

175th Anniversary of Canadian Democracy

John Ralston Saul

**Speaker's Dining Room
233-S West Block**

May 3, 2023

Speaker Rota, Speaker Pro Tempore Ringuette, Députés, Sénateurs, Chief Whiteduck,

On a passé beaucoup de temps sur notre constitution - parce qu'il fallait le faire. Les fédérations sont compliquées.

And a lot of time on policies and politics - that's how democracies function. They take their time. In place of the theoretical efficiencies of authoritarian states, we talk. That does take a lot of time.

Embedded in all of this is the minutia of democracy, which we rightly assume is normal. And we do all of this at a time when anti-democratic and negative-populist forces have been growing. Everywhere. Threatening our democratic comfort for the last quarter-century.

So it is particularly important these days that we remind ourselves continually and out loud of the long line of our democratic standards. By your very function, parliamentarians do that every day.

Il y a l'exercice quotidien de ces standards. Mais il y a aussi la lignée historique qui a rendu tout cela possible.

Le cliché habituel veut qu'on est un pays jeune, récent, inventé en 1867. A new country. In reality Canada is the oldest continuous democratic federation in the world. Agreed, that is a line dense with meaning. So let me repeat it. Canada is the oldest democratic federation in the world. And that fact is true, even without taking into account the much older and varied forms of Indigenous democracies.

What if you remove the word federation? Then Canada is still one of the two or three oldest continuous democracies of any sort.

The key word here is ‘continuous.’ Unbroken for 175 years.

There are other old democracies. But almost all of them have been broken up one or more times by civil war, like our neighbour. Or by coup d’états and dictatorships, as throughout Europe.

Même la Grande-Bretagne est sortie de la violence il y a peu de temps - en 1998. Une guerre civile de 30 ans qui a tué 3 500 citoyens et blessé 47 000. C’était leur deuxième guerre civile du vingtième siècle.

x x x

I often feel we are hesitant to tell our full story in any international context. I’m not sure why. Perhaps because of an old-fashioned narrative which attributed our rise to the adoption of British institutions. But that was a colonial narrative designed to erase any suggestion of Canadian originality.

The reality? A full democracy comes in two parts. First, the power of the citizenry to elect their parliament. Who has the vote?

Nova Scotia and the Canadas had one-man one-vote by the 1830s. Half the population! This included Indigenous people and those women who met the property ownership qualifications. Unfortunately, we regressed and these rights were removed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

And then there was the second characteristic. The power of that parliament to choose and to control the cabinet and prime minister.

Until 1848, we were missing that second half. The voters did not have control over their government through the power of Parliament.

That was the great victory of 1848. The pro-democracy forces described it as ‘Responsible Government’. A boring, technical term, perhaps chosen to avoid frightening the British government.

It had taken twenty years to win that victory - culminating on February 2nd, 1848 in Nova Scotia when Joseph Howe and James Uniacke came to power. I can’t help adding that it was also Howe who laid down the principles of free speech in 1835 in a historic libel trial against the local Family

Compact. In his remarkable defense Howe argued that when it came to governance the questions were clear: “What is right? What is Just? What is for the public good?”

The progress of his party towards full democracy was closely followed in the Canadas. Five weeks later, in Montreal, Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine - a French Canadian Catholic - became Canada’s first real prime minister, with Robert Baldwin - an Anglo-Canadian Anglican - as his number two. It is hard to get our minds around just how unimaginable this mixing of religions and languages was in the nineteenth century.

All of this happened during what is called the ‘democratic spring’ in Europe. Everywhere across that continent emperors and kings fell. Even the Pope had to flee. To flee for his life!

But it didn’t last. Within two years there were a series of countercoups. In the blink of an eye the democracies were all gone. All of them. Overthrown. The autocrats were back.

x x x

The effect on Canada was clear. The Canadian elites and the Orange Order tried very hard to imitate that European counter-revolution.

Over a mere three years in office, Howe, LaFontaine and Baldwin had to manage those terrible threats as they were laying down the foundations of Canadian democracy. This was not a simple matter of power - of winning power. That would have been ephemeral. Much more important, they laid out the principles of Canadian democracy in great detail and won a clear election victory on that basis. They established what Baldwin called “the first principles” of democracy and justice.

C’était une période révolutionnaire. Oui. Une période révolutionnaire canadienne. La Clique du Château et l’Ordre d’Orange se sont révoltés en opposition pendant trois mois. Les émeutes en permanence. Les rues de Montréal en désordre. Ils ont mis le feu au Parlement.

Yet, on the side of the government, it was a peaceful period. The day after the terrible fire, the remains of the Houses of Parliament were still red with cinders. The members were obliged to walk by it because Parliament met at its normal hour that morning, just around the corner in the Bonsecours Market. The Speaker called the House to order on simple wood benches, upstairs in the West Assembly Room. Without a second lost, without acknowledging the violence and burning, Baldwin rose to recommence their legislative work precisely where they had left off the preceding afternoon. As if nothing had happened. The mob could burn down the Parliament building but it

would not be allowed to interfere with the people's democracy. This was the clearest possible rejection of the anti-democratic forces.

A difficult three months followed. But the elected members stayed on their legislative course and avoided the violence running wild in Europe.

I tell you this story - our story - in this 175th year of unbroken democracy - because it reminds us of the deep foundations on which our Parliament stands. Deep and solid. Yet, dependent on constant vigilance. The vigilance of our M.P.s and senators. The vigilance of the citizenry.