



A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada

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In this startlingly original vision of Canada, renowned thinker John Ralston Saul argues that Canada is a Métis nation, heavily influenced and shaped by Aboriginal ideas: Egalitarianism, a proper balance between individual and group, and a penchant for negotiation over violence are all Aboriginal values that Canada absorbed. An obstacle to our progress, Saul argues, is that Canada has an increasingly ineffective elite, a colonial non-intellectual business elite that doesn't believe in Canada. It's critical we recognize these aspects of the country in order to rethink its future.

A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada Details

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From Reader Review A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada for online ebook

Emily says

I LOVE the idea of the three founding pillars of Canada-French, English, and Aboriginal. And even if what he has written is total bull, it's a poetic identity for Canada to have, and I think we, as a country, should have a closer relationship with the French, i.e. Quebec, and the thousands of Natives in our 'fair' country.

I also admire the amount of historic research he has done, with finding a wad of records that contain 'peace, welfare, and good government'.

That being said, I am a Canadian searching for my country's identity. Saul has piqued my interest and held my attention for some time with me reading this book dedicatedly. I feel like I need to shout this idea from the mountain tops because far too few Canadians have been exposed to just what Canada actually is. His idea resonated with me and caused an awakening in my search for the Canadian identity. While his idea has left me generally satisfied, it's still not enough for me that most Canadians don't know what their country is...and frankly don't care.

Great read. I suggest it to all Canadians. Heck, I suggest it to everyone, who cares even a little about Canada's past, present and future.

Lupeng Jin says

I really appreciate that the author provided me with a precious chance to learn something about Canada, a country in which I had had no interest. The bilingual culture made this country totally different from any others on the planet. It is seemingly unnecessary to pay attention to it as same as to its great neighbor - the United States of America, but I believe no one dare to look down upon Canada.

Ben Babcock says

My exposure to politics as a child was, like so many things, gradual and haphazard. There were the overt attempts to indoctrinate me into democracy—vague spectres of mock elections in grade six dance in the deep recesses of memory. There more subtle episodes, such as the late-night satirical sketches of *Royal Canadian Air Farce*, where most of the humour would go over my head for years after I started watching. There were the disruptive moments, like that day in grade seven when I came home for lunch and learned that someone had flown a plane into the World Trade Centre. I have a particularly vivid impression of listening to the CBC's broadcast of the BBC World Service late one night the next year, reporters in British accents describing the carpet bombing of Iraq. Slowly, but not gently, my understanding of the world as a political thing was starting to come together. It would be inaccurate to say that my political awakening coincides with September 11, 2001, but it is a useful enough milestone.

I'm kind of Canadian. And I'm proud, for all the complications that come with it, to be Canadian. Yet unlike so many other countries, Canada seems to struggle with its concept of nationhood. It is so common for people to define Canadianness as "not American". And this is true, to the extent that any identity through negation can be true. But it's so woefully inadequate—why don't we have a better identity?

I've moved past the unsophisticated engagement with politics that I had as a child. I am an adult now, and I watch and judge what our leaders do with the harsh, critical eye of adulthood. Stephen Harper stands up and rattles a sabre and makes loud noises about reclaiming Canada's place on the international stage ... and then proceeds to do absolutely nothing of consequence. It's fair to say that since my political awakening—essentially this entire decade and a half of the twenty-first century—Canada's position and influence in the international community has done little but decline. Far from bolstering us as a nation to be respected and listened to, Stephen Harper and the Prime Ministers before him *squandered* the reputation and respect that the leaders of the previous decades spent so long establishing.

In *A Fair Country*, John Ralston Saul sets out to look at what distinguishes Canada from other former British colonies. He wants to see if our history offers any clues as to what type of nation we could be, what philosophies could embody our national identity. Indeed, he goes as far as to argue that Canada is a *métis* nation, in that the values built into our democracy and culture from the start of our nation have been heavily influenced by Aboriginal ways of thinking. From here Saul goes on to describe how lingering colonial tendencies have masked this Aboriginal identity, to the great detriment of Canadian society. Finally, he offers suggestions for how we can acknowledge and reclaim our Aboriginal values.

Saul is helpful enough to offer up the book in four parts, which makes it easy to structure my review. He is not quite so helpful to provide an index, which makes it a lot harder to look back and refer to specific passages.

The first part, "A Métis Civilization" addresses Saul's contention that we are a *métis* nation. That last phrase needs a little unpacking. The key is in the capitalization: *métis* rather than *Métis*. Saul is not invoking directly the cultures and traditions of the Métis people (although they certainly have a bearing on the discussion). Rather, he is using the word *métis* to describe the blending of anglophone/francophone culture with Aboriginal culture. Some critics pan this part of Saul's argument because they look around and scoff at the idea of Aboriginal influence on our culture, given the Canadian government's poor treatment of Aboriginal peoples. I understand their scepticism. But this is also part of Saul's point, which is that Canada has historically developed as a nation of mixed heritages in a way unique from other former colonies—but that this heritage is now under attack from a reactionary revival of colonialism.

Ironically Saul invokes the idea that Canada is not America to support his argument. He points to the differences in how the two countries treated the indigenous population. Prior to the arrival of European settlers, there was no "Canada" or "United States of America"—there was just one vast continent. Yet the French and British governors who first set up shop in what would later become Canada established more fruitful dialogues with indigenous peoples than did the governors of what would be the American colonies. The treatment of Aboriginal peoples by the Canadian government was (and continues, sadly, to be) just as shameful and unforgivable as that of its American counterpart. Yet, and maybe I'm wrong on this, it seems to me that Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture are far more visible and in evidence in Canadian society than in American. There has to be a reason for that.

Even if Saul is incorrect, and facets of Aboriginal culture *aren't* the essential distinguishing characteristic of Canadianness ... shouldn't they be? They certainly shouldn't be *absent* from our national identity. So even if Canada isn't a *métis* nation, we should be.

The other major difference between Canada and our southern neighbour (I like to think of the United States as "Canada's ironic hipster T-shirt") is that the United States *fought* for independence while Canada merely *asked*. All stereotypes aside about Canadians and politeness, and this marks a fundamental divergence in the development of Canada as a nation.

Saul goes on to investigate that development with the second part of *A Fair Country*, “Peace, Fairness and Good Government” (but not, apparently, Oxford commas—the most colonial of all commas!). He makes a lot out of the fact that, back in the day, the fathers of Confederation talked a lot about “peace, welfare and good government” but that the wording morphed into “peace, order and good government” during the negotiations for independence with Britain. But I admit to being somewhat confused about whether this change is important.

On one hand, Saul suggests that the current generation of politicians has gone overboard on its focus on order, to the detriment of public welfare. (One example of the contrary is the 1849 riots and LaFontaine and Baldwin’s decision not to use military force to stop the rioting: “they chose public welfare over public order”. And I couldn’t help but think about Ferguson, Missouri while I read this chapter, and how the opposite is so sadly true these days.) He sees our government as the victim of excessive bureaucratic feature creep, with a layer of civil servants acting as custodians and handlers of increasingly illiterate (and thus ineffectual and impotent) politicians; these civil servants act predominantly and reflexively to preserve their own positions rather than for the greater welfare of society. This is something to which Saul returns with more vigour in the next part of the book.

On the other hand, Saul’s attempt to trace the replacement of “welfare” with “order” seems to suggest that this was little more than a sop to British interests and colonialistas of the time. (I’m coining *colonialista* in the same vein as *fashionista*, as in someone who fancies themselves a supporter of colonialism.) This would then be part of the long line of Canadian tendencies to ignore the written rules and instead obey a series of unwritten rules. By this reasoning, the disappearance of welfare from the slogan is not a big deal.

Part III, “The Castrati”, is an increasingly-terse rant against the “failed elite” who have embraced a neo-colonial mindset in which Canada is constantly sucking up to either Britain or the United States in lieu of acting independently abroad or at home. The title of the part says it all—Saul condemns our leaders mostly for lacking fire, passion, and the guts to do *something* (even if it is the wrong thing). He criticizes their reluctance to spend money and their lack of transparency. I agree with a great deal of his criticism; I’m no fan of the current or recent governments. Yet this part of the book is a dramatic shift in tone from the rational, even-handed approach of the first two parts.

Part IV seems like an attempt to reconcile these two conflicting tones. “An Intentional Civilization” offers three brief, concluding chapters to *A Fair Country* that offset the depressing cavalcade of perceived failures from Part III with a new plea for action and hope. Saul focuses heavily on the North and the prospect of restoring Canada’s international clout, to some degree, by trying to play catch-up with other polar nations that have universities in the North and well-established policies. I can’t speak to any degree about how realistic these ideas might be, but I can agree in principle that the North is neglected and that anything we might do with the North has to be done from a Northern perspective, rather than imposed by we Southern types....

It’s fair to say that *A Fair Country* is what I expected. It’s a meditation on nationhood and identity, part political treatise and part cultural essay. None of it is really all that controversial ... and I think that’s part of the problem. I can see how hard-line conservatives might raise their hackles over Saul’s characterization of the “Family Compact” style of governance that he links to conservative views. But that’s an exception in what is otherwise a very centrist and thus moderate book. It’s good, I suppose, that Saul is making an argument that could be embraced regardless of one’s political leanings. Nevertheless, it lacks the fire and sensationalism that could make it anything more than an academic curiosity attractive to intellectuals like me.

There's also the issue, of course, that this is a book by a privileged white man largely about Aboriginal relations and culture in Canada. Saul is careful to acknowledge his privilege and to include Aboriginal people in his sources. But I think it behoves readers of *A Fair Country* to consider consulting primary sources of Aboriginal information, even if they might not always receive as high a profile as a book by John Ralston Saul. I'll freely admit I've been lacking in pursuing books by Aboriginal authors (feel free to suggest some for me in the comments!). But I can recommend *Feminism FOR REAL*, which includes several Aboriginal authors and viewpoints in its essays.

If, like me, you are interested in Canadian politics and culture and want to question the conventional (and frankly insubstantial) presentation of our history we learn in school, then *A Fair Country* is a good resource. Saul asks interesting, deep questions and raises points that make for good discussion, whether or not you agree. At times he seems to switch gears very quickly, going from academic to polemical in tone without much warning. And even then, he is never quite scathing enough to feel as transgressive as I might like. Canada is a good country sometimes. It could maybe be a great country—it has potential. But a fair country? Not yet. But it's something to strive for, and it's somewhat more important than greatness.

Paul says

If you've long had a sneaking suspicion that you were fed a pack of pos-colonial lies in history class, read this book. If you lament the inability of this countries elites to rise above a servile colonial mindset, read this book. If you have hope that we can, as a nation, remember that we are a wonderfully diverse group of fair-minded, courageous, innovative people, read this book.

Vanessa says

This was excellent. It's written in a somewhat ranty, conversational style - I had the impression of reading a transcript of a lecture - that gives the book a chaotic feel. This is both a strength and a weakness. Main theses: Canadian civilization is based on Aboriginal and Métis concepts of social organization and justice; the Canadian elite are cowardly, weak, wallowing in a colonialist fantasy; Canadians need to reconsider the North and its citizens on its own terms. He also covers economics, sociology, history and myriad other subjects, adding to the feeling of anarchy. It comes together pretty well in the end, though. In particular I recommend chapters 20 ('The Colonial Mind'), 21 ('Two Colonial Tales') and 24 ('The North').

There are some wonderful, brave and original ideas in this inspiring book. I hope lots of Canadians read it.

Todd says

I had to debate on clicking non-fiction or fiction. I'm a fan of John Ralston Saul, this book is very, very interesting and well worth reading. Actually I would think that every Canadian should read it. But, I wasn't convinced that Metis culture has really influenced Canadian culture. If you would like to have delightful

hours of thinking ahead of you, then this is the book to pick up. If you want to have your mind blown and perceptions of the world change, it's more likely that you'll need to read Jared Diamond or Michael Pollan.

KendraLee says

"If you wonder why Canada is able to take more immigrants per capita than any other country and make them full citizens...with quite a bit of success, while other countries stumble over far smaller numbers, the answer is not that we are nicer, smarter...The answer lies, first, in the culture of minorities common among Aboriginals and in their idea of society as an expanding and mutating circle."

"Each time [an Aboriginal language] disappears, the First Nation in question loses access to its culture...I lose access to part of my culture. So do you. A door closes forever on our possible understanding of this place."

A detailed and critical look at Canadian culture, life, policy, business, and government.

Leif says

Great book. The concepts presented by John Saul helped me to intellectualize what previously only my heart felt; that Canadian culture is at conflict with itself (the conscious/subconscious) by not understanding the roots of our national identity.

I feel more frustrated then when I began because while I now have the language think about the problem, how does one influence the elites other than by becoming one? John Saul answers this by briefly saying that he feels coops are a way for ordinary Canadians (non-elites) to take back some power to shape their community and offer a space to those who willing to take risks, lead, and create.

Tasha says

True to form John Ralston Saul gets you thinking about things from a different point of view. For me, this was a challenging read as books of this nature are a deviation from my norm.

There is a bittersweetness to it all - a telling of what Canada could be, maybe even should be - and how the powers that be have altered course on us. Perhaps some day we can forge a path towards this vision of Canada - a farcry from Harperland. Sadly though, not in my lifetime.

Ted Newell says

I was puzzled by this book. I admire the author as public intellectual who had years to gain a privileged view of the country at the side of the then-Governor General. I wait to hear more from him. For now, I was not

persuaded that the founding generations of the country were much influenced by Metis or First Nations thinking. To be frank, an English loyalist Protestant triumphalism dominated, and I say that counting myself as a hopefully chastened later member of the clan. The dominant (thankfully not exclusive) attitude to Native culture was a religious racism later seen in the residential schools catastrophe. I suspect the first generations looked down on the natives. Maybe Saul is not religiously sensitive himself and mislabeled an accommodating trait of Christianity in a context that was plural (Anglican/Catholic/Methodist/etc) from inception. Did I read aright that he implies in the first section that European thinking would be natural in Europe and transformed somehow by the geography when Europeans traveled to the New World? If so, not persuaded. I imagine the old thinking would be transmogrified in the new land and old traditions displaced, as was the case in New England, and begin its unique evolution, but the roots would remain in place. We are still celebrating Christmas though for most folks the religious aspects are, lets say, muted. Many interesting aspects, esp the accommodation of the Supreme Court to First Nations approaches in deciding their cases, orality over literacy, et.c., but the case overall fell short. Open to discussion.

Rob says

(5/10) Okay, here's the thing Canadorks: brainless flag-waving is still brainless flag-waving when that flag has a maple leaf on it. Canadians like to think they aren't very patriotic, which is easy to understand living next to the land of star-spangled fireworks, but really the kind of quiet backhanded aw-shucks patriotism of Canadians is just as insidious as the louder varieties. And here comes John Ralston Saul to try and invent a bigger, Native-er national myth.

To hear Saul tell it, there's something intrinsic in the soil of Canada that makes it tend towards tolerance, co-operation and moderation. Saul says it's the influence of the Aboriginals, who surely influenced the behaviour of Canadian elites greatly while they were shipped away to reservations so we wouldn't have to think about them. This is something of a "no true Scotsman" argument: all progressive elements and moments in Canadian society are taken as evidence of this trend, and all regressive ones are portrayed as the work of a conservative plot to repress Canada's inner nature. It also requires several gymnastic contortions on Saul's part, as he redefines colonization as co-operation and defines the legal concept of the Crown as essentially Aboriginal (seriously). The worst part about it is that it just feeds into the myths most people, Canadian and otherwise, have about Canada: that this tar-sand-pumping, funding-slashing, conservative-electing nation is a social democratic multicultural paradise. Oh, and all of Saul's writing about "the colonial mindset" like he's Franz fucking Fanon also helps to feed the particularly Canadian delusion of being an oppressed underdog instead of a white first-world exploiter nation.

A Fair Country does have its merits: Saul eventually gets around to making some reasonable critiques of our society and provides some interesting, if probably biased, history. In the end he advocates a lot of things I agree with. But this is all skewed by Saul's nationalist capitalist lens and the kind of centrism that comes from a man who timidly suggests that we might have better ogliarchs in between praising the chairman of Power Corp.

To sum up: John Ralston Saul needs to be beaten with a post-colonial theory reader, Canada needs a real left wing, and I'm going off to the jungles to join the Maoists now.

Lucia Iordache says

If you're planning to visit Canada and want to learn more about Canadian history you might find this book interesting. This is not a history book but a social and political philosophy book about the making of Canada. It's not an easy read and if you don't like philosophy or abstract concepts you might not like it. As an immigrant, I've always struggled to find a sense of identity in my adoptive country. I found it interesting to discover that this struggle is perhaps just as present among born Canadians. Saul argues that by refusing to acknowledge the Aboriginal experience of our past we've lost our sense of identity...read more...<http://luciastravels.com/2013/05/29/a...>

Sasha Gronsdahl says

I like JRS's premise--that Canada is a metis civilization, founded on Aboriginal values as much as on European (English/French) ones, and that is why Canada is different from other developed countries in so many ways--but I think it misses the mark on many levels. First, he fails to properly deal with the oppression of Indigenous peoples and the question of their consent. How would First Nations people today feel about this argument that Canada is rooted in Indigenous values? Perhaps it could be seen as appropriation, not complimentary. Second, I think JRS exaggerates the differences between Canada and other countries. Sure, we're "multicultural," but don't fool us, JRS: systemic racism and white superiority have always existed here and still do. Third, the discussion of Canada's elites in the last third of the book feels out of place and doesn't tie in well to the central premise. It feels like JRS just needed a place to rant (eloquently) about Canada's politicians and health care system, but I really missed how that argument complemented his overall idea of a metis civilization. Finally: JRS, please stop using the adjective "Manichean". Get a thesaurus.

William says

I was going to give it only 3 stars because the middle part of the book is quite a rant but I find myself thinking about it constantly. Some authors awaken inside of you truths which were always there but buried. This is such a book.

His thesis is that Canada is in fact a nation founded on 3 pillars - French, English and Aboriginal. We have largely denied the last (and possibly most important) and in doing so have failed to meet many of our greatest challenges. Our current 'elites' have similarly failed to recognize the very things that make us proud to be Canadian and have failed to protect our values. Only slowly are we starting to regain our values of peace, welfare and good government. Stronluy recommended.

Theiant trout says

John Ralston Saul once again has proved that there is a more nuanced and balanced way of defining Canada that sets us apart from most other western states. Our schoolroom history often sweeps over the contributions of the First Nations peoples, which are brought to light with elegant prose by one of Canada's leading thinkers.

Lindsey Pattinson says

This is a book that panders to Nationalist self identity which made me question my own comfort level with this. It connects shared settler and indigenous history in Canada from past to present making sometimes completely new connections and giving proper credit for a current self identity in present Canada formed over time. Although it was sometimes hard to follow, it was a book that changed my perspective and was refreshing. Since reading it, I've read the newer version *The Comeback*, also all of the books referenced in it like poetry by Icelandic Canadian Stephan G Stephansson, Richard Atleo: *Principles of Tsawalk* and plan on reading its newer version.

Catherine says

The beginning of the book goes through Canadian history with an interesting sort of "Aboriginal" lens. Unfortunately, Saul then goes on an extended rant about how "our elites" (a term he never really pins down) have failed us, which feels vague and insufficiently supported. The final section offers some recommendations for how we might think about ourselves as a country and how we might solve some of our more pressing issues. On the whole, the book provides some interesting ideas, but I would have appreciated a more rigorous system of referencing so that I could feel like the examples were coming from somewhere other than Saul's ass.

A.J. says

I think this book should be required reading for all new Canadians. Not least because John Ralston Saul says *such nice things* about new immigrants. And because it makes such a lot of sense. It gets very political in the middle, but the historical perspective on how Canada was forged out of the Aboriginal approach to welcoming the 'other' is absolutely fascinating and I was nodding my head all the way through the early chapters. This man knows his history and has a clear vision of how it can be incorporated in a national vision for the future. Which is unfortunately a lot more than can be said for most of the current crop of leaders of the country.

Darcy says

John Ralston Saul is not an author you quickly read and I must confess, the first time I tried to read this book I gave up after about 100 pages. BUT I knew there was something there I needed to understand and learn. So I opened it again and approached it as if I were in conversation with Saul. Suddenly the pages came to life and I was gobbling up the book. Saul's respect for the First Nations of Canada is profound and inspiring. I love his articulation of Canadian society and how it is rooted in aboriginal engagement--a high place from which we have sadly fallen. He convincingly places the success of Canada's diverse society in the roots of our nation that go back 400 years--well beyond the BNA. His argument that we are fundamentally a metis society--that the subconscious of Canada that drives our engagement with the world is neither European nor American but Aboriginal melded with French and British migration--is as refreshing as it is groundbreaking.

If you read only one book about Canada, make it this one.

Me says

If I were to go on and write on every line Saul provides to the great Canadian public I feel rather dumb daily on how this man appeals. His arguments are all riddled. So much for an intellect, ever Aboriginal person is his brother, why it's quite fair to disagree. It's appalling for "the" representative of Canada on the most donned intellectual is only 70% right most of the time, or all the time. Disappointed, we are all so easily sold on our fantasies. Not cynical or rhetorical or madly negative rather just glad I am thinking. This book took me back to 1997 Siamese Twins, A Triangular reality, you'd think we'd learn.
