

“A Fair Country: Truth or Tall Tale?”

An Evening with John Ralston Saul

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Close to 170 folk joined the Aboriginal Issues Working Group to hear philosopher & essayist John Ralston Saul speak about his ground-breaking book “A Fair Country” (2009).

Herewith some of his comments as noted by your scribe. Most are quotes.

We must relearn our history from a new timeline reflecting the story of First Nations.

Joke: “What do you think of western civilization?” “Nice idea, were it to exist.”

Sympathy and empathy are cheap emotions. What is needed is respect for our aboriginal cousins.

He recommends the conversations on Canada Reads (CBC Radio One) between Stephen Lewis and Wab Kinew. They illustrate the shift which is occurring in Canadian thought. Why can't/don't we settlers recognize that aboriginal leaders know what is best for the country? The world is a knife: we are about to fall on it if we do not listen and change.

The dominant culture worked very hard to carefully destroy Aboriginal culture by banning beliefs and practices at every turn in order to strip power from the indigenous peoples. Why can we not take responsibility? We must grasp the nature of the problems and the positive forces which can ensure we never block another's rights. We need to delete anti-democratic tendencies in favour of true democracy: this is neither charity nor politics.

The concept of being a “Metis nation” encompasses a model of community. With overlapping civilizations coming from an Aboriginal approach to community, ‘citizenship’ means becoming involved with that community. In Europe, thousands died because no one took responsibility, whereas in Canada no one died during heat waves or winter storms because we do check in on our neighbours and offer shelter. We are proud not to be a “melting pot”: we are different and must continue to insist on respecting and nurturing differences from which we learn and enrich each other.

Mr. Ralston Saul read to us from the Memorial of the British Columbia Interior Chiefs (see ubcic.bc.ca) to Prime Minister Sir Wilfred Laurier. Their calling him “Father” was a mark of respect indicating they considered him an Elder, not the patriarch or parent. (This is true of Aboriginal references to Queen Victoria as “Mother.”)

What possible reasoning supports paying 55 cents to educate an Aboriginal child, but \$1.00 for the rest of Canadian children? There are 55 Canadian languages. Let's try to learn at least 3! Or 4.

The colonial approach to higher education needs to change. We have departments for English and for French, which study two EU countries (plus the US). Where is the Canadian department? Aboriginal studies are Canadian studies. History, literature, geography, sociology, archeology, music, culinary and many other subjects are hived off instead of being brought together.

The fact of the governments fighting court cases is instructive. The government has lost almost all the time. The courts have empowered Aboriginals, although they are impoverished. Now, indigenous peoples can just say “NO.” And No again. The economy will begin to listen.

The unfinished and urgent business of the place of Aboriginals, their culture, language and practices, is a matter for every political candidate, every citizen. It is our responsibility, out of respect, to make Aboriginal matters a priority in every election at every level. We must consider “going to the streets” to demand openness and fairness for our communities.

We must immediately settle all treaties. If we keep the money in the North for the North by the North, maybe more people will go to stay. Further, we must urgently settle all monetary and restoration issues, in addition to education both for and about Aboriginals. The issue of preserving and teaching our original languages is also a matter of urgency.

In accepting a gift to PEN International, Mr Ralston Saul observed there are over 800 writers in detention, two politicians, and no economists. 