

John Ralston Saul vs. the Ivory Tower

One of Canada's best-known thinkers is a relentless critic of our university system

BY: JEREMY NELSON

WINNIPEG (CUP) — It speaks to John Ralston Saul's talent as an author and speaker that almost everyone has a hard time finding an appropriate label for him.

More prolific than most writers, more open-minded than most academics and more effective than most activists, Saul has been called everything from a public intellectual to a great political thinker.

But after spending a couple hours in discussion with the man, as 20 University of Manitoba students did last month, you get the sense he'd probably prefer to skip the accolades and simply be labelled something less dramatic — namely, a good citizen.

As he fielded questions from students during a recent visit to the U of M, the author of best-selling books including *Voltaire's Bastards* and *The Unconscious Civilization* tore into modern academia and the problems with post-secondary education.

He also urged students to foster debate on campus.

"The university is where there is the time and opportunity to think about ideas," Saul told students. "This is where the elite is — I don't know if you think about yourself as that, but you are the elite. You have obligations and one of them is to make sure that your knowledge is used to provoke debate, not close it down, because if it doesn't happen here, then it's not going to happen in government or businesses."

Saul, who completed his PhD at King's College in London, Ont., said that even 30 years ago universities were becoming more inward looking and elitist.

He also criticized universities for isolating different fields of study and concentrating on methodology instead of content.

Saul, who has published a dozen books and done hundreds of speaking engagements around the globe, has spoken in front of more than 27,000 Canadians in the last year alone.

"I'm attempting to revive 2,500 year old tradition tied to democracy, philosophy and the individual," he said.

"That tradition says that books

are fine, text is fine, but public debate, citizens coming together is where in the end most of the decisions are made."

Saul has thrown a diverse lot of ideas into the public debate over the last two decades, but has generally focused democracy and been critical of anything that attempts to deny citizens their right to influence the direction their society will take.

Universities have played a key role in shutting down debate by continually telling citizens that everything from unemployment to globalization is inevitable, Saul said.

When members of the elite tell society everything is inevitable, citizens believe they have no role to play and cut themselves off from politics and debate.

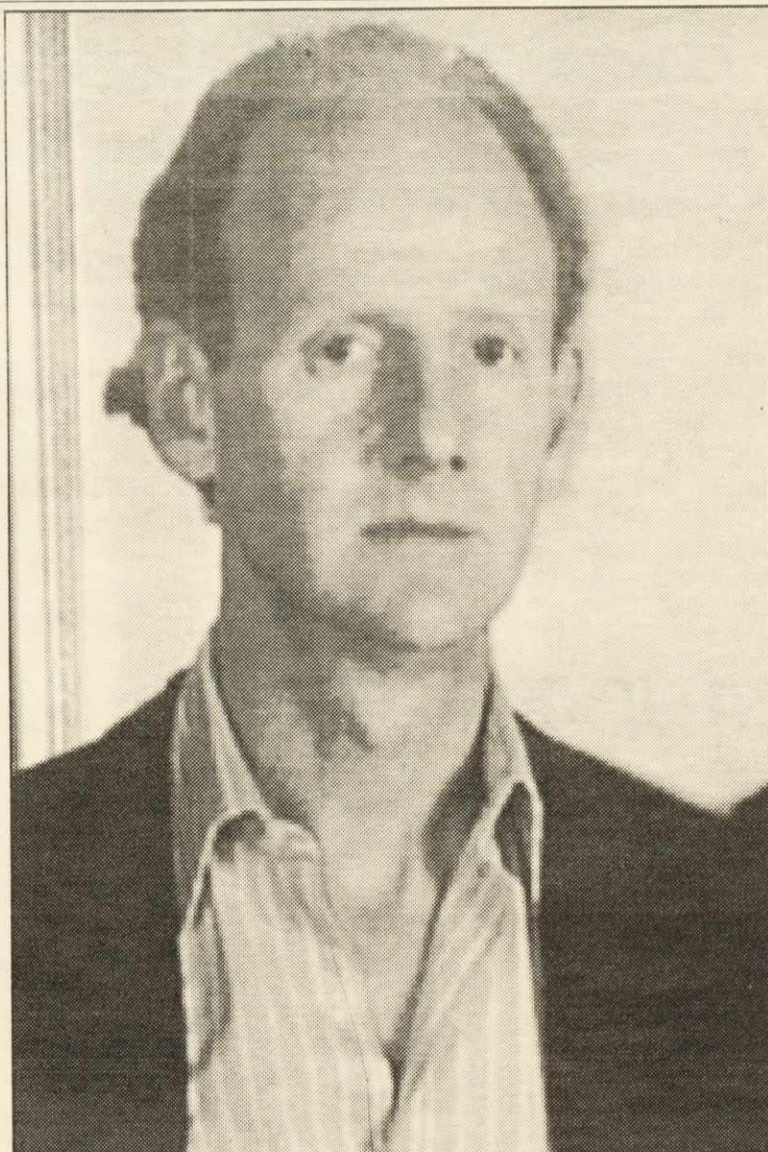
"We have a real problem inside the universities and the intellectual community and that problem is contributing to very seriously to the despair in the citizenry," Saul said.

"In other words one of the real obligations of people like you and me is to be feeding the debate, not killing it. When you're looking at why there is disaffection between citizens and politicians, begin with the fact that there is disaffection between citizens and their universities."

According to Saul, universities have shut down debate in a number of ways, including the compartmentalization of education.

Instead of allowing academic disciplines to learn from one another and contribute to a wider understanding, they have staked out their territory and thrown up walls in the form of language and methods that are completely impenetrable to the outsider. The message this sends, says Saul, is that you cannot participate in the debate unless you are an expert — and even then, you're only allowed to debate issues within your area of specialty.

"We're clearly not following the humanist approach, which is a sort of integral view of human intelligence putting together things.



Our education system is based on the taking apart of things and the isolating of smaller and smaller elements of knowledge."

Just as damaging, Saul added, is how management and social science fields have made false idols out of efficiency and management.

"What is the proper way to proceed when you are faced with a problem?" he asked rhetorically.

"First we identify reality — even dogs can do that. Then we have a debate... After a debate it's not difficult to make a decision because we've got five or six things in front of us and all we have to do is pick one to try for a while. And then, having made a decision, then you have to manage it and try to make it efficient. Those are the third and fourth most important steps and we've been elevating them to the primary level."

Worse yet, many other faculties have been cutting their cloth to teach management of art, or literature or science, instead of teaching those subjects themselves.

"The origin of the word management comes from a French word for housekeeping," Saul said. "Have we come this many years only to decide that the most important part of human intelligence is housekeeping?"

The reasons why people feel cynical and passive in the face of major problems is that society has been reduced to efficiency, management and inevitability.

In the face of complex problems, however, the way to go is remarkably simple: If the citizens and their universities can cast aside the notion of efficiency and demand their leaders debate policy instead of managing it, then society can begin to move in a more constructive direction. Debates will reveal ways to tackle even the most seemingly impossible problems he said; all that is missing is the political will to engage in them.

"I think that we have — and Canadians are perhaps somewhat worse than others — slipped into thinking of ourselves as helpless. And yet in many ways, it's never been so easy to realize that we can take power and make some changes. These people who say everything is inevitable have been in power for a quarter of a century and they have blown it. They look like fools."

As for where change should start, Saul impressed upon students and professors their crucial role as catalysts for a long overdue discussion.

"There are very few professors who go outside of academia and use clear language to engage in public debate," he said. "There is debate going on inside the universities but they are not communicating to the larger citizenry. So in effect they're losing sight of their special responsibility to force the pace of communication in society."

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