

Opening - Ken Kittridge - "A Fair Country" - Session 1

I am pleased that the ACTS committee has chosen to study the role of First Nations Peoples in Canadian Society. I was a high school teacher, keenly interested in history - unfortunately trained to study Canadian history from the victor's viewpoint. Common themes were: English vs French, their compromises, independence from Britain, attaining power over foreign affairs, B&B Commission, multiculturalism, etc. Very rarely was much mentioned about a major pillar in Canada's development - the role of the First Nations Peoples.

I read John Ralston Saul's book, "A Fair Country" about 6 years ago. Most people likely know of him as the husband of then Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson, and not as a brilliant thinker/philosopher.

2 major ideas running through his book are:

- (a) for 250 years First Nations Peoples and Europeans worked as a team respecting each others values.
- (b) the confining of the First Nations Peoples into a reserve system which has caused First Nations Peoples to lose their independence and creativity.

Saul says the relationship with First Nations Peoples must be repaired because:

- (a) the cause is right,
- (b) economically 2/3 to 3/4 of Canada's land area - rich in resources - lies where First Nations Peoples are major players.

A good summary of Saul is that he is challenging us to use our faith-based values (mythos) and encouraging us to more carefully study the evidence (logos). Rather than attempt a summary of Saul's book, I would like to briefly note a few contemporary issues brought out by various media. Perhaps at the study's end, we could consider these.

1. The Idle No More Movement. This illustrates that the First Nations youth are no longer willing to remain a docile people like many of their elders.
2. The Treaty/Reserve System. Many of the obligations have never been adhered to and those in BC are just being negotiated.
 - (a) The Sickness of the Reserves. A summary of an article by Gordon Gibson, author of "A New Look at Canadian Indian Policy" effectively summarizes the sickness issue as follows:
 - (i) Indians were made members of collectives with rights and title belonging to the collective, not the individual.
 - (ii) Ottawa was given responsibility for "Indians and land reserved for the Indians".
 - (iii) 1876 Indian Act confined the Indians in reserves under the tutelage of the Indian Agent.
 - (iv) Statistically, Indians who have "gone to town" do better than those on reserves.
 - (b) Compensation Issue. An example: The Robinson-Huron Treaty Territory involves 30,000 people in 21 First Nations. The chiefs are suing to obtain revenue from the vast resource revenues taken. They have been receiving \$4 per person for 140 years.
3. Recent Supreme Court Rulings:
 - (a) Delgamuukw Ruling (1997). British Columbia ruling granted the First Nation more power in their settlement area with diminishing power the further you got from the settlement.
 - (b) 2014 Ruling. Aboriginal rights extended to wall the areas in the 1997 Ruling.
4. Recent Rejection of the Federal governments First Nations Education Act. (2014) The Act promised an extra \$3 billion as negotiated by Grand Chief Atleo, but was rejected by the chiefs who wanted more.
5. Transparency Act (2014) Legislated open electronic reporting of each Nation's expenditures. There are many examples of misuse of funds.
6. The Assembly of First Nations. It represents 617 Nations. It is headed by an elected Grand Chief as well as elected and hereditary chiefs. Consensus is virtually impossible.
7. The United Church Role/Participation.
 - (a) United Church Observer - April 2013. Extensive coverage of the land ownership issues. "Owning land is a Canadian right - unless you live on a reserve. Now, a first Nation in BC is rewriting the rules. Will property rights for Aboriginals bring prosperity or assimilation?"
 - (b) Alvin Dixon - The Compelling Story of a Residential School Survivor. Alvin Dixon was an activist in the United Church, whose appeal for a public inquiry led in part to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His lifelong regret was the loss of his Native Language. "An apology doesn't return that language to me."