

## Democracy Canadian-style

By [Eric Walberg](#)

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Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*Given [Canada's neo-realpolitik internationally](#), it is no surprise that Canadian domestic affairs are following an identical logic. In the past, Canada appeared to stand apart from such settler colonies as the US and Australia in dealing more fairly with its natives. John Ralston Saul argues for the "originality of the Canadian project", that contained elements of a rejection of the Enlightenment project of Europe/ the US, which was based on secular rationality and liberal revolution. Canada was never a monolithic nation state, but rather based on consensus, incorporating the native philosophy of man as part of nature. Canada's policy of constant immigration furthermore fuelled the need for a multicultural "intercultural" ethic.*

It was never a 'melting pot' and Canadians have always prided themselves on their lack of US-style national chauvinism. (Europe is formally multicultural because of its need for cheap immigrant labor, but old imperial nationalisms live on.)

Saul argues that Canada was 'founded' as a modern nation not in 1867 but in 1701 with the Great Peace of Montreal between New France and 40 First Nations of North America. This treaty, achieved through negotiations according to Native American diplomatic custom, was meant to end ethnic conflicts. From then on, negotiation would trump direct conflict and the French would agree to act as arbiters during conflicts between signatory tribes. The paradigm is a confederation of tribes, consensus, the Aboriginal circle, "eating from a common bowl". The treaty is still valid and recognized as such by the Native American tribes involved.



French Canadians are generally pre-French-revolution immigrant stock. Similarly Anglo-Canadians were against the American revolution (a merchants' revolt against the crown). The downside of this is Canada's enduring colonial mentality, and the constant reassertion of conservative elites (Confederation, Borden, Mulroney, Harper) and kowtowing to the Britain/ US imperial center. (Diefenbaker was the one exception, defying US empire over stationing nuclear weapons on Canadian soil, and he was shafted by US do-gooder JFK and our own do-good Nobel Peacenik Lester Pearson.)

Sadly, this contradiction in Canada's conservative colonial heritage has meant that the thread of continuity from the days when natives counted (it was their land which the whites

wanted to expropriate, albeit peacefully) has now officially snapped, as Bill C-45, and the political and media campaign against the native resistance shows.

Natives face not only official pressure to give up their rights, but they face abuse, even by those who are supposed to protect them. The residential education programs, intended to forcibly assimilate native children by wiping out their languages and traditions and replacing them with modern (or rather 'postmodern') education, was exposed in recent years, even eliciting an official apology from Prime Minister Harper himself. Most recently Canada's national police force stands accused of sexually abusing aboriginal women and girls in British Columbia, Human Rights Watch has revealed.

The Idle No More protest movement, spearheaded by native activists, and joined by other Canadians who are opposed to the Conservatives' agenda, is making alliances with similar groups in the US who are opposed to the neoliberal agenda. At the "Forward on Climate" march in February in Washington DC, Chief Jacqueline Thomas of the Saikuz First Nation warned that the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline will not only threaten indigenous communities living in its path, but the myriad of ecosystems that it will invade (the equivalent of the empire's military invasions around the world). "When we take care of the land, the land [takes] care of us," she pleaded.

#### Canadian pitbull

Harper is counting on Canada's past do-good reputation to see it through in its new, hardnosed role as imperial pitbull. "Canada remains in a very special place in the world. We are the one major developed country that no one thinks has any responsibility for the [financial] crisis. We're the one country in the room everybody would like to be," he boasted at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh in 2009. The other G20 nations "would like to be an advanced developed economy with all the benefits that conveys to its citizens and at the same time not have been the source, or have any of the domestic problems, that created this crisis. We also have no history of colonialism. So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers but none of the things that threaten or bother them."

Harper should read a less tendentious history book. Canada is the colonial success story par excellence, and continues to be. In most colonies (for example, India), a small number of Europeans ruled over much larger Indigenous populations. In order to make profits from a colony, Europeans needed the labor of the people they had conquered to amass profit.

Colonialism in Canada was different. Here it took the form of settler colonialism (other states with this type of colonialism include the USA, Australia and Israel). "Settler colonialism took place where European settlers settled permanently on Indigenous lands, aggressively seized those lands from Indigenous peoples and eventually greatly outnumbered Indigenous populations," writes analyst David Camfield. It destroyed the organic cultures that grew out of relationships with those lands, and, ultimately, eliminating those Indigenous societies.

What's left of the natives, with their very different way of life, ended up tangled up in the legal system, desperately them trying to keep their original treaties alive, though these treaties, with their many vague loop-holes, have in any case proved threadbare over time. And watch out for retribution. Native spokesperson Cindy Blackstock, who has spent more than five years trying to hold Ottawa accountable for a funding gap on the welfare of aboriginal children on reserves, found herself hounded by government surveillance intended

to discredit her, as recently confirmed by a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal statement.

Similarly, (white) Canadians who run afoul of the neocolonial role Canada plays abroad have been burned. Gary Peters, an Australian national based in Canada, was found complicit in “crimes against humanity”, and Cyndy Vanier — of involvement in organized crime and falsification of documents, for helping deposed Libyan president Gaddafi’s son, Saadi Gaddafi, flee Libya in 2011.

Canada has graduated as the consummate colonial success story, and has now moved smoothly into its postmodern role as ‘supporter of human rights’ — not by promoting disinterested NGOs and providing lots of funding, but via invasion, exploitation and/or subterfuge at home and abroad. This should come as no surprise, where the indicator for success in economics and politics is not fairness and consensus, but profit and engineered majority-rule.

Canada’s own democratic traditions have been trampled time and again by Harper, who prorogued Parliament twice, becoming the first prime minister ever to be found guilty of contempt of parliament, and flagrantly ignores freedom of speech by muzzling senior bureaucrats, withholding and altering documents, and launching personal attacks on whistleblowers. There is an ongoing investigation into voting fraud perpetrated by the Conservatives in the last election.

That this reality continues to be touted as Canada’s success story is a sorry commentary on our postmodern reality, where truth is in the eyes of the beholder, and public opinion is in any case shaped by ‘them that controls the words’.

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the

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