THERE'S ETHICAL SOLIDITY IN THIS COUNTRY

An exchange — **John Ralston Saul** and **Haroon Siddiqui**

Haroon Siddiqui: Do you hold hope for Canada in the sea of trouble in the United States and Europe? We are not immune to those forces.

John Ralston Saul: I do have hope; otherwise I wouldn't bother. I'd just go to the beach with a bottle of whisky and get drunk and swim.

I think the return of Indigenous people is a very important factor. It grounds us in thousands of years – all of us. And the more powerful Indigenous people are, frankly, the better it will be for the rest of us. We have gradually managed to weed out, bit by bit, the various aspects of institutional racism. Forty years ago, Jews weren't allowed to belong to clubs — at McGill, there were only a certain number of spots for Jews. I mean, just think about this – this was after the Second World War!

Siddiqui: "No Jews need apply…"

Saul: All that stuff…

Siddiqui: …no Irish, either.

Saul: No Irish, either! We have done away with the Protestant-Catholic thing, which was a terrible division. The Orange Order and the right wing of the Catholic Church did everything they could to fight each other, because they wanted it to be like Europe, they wanted to feel at home. But we dealt with a lot of that. Doesn't mean it can't come back – in another form.

Siddiqui: We've managed well. Ours is a model that works relatively better than anybody else's.

Saul: Yes, there's a comfort in Canadian cities that's quite remarkable. Foreign visitors to Canada say, 'The atmosphere here is so relaxed!' What they mean by 'relaxed' is relaxed between races. They can't quite figure out how it functions – neither can we. We're succeeding in many ways now, but I think Canadians don't realize how much hard work it entailed and entails.

Siddiqui: Except that the consensus we had developed post-Charter and post-multiculturalism, post even the 1990s economic troubles, that consensus began to break down post-9/11, especially with respect to Muslims. Now it's gone well beyond fear of terrorism. It's a cultural warfare against Muslims, and also against women's empowerment, against gay rights, which Trump stokes.

We see parallels to the 1930s.

Saul: But I thought it was absolutely wonderful that when the incident happened the other day in Edmonton (where a Muslim was accused of stabbing a police officer and plowing a van into pedestrians in Edmonton), it was the Muslim organizations that immediately came forward and said, "We will organize all the public ceremonies," "We're taking over the public ceremonies…"

Siddiqui: There's a counter-argument – it's good PR on the

part of Muslims who are learning to do it, but why should they have to do it in the first place?

Saul: No, you're missing the point.

Siddiqui: We don't expect whites to do this when white murderers go out and do their killings.

Saul: But doing good is a very important thing, doing the right thing. I don't want to say you have to be seen to be doing good, that's not what I mean – people have to understand that you are part of the doing good. And when you have so many forces – coming from the United States and so on, and talk radio going the other way, you do have to stand up and be there, otherwise those people will control the language and the public agenda.

That's not what I would like, but that's the reality of public debate. It's one thing to stand up apologetically, [and another] to say, "We're taking over here, we're doing it – you can follow us."

That changes it completely. It's a bit like the Aboriginal movement, Idle No More (2012-13), which was a real turning point in the history of Canada. Those kids, those Indigenous kids said that wrong was being done. They were the only people in this country who got up in the middle of the winter, when the Harper government was doing evil – evil – against the parliamentary system through those omnibus bills. They were the only people who got up in the middle of the winter and for several months stood out there and said, "We will not allow this to pass."

Thousands of young people, who would not stand up for O Canada, who would not say they are Canadian citizens, actually saved the dignity of the country. We're a much better place because they did it. That's called ethics.

Siddiqui: More power to them. But equally, we have a public discourse that has become venomous, far less civil than it used to be in my lifetime.

Saul: That's because you're too young. The history of democracy is vicious and full of violent debate. The 19th century was appallingly vicious and violent.

Siddiqui: You want us to be compared to the 19th century?

Saul: All I'm saying is, the new methods of communication have permitted us to go back to the kind of debates we had in the 19th century.

The viciousness that we're getting in social media may have two aspects to it: one is that social media is very, very new. There's a side to it that's profoundly irresponsible. Worse than some of the racism, which you can kind of shut off, is the pornography. I think the effect of that pornography on this new generation – and I'm not being conservative when I say this – stuffing the heads of 12-to-18-year-olds with sexual images that are not possible in the real world. People are only just starting to write about that effect — what does it mean to people.

Siddiqui: And it's all being done in the name of free speech.

Saul: Yes. But that's the complexity. As the Chinese say on their good days, "Short periods of time are short periods of time." You do have to get through them.

Siddiqui: Is there hope for Canada?

Saul: I think that there's solidity in the country, which we perhaps have never had. And when I say solidity, I mean there's an ethical solidity, which is really quite interesting. We didn't have a civil war and kill 700,000 people as in the United States. We didn't have a coup d'état, etc.

We have a lot of experience with trying to work out what it is that we're going to do. If you've been trying to be a democracy, officially since 1848, with 50-60 years of struggle before that — and on top of that a long experience before that of Indigenous democracy, which had an enormous influence on settlers, the incredible influence of Indigenous ways of making decisions, humanist ways of making decisions — all that influence on French-Canadians, on Scots, on people in the Prairies, on the Hudson's Bay Company, the Métis Nation, all the rest of it, you have to say there's a line there. And if you can start eliminating some of the worst things you're carrying with you, like the racisms, we start to get back to these thousands of years of Indigenous ways.