THE MÉTIS PEOPLE: AN INCONVENIENT NATION

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THE BIRTH OF A NATION IN THE HEART OF A CONTINENT

It's safe to say that from the birth of our Nation to its attempted assimilation, the Métis people have proven inconvenient to a succession of would-be colonial masters. For the Hudson's Bay Company, the remote British rulers, the fledgling Canadian Government and the Anglo-Protestant settlers – we have been in the way.

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But we have remained – we have persisted. Despite the energy that went into defeating, scattering, or ignoring us, there has never been a time where there wasn't a Métis Nation. Since our inception, there has never been a time when that Nation was not political.

And that's the heart of what makes us inconvenient.

In order to understand this, some history needs to be examined.

Thomas Douglas, 5th Earl of Selkirk, had established a pattern of buying land in North America, including Prince Edward Island and Baldoon in Upper Canada for displaced Scottish farmers to settle, when he set his sights on the Red River Colony as another ideal location. At this time, several Indigenous peoples

◂ Ernest J Hutchins, *Main Street 1871*, 1970. Image Courtesy of University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

of the Northwest called the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers home – the Ojibwe, the Cree and of course, the Métis Nation. None of the Indigenous people were consulted on the decision.

There were periods of cooperation, help and mutually beneficial arrangements between the settlers from the east and the Indigenous peoples. However, the colonial insistence on importing and imposing British law into the Indigenous territories persisted. The Métis people grew increasingly restive under the colonial laws attempting to control land allocation, resources and trading activity.

While Brian Mulroney might have had the most publicized battle for free trade in Canadian history[1], the Métis people can lay claim to the first of such battles. Though the Métis Nation existed prior, it is generally agreed that our political consciousness as a Nation was realized at the 1816 Battle of Frog Plain – also known as Battle of Seven Oaks.[2]

The Battle of Seven Oaks was a clear victory for the Métis Nation, demonstrating that attempts to impose laws from the east – colonial laws – that harmed the Métis peoples' right to live, trade, settle and profit were simply not sustainable. The Métis Nation was too strong, too resilient, and too independent to be controlled.

It was during this battle the Nation's flag was unfurled, giving notice to any and all comers that the Métis Nation was alive and well on the prairies. *La nouvelle nation*, or the new nation, as the Métis called themselves in 1816, had demonstrated the collective consciousness required to meet the definition of a Nation.

That Nation was going to need its collective will over the ensuing two hundred years, because The Battle of Seven Oaks was not the last battle the Métis people would face.

THE PRICE PAID FOR POLITICS

In 1870, the Manitoba Act[3] was negotiated by Louis Riel and his emissary Father Joseph-Noël Ritchot. It was then ratified by the Métis Provisional Government, an entity that also happened to be the first Indigenous and first Métis-led government, making Louis Riel the first premier of Manitoba.

The foundations of the Act were derived from a list of rights developed by Louis Riel and the Convention of 40[4] and through democratic and widespread discussion among the Métis of the Red River Settlement.

This was the beginning of the province of Manitoba, meant to protect the Métis peoples' rights from the wave of settlers from the east. The Act specifically said that all lands held in the custom of the country

1 Policy Options, How free trade came to Canada: lessons in policy analysis.

2 The Canadian Encyclopedia, Battle of Seven Oaks.

3 The Manitoba Act, 1870.

4 Reconstituted Debates of the Convention of Forty/La Grande Convention, 1870.

by Métis people prior to 1870 would be formally granted under the new Canadian laws. Section 31 of the Act specifically outlined that 1.4 million acres of land were to be allocated to Métis children and heads of families.

But in the end, the Canadian Government used the Act against the Métis people and successfully drove them away from the land they had been born to and that was rightfully theirs. Stripped of their land by the outright thievery of the Canadian Government and their representatives, Métis people were forced to find other places to live.

Thus, began the exodus of the Métis people from the heart of their Homeland. Some ended up living in ramshackle houses on road allowances – land destined to be roadways.[5] Some followed Louis Riel south to Montana, or Minnesota and North Dakota. Others went north. Still others, the majority, went further west and settled in our harvesting territories and beyond. Nowhere is there evidence of our people going east and receiving any support from kin in the eastern provinces, largely because there weren't any Métis settlements in eastern Ontario and beyond.

Some who moved further west were still prepared to fight for their place in Canada's Confederation and called on Louis Riel to once again return to protect the Nation's families and Homeland from eastern settlers. Many of those were participants in the Battle of Batoche[6], the culmination of the Northwest Resistance. With just 300 Métis fighters facing off against thousands of British soldiers, many of whom were Orangemen from Ontario, this was the last and worst defeat of the early Métis Nation.

Even those who avoided battle did not escape hardship. Cut off from family and other members of the Métis Nation, following the diminishing buffalo herds, the Métis people continued to suffer losses. Excommunicated and treated like expats in the nation they created, many nation members, including children, died from the hardships.

After 1870 and the reign of terror[7] faced by the Métis people, many did more than walk away from Red River and their promised land settlements. Fearing persecution, those who could hide, did so. They hid their identity for fear of the wrath of the Orangemen and for fear of retaliation by the government of the day. Many either allowed or actively encouraged others to think of them as French-Canadians.[8]

It took years to even begin repairing and restoring the culture of the Métis Nation.

Today, I'm proud to say we've had successes. Be it with harvesting laws, sharing our culture, investing in Métis education, building housing and economic

5 Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada, Road Allowance People.

6 The Canadian Encyclopedia, Batoche.

7 The Reign of Terror Against the Métis of Red River.

8 Podcast, Hiding in Plain Sight: The Métis Nation.

strength, we are seeing the beginnings of prosperity for our Nation. We're seeing a resurgence of our Nation, and the possibility of regaining the greatness we once had.

But success can come at a cost. People outside of the Homeland are looking at what we have with great interest, hungry to exploit us – again.

BECOMING CONVENIENT – ANOTHER THREAT FROM THE EAST

It is clear that the Métis Nation of 1816, with its new flag and its great vigour, recognized it was going to have to protect the Métis People, our government, our culture and the existence of our Nation. Even then, we knew we were going to have to fight to keep what was ours by tradition, heritage and birthright.

> *We must seek to preserve the existence of our own people. We must not by our own act allow ourselves to be swamped. If the day comes when that is done, it must be by no act of ours.* -Louis Riel, 1870[9]

It's important to know that there is no blood quantum involved in defining who is Métis. It is not on the concept of race that the Métis Nation stands – what unites us is our heritage, our connection to our Homeland, our culture, our common purpose and our shared feeling of responsibility to right the wrongs done to our ancestors. By all the universal indicators of a Nation – shared land, laws and language – the Métis Nation existed in the 18th century and remains today.

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The 2013 Supreme Court of Canada *MMF v. Canada* decision[10] was a landmark in revealing our Métis history and helping to establish a renewed nation-to-nation relationship between the Métis Nation and Canada. The subsequent 2016 *MMF – Canada Framework Agreement for Advancing Reconciliation*[11] is the expression of the new approach. We are now renewing the partnership with negotiations for self-government and for land claims. Together, we will take steps to right the wrongs and finally begin to build a pathway to reconciliation.

But there is a rising movement in the eastern provinces of Canada, starting in Ontario – people with mixed heritage attempting to identify as Métis. This identification is based on having one or more Indigenous ancestors, but no ties to the Métis Homeland.

9 Reconstituted Debates of the Convention of Forty/La Grande Convention, 1870.

10 Thomas R. Berger, Q.C. – The Manitoba Métis Decision and the Uses of History.

11 Framework Agreement for Advancing Reconciliation.

Perhaps these newcomers looking to align themselves with the Métis Nation are interested in the economic benefits that are suddenly attached to citizenship. Perhaps they see an avenue to political power. Or perhaps, like many in today's world of increasingly visible and divisive community lines, they are simply seeking a sense of belonging – seeking it and in doing so, appropriating the identity of others.

Whatever their plight, they are not Métis Nation. We defend against them to preserve our Nation here in in the west. This is our Homeland, where we were born. We have no other home.

Even so, we Métis are a tiny portion of the population in the prairies. Canadians with mixed heritage may number in the millions. Given these odds, it wouldn't take long for Louis Riel's people to be overtaken and swallowed up in a larger pan-Aboriginal entity under the guise of a new Métis Nation. Everything we know, everything we stand for and believe in, the things our ancestors sacrificed for, could be in jeopardy. This is precisely what was hoped for by John A. Macdonald when he wrote that the Métis "[...] will be altogether swamped by the influx of strangers who will go in with the idea of becoming industrious and peaceable settlers."[12]

How can the people in eastern Ontario now declaring themselves to be Métis claim the heritage of Louis Riel's people? Can they own the suffering and the persecution of the reign of terror and the resulting violence and condemnation? Can they walk the land and know that they are in a place where the soil is stained by the blood and suffering of the Métis Nation?

Will we continue to be sentenced to a role of convenience or inconvenience by external forces? Or will we finally be recognized as a full participant in Canada's Confederation, as a distinct nation with distinct characteristics and identity?

Time will tell.

But I, like Louis Riel and the other defenders of our Nation, will not stand idly by and let those external forces steal our fate. We are the Métis people, the people who own themselves. Like the prairie flowers that are echoed in our beadwork, resilient to and grown in this challenging land, the Métis people will continue to stand and withstand on the prairies, as we have for more than 200 years.

12 Thomas R. Berger, Q.C. – The Manitoba Métis Decision and the Uses of History.