produced something that swelled like a planetary boil, because a handful of empires dominated everywhere. And then we lanced it in a killing frenzy of two world wars followed by a multitude of localized but equally violent clashes.

Was there a particularity to Canada's participation in this experience? Behind the fears of Protestants versus Catholics, English-speaking versus French-speaking, those who imagined themselves as pink or white versus all of those Ukrainians and Jews and Chinese and Japanese, was there a deeper, unspoken fear? Did those Canadians who had got hold of so much of the country—both physical and mythological—fear above all the possibility of a real *other* whose place this was and in whose shadow they—and eventually we—would have to find our reality? In spite of the posturing and myth manufacturing of those who dominated for approximately one century out of our four, perhaps that real *other*, the Aboriginal, was as present as ever, with us, within us. And were we not so much one of those singular European races, but something quite different? Perhaps *the other* we denied and feared was actually the possibility of becoming something more complex, an integral part of that *other*.

So it is both curious and troubling that we cannot bring ourselves to talk about how profoundly our society has been shaped over four centuries in its non-monolithic, non-European manner by the First Nations. Our immigrant society was fragile, tiny and poor everywhere in Canada until well into the nineteenth century. This was true even of the concentrated older enclaves of francophones and anglophones in the

Maritimes and the Canadas, people who had long before stopped thinking of themselves as immigrants. In some areas it was still fragile late into the nineteenth, even into the twentieth, century. In part because of this reality, the relationship between the First Nations and the immigrants varied from region to region. And so the new Canadians, even those who had been here for two or three centuries, were in different ways still dependent on the First Nations for their survival.

Over the first two hundred and fifty years of settler life in Canada, the newcomers had at best reached the level of partnership with the Aboriginals. New France, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company consciously built their place here on the indigenous ideas of mutual dependency and partnership. The Loyalists were part of that process. In more northerly parts of the country, that general idea of partnership went on well into the twentieth century. In the Arctic, our mixture of dependency and partnership was never completely extinguished. And already the Inuit are more or less back in control.