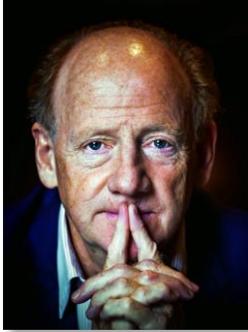


## Does Citizenship = Belonging? Interview with John Ralston Saul



*John Ralston Saul is a Canadian writer, political philosopher, and public intellectual. Saul is most widely known for his writings on the nature of individualism, citizenship and the public good; the failures of manager-led societies; the confusion between leadership and managerialism; military strategy, in particular irregular warfare; the role of freedom of speech and culture; and critiques of the modern economic situation. He is a champion of freedom of expression and was the International President of PEN International, an association of writers. Saul is the co-founder and co-chair of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, a national charity promoting the inclusion of new citizens.*

**Gathering:** Six Degrees Toronto, one of the global gatherings focused on citizenship and belonging (hosted by the Institute for Global Governance, co-founded by Saul)

**Location:** Art Gallery of Ontario, downtown Toronto

**Date:** September 26, 2018

**Event Manifesto:** We, the engaged public find ourselves at a crossroads. We see flawed democracy's, biased media, eroding civic institutions and unjust power structures. We see widespread anger, frustration and division. People are overwhelmed and feel left out. It's 2018, and we no longer know how to engage. This is a critical moment. We need to isolate tool from destruction, revolutionary from demagogue, echo chamber from public forum. We need to reengage and the question, answer the question underlying what it means to be a citizen.

**John, can you say a little bit about the overlap between belonging, citizenship and capitalism. Where are the barriers between those ideas and where do the opportunities lie?**

Well, it's interesting. This question will never go away. It's one of the essential questions. I wrote about it in *The Unconscious Civilization*. One of the greatest PR tricks of the 20th century was to convince people that capitalism was an essential element of democracy. You couldn't have democracy without capitalism. That of course set up social democracy as the loser if you like.

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**In a way, is citizenship the antidote to unfettered capitalism? It's the power in the hands of the collective or the people.**

Well, it's not just that it's the answer. It's the fundamental. Everything else is decoration. Today is a little bit the wallpaper is killing us because we've just been through a half century of pretending that everything was driven by self-interest and the market, a total lie, a complete fabrication made up frankly by third rate economists who were a joke, a joke until the early 1970s when suddenly, power went their way, and suddenly, they were treated seriously.

That's why it's such a shock for people to discover that so much of this stuff that's been treated as godly for half a century really doesn't work at all. There is no example in history of unfettered capitalism functioning in a stable manner. No example in the history of the world. The marketplace has only ever functioned over a prolonged period of time with clear and strict and transparent regulations. It's true of Venice. It's true of early Russia. I mean, there is no example of what's called the invisible hand functioning.

**How do you reconcile the notion of Canadian Citizenship with, for example, thinking about those distinct communities within Canada, let's talk about the indigenous community, with the right to self govern and to have their own self-intrinsic notion of belonging What does that mean? I mean, do you see bringing Indigenous peoples into the fold of state governed citizenship, separate self-governance or do you see kind of a hybrid?**

When I have written to non-indigenous people about the indigenous reality, it's all been about for 300 years, they were running the place or were partners. There was an attempt in the second half of the 19th century to turn us into a European style Westphalian nation state. It's never worked. That's why the celebration of the 150th of Canada was such a disaster.

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Canadians know in their heart of hearts that it doesn't work to do that monolithic patriotism. We know that that without complexity, we would break up or have a civil war. There's lots of room inside this imagination for many things at the same time.

We did a session yesterday with a number of the leading legals, indigenous legal scholars, the new generation. They were talking about, "*This is how you reimagine how to do this.*" It's entirely possible to do all this. You really have to change the constitution. It's all there. It's all doable.

I think, it's far more difficult in Europe. They tried to do the EU. They did the economics. They did the political elite. They did the political administration. The only thing they didn't do is the citizens, because it's not for them to do the citizens and they didn't want the citizens to get involved as citizens in the building of Europe.

They tried to move the national narrative to the continental narrative. They didn't really listen to the pre-Westphalian nation state arguments of Europe as a very interesting entity in which you could have very precise belongings, which could be nation states, but you also had a European belonging, and the citizens were the source of both. They never addressed this question. They never addressed what I

would call the cultural question. The cultural question is not, "I'm going to a party for the launch of some of this play." Culture is a broad idea of how people live with each other. It comes way before economics.

**Can you share one thing from your childhood that led you into doing this mammoth body of work around belonging and citizenship and democracy? What is one thing that rooted you in this clearly your life passion?**

That's a really interesting and difficult question. It's a very strange thing. My father was an army officer who left university like a lot of his buddies, and landed on first wave on D-Day and fought in three fronts just like billions and millions of other people, but he stayed in after the war. He married an English woman, a war bride. 50,000 women came to Canada 12 months after the war. It was one of the most interesting immigration groups to come, all women.

**50,000! I didn't know that.**

It's a fabulous story. Anyway, we moved all over. I was brought up in four provinces. I was brought up in isolated camps. I was brought up in small towns. I was brought up in cities. From the very beginning of my life, I saw Canada in a way that not that many people do in their upbringing, which was the complexity of it. Everybody's in the army. It's one of the first places to be for various reasons.

They have not just anglophones and francophones, but a lot of indigenous people, a lot of immigrants, poor people, rich, some rich people, a lot of people in the middle and just the geography. My whole youth was filled with three years and then you move 4,000 kilometers. I think, it set me up for this idea that I wasn't going to claim that I had the truth because I came from somewhere.

**That's it. Beautifully said.**

Then from there, I expanded outwards and everything. I did confirm that idea that the complexity was what was interesting. The ability of people to live together is to admit that the idea of everybody has multiple personalities. Everybody's complicated. Interesting nation states are complicated. What power has tried to do since the 17th century is to pretend they're simple and to kill people if they get in the way of complexity.

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I remember when I published my first book about Canada because I had already published *Voltaire's Bastards* and *The Unconscious Civilization*. I published a book called *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*. It began by saying the fundamental characteristic of Canada was that it was really, really complicated. At first, people laughed and then they looked really worried, and then they didn't know what to say because it was philosophically the precise opposite of the argument of the Western nation state, the precise opposite of the argument that came out of Britain and France to Canada, and it caused the terrible civil war in Europe and caused the civil war in the United States.

**This seems something we're forgetting in these times where this polarization around so many issues just feels so binary. I mean, have we lost the ability to hold more than one thing to be true, the complexity you're talking about?**

I mean, what I said in *Voltaire's Bastards* was the rise of specialization was a very good thing. I'd rather have a heart surgeon operating on my heart, and not a lung surgeon or whatever. This silo approach of specialist was profoundly anti democratic, because it was held together by ... Well, we'll have some managers to hold all this together and they don't know anything about the market because they're managers. They're public or private sector managers. We came into the '70s completely unprepared for what would happen with democracy and citizenship in this explosion in new technology and people moving around.

It's just got worse and worse, and then we realized we had to deal with a lot of the injustices and the exclusions, which we should, but that's not a reason for isolation. What's so dangerous is you can't fall into the old European Austro-Hungarian argument. The Austro- Hungarian argument is that this is an empire in which there are 50 peoples, and those peoples are pods. They don't really have relationships with each other, and therefore, they are not the source of legitimacy. You see what I mean?

**Yup.**

The European misunderstanding of multiculturalism is they thought it was a modern recreation of the Austro-Hungarian model, all these pods up.

"Oh, you come to church, so the church go over here. Oh, there are the people from Africa. They go there." That isn't what it's about at all. It's about the capacity for complexity and the capacity for citizens, the source of legitimacy, to have multiple personality, multiple identities at the same time, so it's not up to the government or the police to ask, "Are you loyal?"

I'm a source of legitimacy. I get to define whether I'm loyal or not. They don't get to even ask me. I employ them. I'm the owner of the state, and you, and you, and you, and you. They have no right to be defining loyalty. We define loyalty to our complex relationships with each other. Once you look at it that way, which is very sensible and down to earth, you realize that it's entirely possible to build sub-national, national, regional structures which function because people are capable of existing loyally at all those levels.

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**You're hopeful about us making these shifts in the next... whatever amount of time we have left as species?**

Well, I would say exactly two things. The first is that ... Well, three. I've always seen myself as an optimistic pessimist. There's nothing worse than a pessimistic optimist. I mean, that's really bad. That's

suicidal. Secondly, if I thought there was no hope, I wouldn't be spending my life doing what I do. I'd buy a case of whiskey and I'd be on a beach having fun and getting drunk.

**Which has its moments.**

Which has its moments, I love swimming.

**Especially when you've consumed a lot of shots.**

Well, it's a little dangerous. The third thing is that I wasn't alone. People like me started warning really seriously in the '80s and '90s where we were headed. In *Voltaire's Bastards*, I said very clearly that if we don't deal with this, we're going to end up back in negative nationalism at the worst of populism. We're going to see racism back. It's all coming back, and I've just written endlessly saying, "This is what's coming. This is what's coming. This is what's coming," and now it's come because we continued to accept the idea that the market would drive us, that technology would ...

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How can technology drive us? We built it. Technology has neither moral nor ethical characteristics, and the people talking about artificial intelligence are talking nonsense. The basis of the legitimacy that comes from the citizens is a mixture of things including a strong idea of ethics. Can the machine be ethical? I mean, please. It's not about logic, it's not logic.

**No.**

I think that we've failed miserably in the last quarter century, because I'd say the first 25 years, we didn't entirely see it coming. We failed and we're now suffering from that failure. Last comment. I said this when I wrote *The Collapse of Globalism*. I first said it in '99, and then I published it in this big forum in 2005 or 2006.

When you have a collapse, which we had, you then get a vacuum because the system doesn't function anymore. You've got between five and 10 years to get your act together. If you don't, the vacuum is a vacuum. In large, rocks start flying about and something horrible happens.

You become the victim as opposed to putting in place something. We did nothing, and we're suffering the consequences of that. The most interesting thing in all of this is that populism is not a characteristic of the right. No more than nationalism is. That's why I wrote in *The Collapse of Globalism* at the end about positive nationalism and negative nationalism. We know that negative nationalism goes with negative populism. *Positive nationalism* is about the legitimacy of the citizen. It's about engagement. It's about civics. It's about the other empathy and so on, and belonging and responsibility for place.

All of those are indigenous ideas by the way. Everybody has now forgotten, and this is the great failure of the liberal class. It became technocratic and distant from the people. The leaders, they completely

forgot that democracy owns populism as well, that FDR was a populist, the Trudeau was a populist, that Jean Jaures was a populist. The great French socialist was a populist. If you can't really understand where the ideas in power are coming from, and be in a permanent relationship with the people as we say, then you're going to fail.

You're going to hand power to the negative nationalist and the negative populist, which is precisely what's happened so that what you're seeing now is that there was a very sensible argument to be made about how globalization was going to fail from the very beginning, how its premise was not internationalism. Its premise was the shift of power to a small group of people. That was its premise, and because the liberal elites refused to deal with this, Donald Trump is the voice of anti-globalism.

You see, that's what happens when you don't deal with the reality of the power of the citizens and respect for the power of the citizens.

**It strikes me that one of the things, and then we can end on this, that we've forgotten as progressive Canadians, liberal Canadians, those of us wanting to really re-shift the notion of citizenship is that on a skill level, it's a heart project. As you say, it's about relationship. It's about empathy. It's about listening and all those things that I quite frankly think the alt right often does better than we do.**

By abandoning the idea of the needs of the human, we left it to people who are very dishonest about it.

**That's right. I like this line: "By abandoning the idea of the needs of the human, we left it to people who are very dishonest about it." There's something powerful in that, that citizenship offers legitimacy, but it doesn't create space for people to really be themselves fully. And that project, creating an inclusive society, is an ongoing process, and it's a harder struggle. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges of our time.**

**I think one of the requirements of a well-functioning citizenry is psychological literacy-- people developing the capacity to look at themselves and regulate their own emotions and deal with their own wounding. Because if we don't deal with our own struggles and woundedness and pain, then it is very easy to outsource that and place that on the shoulders of another individual, or group in society, which is what we see happening so much today.**

**Thank you for joining us today, John.**

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