

Book Review PDF

John Ralston Saul

Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century

Toronto: Penguin/Viking, 1997

Reviewed by Eleanor Glor

John Ralston Saul's newest book is remarkable, on several counts. Like a verbal tale, like a parable, or The Bible, it keeps going in circles, and coming back to the same point, from a new direction, over and over again. This structure aids, reinforces and creates the point he is making, that Canada is an old country, built on an oral and reform tradition, but with an ongoing conservative, sometimes dissonant, harmony. Canada is a highly nuanced place.

The structure of this book fascinated me. Rather than making one linear, rationalist argument, Saul uses a form more common in oral and fiction traditions. As a novelist and anti-rationalist, as well as an essayist, Saul demonstrates to us one possible non-linear approach to understanding a country whose chief characteristic is complexity(1). Like music that keeps several themes flowing at the same time, he explores all of Canadian history, but draws out the themes in new ways. The conservative theme of historians and philosophers like Desmond Morton, George Grant and Marshall McLuhan is challenged by a new counter-point built on the contributions of Louis-Joseph Papineau, William Lyon McKenzie, Robert Baldwin, Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine, Georges-Etienne Cartier, John A. Macdonald, Clifford Sifton, James Lougheed, J. W. Dafoe, Wilfred Laurier, J. S. Woodsworth, Tommy Douglas, Henry Wood, William Aberhart, John Diefenbaker(2) and many others. They provided the leadership of ideas. The importance of the artistic visions of so many, such as Frank Scott, Northrop Frye, Paul-Emile Borduns, Marie Chouinard and Georges-Emile Lapalme (the only provincial minister of culture who was a person of culture) in conceiving a nation is recounted. Canada has political leaders who write and artists who are politically active. More than most countries, Canada has created national institutions to support creative activities - Radio Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the National Film Board and the funding agency, the Canada Council. Canada is built more than other nations on an oral tradition, on the animist, on the imagination of existence. Listen to Glen Gould, Louis-Edmond Hamelin and Elijah Harper.

This is not to say that the book is argued irrationally. Each theme is argued well. The story told draws out the intention to create a nation based on liberal and socialist values, on the value of the person and the community, and, above all, on the desire to create a nation on the northern half of the North American continent. This nation, built on the pyramid of aboriginal, French and British roots, opens itself to the rest of the world - through its contribution to the Boer, the First and Second World Wars, but also to the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Socialists and Anarchists. Through two centuries, Canada has slowly built one of the first public education systems, a pension system, a health care system, a social safety net - a social framework of collective responsibility.

Like other countries with roots in great empires - including countries of South America and Northern Europe, and like other countries located next door to these empires - nations like Poland and Austria, Canada struggles to maintain its identity and communicate in its own fashion about its own past. Because of this geographic location, at least in part, Canada has produced some of the most important theoreticians and analysts of communication, such as Marshal McLuhan and Harold Innis. Despite the difficulty of creating a nation in a harsh climate, in the shadow of great empires, in a nation which includes more and more cultures, this feat has been accomplished over and over again by Mackenzie and Papineau, Baldwin and Lafontaine, Macdonald and Cartier, Laurier, Lapointe, and Trudeau.

They were engaged in that most complex of public acts - attempting to match imaginative initiative with careful moderation. (p. 340)

But Canada does not celebrate its heroes - if anything its approach is anti-Utopian and anti-heroic. Saul's assertion made me remember the American History Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa: The first tells a story of constant progress, even when it tells the sad tales of Black History, the struggle for women's votes or the Japanese internment during World War II. In Canada the story is told sequentially, with no great sense of accomplishment, just an appreciation of the lives of the people - aboriginals, fishermen and whalers, settlers, Ukrainians - who got us here. And it is told by an aboriginal architect, Harold Cardinal. Look at the way our authors write about us - Hugh MacLennan, Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, Farley Mowat. Even our most famous artists, the Group of Seven, were anti-heroic in their war art. A few sought to introduce a taste for great men - Abbe Groulx and even Donald Creighton, but they were few and of another taste.

When Canada produced political heroes, they tended to be false heroes, basing their rhetoric on negative nationalism; exclusivity of various sorts, grounded in race, language, ethnicity; and the theme of victimization. They were men like W.A.C. Bennett, William Aberhart (yes, he acted differently at different times), Ernest Manning, Howard Ferguson, Mitch Hepburn, Honoré Mercier, and Maurice Duplessis. While I admit my surprise at his conclusion, Saul asserts their equivalents today are, Brian Tobin, Lucien Bouchard, Mike Harris, Ralph Klein and Glen Clark, premiers of five of the provinces. He lumps them together because they are caught up in the arid rhetoric of interest groups and corporate elites, and have abandoned a focus on the public good.

The leaders who were effective and positive in Canada based their appeal on ideas. Most federal leaders dealt in terms of ideas, because of the complexity of Canada. At the provincial level, where anti-heroism was easier, because of the greater ethnic uniformity of provinces, some leaders nevertheless led through ideas. Despite his vulnerability, former Premier of Québec René Lévesque, for example, exercised restraint and maintained his democratic vigour.

Saul's primary criticisms are of Canada's elites, many of which have retained a colonial mindset, looking to Britain or France or the USA for their attitudes and guidance, forgetting the Canadian approach. Their appeals to negative nationalism, victimization, corporatism and neo-conservatism, and their lack of a sense of the public good(s), tolerance and openness poses the core Canadian problem. Exclusivity, inevitability and universality are expressed in the Ultramontane movement, the Orange Order, Social Credit and neo-conservatism. The more

positive aspects of Canadian nationalism are found in its usual centre to centre-left positions focussed on public interests, open to variety and reform, and dependent on legitimacy given by citizens. Saul's story of a complex, open Canadian majority is vitally and boldly told. I recommend it to all those concerned about creating a better country.

1. His building on the oral tradition and references to Harold Innis led me to go back and reread Innis' *The Bias of Communication*, which also emphasizes the great differences between the implications of the oral and written traditions.

2. Papineau and McKenzie were the leaders of the rebellions of 1837 in Lower and Upper Canada respectively, which led to the first responsible government in the British Empire. Baldwin and Lafontaine formed a humanist pact as the first, joint leaders of the newly-amalgamated Upper and Lower Canada ten years later. They created the francophone-anglophone pact to which many Canadians continue to feel committed today. With Macdonald as Prime Minister and Cartier as his leader in Quebec, Cartier and Macdonald formed a partnership to lead the first Canadian government in 1867. Sifton, Lougheed, Dafoe, Wood, Woodsworth and Aberhart, all western leaders, played "an enormous conceptual role" in Canada. Diefenbaker, also a westerner, reimagined the myth of a country which existed beyond the logic of southern, central cities (p. 329).

Also by John Ralston Saul:

Novels:

The Birds of Prey,
Baraka or The Lives, Fortunes and Sacred Honor of Anthony Smith,
The Next Best Thing, The Paradise Eater

Essays:

Voltaire's Bastards,
The Doubter's Companion,
The Unconscious Civilization

About the Author

Eleanor Glor: Eleanor, an executive with Health Canada, organizes The Innovation Salon and is Editor of The Innovation Journal. She is author of a book, a chapter and numerous articles on public sector innovation, and has also published in the fields of public administration, evaluation, health, aging, and disability. She was a member of the selection panel for the first two Association of Public Executives of the Government of Canada (APEX) Innovative Public Service Awards in 1997 and 1998.