THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF LOUIS RIEL AND JOHN NORQUAY

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Louis Riel and John Norquay: bright, articulate, ready to lead, able to command. These two children of Assiniboia won the attention and the affection of their people.[1] They had much in common. Both were descended from First Nation, Métis/Half-breed, and European forebears. They spent their childhood years in the District of Assiniboia, Norquay in St. Andrews parish (b.1841), and Riel in St. Boniface (b.1844). Both saw their homeland as the north-western interior of North America. Both had the advantage of greater formal schooling than their western contemporaries.[2] Both spoke French and English and could communicate in Indigenous languages.[3] They faced similar challenges: how to manage the adaptation by residents of Red River, and of the wider North-west, to the Canadian government's takeover of prairie lands.

Louis Riel's political education began in Red River. It took on new dimensions during the years he spent in Montreal (1858-66), where he studied in an excellent school and was made to feel self-conscious about his family ancestry. When he returned to the west, he relied for advice on clergy

1 The story is told in lively fashion in Jean Teillet, *The North-West is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation* (Toronto: Harper Collins Canada 2019)

2 Max Hamon, *The Audacity of His Enterprise: Louis Riel and the Métis Nation That Canada Never Was, 1840-1875* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2020). After a few years in parish schools, Norquay attended St. John's Collegiate School in the Red River Settlement as a scholarship student for three or four years.

3 Riel would have known Michif and may have known First Nation languages. Norquay traded for two seasons with Michif-speaking people and it was frequently said that he spoke Bungee, Dakota, and Anishinabek.

from Quebec who reinforced his Québécois, French-language and Catholic loyalties.[4] He said that he belonged to a "national" group: "Eh bien, je suis métis moi," he wrote in February 1869 in refuting a rude generalization about Red River.[5]

Language ("English" and "French"), church (denomination and parish), and the descriptors "Métis" and "half-breed," "native" and "*les sauvages*,"[6] constituted the social and political categories of Assiniboians that Riel employed in his discussions of politics. Riel prepared a record of the first political assembly at Upper Fort Garry in November/December 1869 in which he consistently distinguished between "les deux sections de la population," the delegates of the "English" parishes and those from *les paroisses métisses françaises*.[7]

"Riel: "the fate of the "Métis" became his preoccupation from the time of his departure from Upper Fort Garry in August 1870 until his death in November 1885."



Unknown Photographer, Portrait de Louis Riel, 1875. Image Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, Jean Riel Fonds.

4 Ens & Sawchuk, *From New Peoples to New Nations*, pp. 92-112.

5 Raymond Huel ed. *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel* v.1 (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1985) [hereinafter *CWLR*], 1-010, p. 14. One of the first published statements of the resistance, written on 6 October 1869, probably by Riel, spoke on behalf of "*la population métisse canadienne de la Rivière-Rouge*," people who, according to the document, were "*sujets loyaux de Sa Majesté la Reine d'Angleterre.*" Also relevant is *CWLR*, document 1-013, p. 19 in which the phrase, "the Métis-Canadien population of Red River" throughout this important announcement of the group's plans.

6 *CWLR*, 1-060 and 1-062, pp89-95.

7 *CWLR*, 1-017, pp. 23-32. Another document of that period, again likely to have been written by Riel, referred to Métis delegates to the first provisional assembly as the "representatives of the French-speaking population of Rupert's Land." *CWLR*, 1-016, pp. 22-23. Yet another spoke of "the English half-breeds and other native women and children." *CWLR*, 1-020, pp. 34-35.

He also distinguished two broader categories of residents, whites and First Nations. The whites were the people "whom progress and civilization fill with ambition." He wrote that the First Nations regarded the newcomers expectantly and with apprehension. And, of course, he added a third category: the people of Red River who had been formed out of the two great populations in western North America and could serve as intermediaries between them:

> *En effet, nous sommes liés avec les deux [whites and First Nations] par le sang et les habitudes.*[8]

His use of these categories did not change much throughout his life. But the fate of the "Métis" became his preoccupation from the time of his departure from Upper Fort Garry in August 1870 until his death in November 1885.[9]

"Norquay: "His fullest statements of Manitoba's "provincial rights" claims in 1883-84 insisted that equality of the provinces must be a cardinal rule of the federation."

Norquay was a Manitoba cabinet minister for sixteen years and premier of the province for nine (1878-1887). His political education was based on the institutions of the British parliamentary tradition. He viewed Assiniboia as an infant "state" wherein citizens had united voluntarily to preserve order. He accepted Assiniboians' insistence on their status as free British subjects.[10] He claimed to have taken a moderate position in the resistance of 1869-70, though he spent much of that winter far from the



Unknown Photographer, John Norquay, Premier of Manitoba, 1878-1887. Image Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

8 *CWLR*, 1-060, pp89-93. "linked with both by blood and customs."

9 *CWLR*, 1-071, pp. 102-03 and 1-074, pp. 105-09, and especially 3-156, pp. 278-94.

10 Gerhard J. Ens & Joe Sawchuk, *From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Métis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to Twenty-First Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2016) pp, 71-91.

action, trading for furs on Lake Winnipegosis. In the 1870s his defence of Assiniboians transcended the Canadian Party/Riel conflict by insisting on the rights of "old settlers," a category derived from a family's history in Red River, not its language or religion or race. He accepted the Canadian nation-state's institutions of government, economy, and law. His fullest statements of Manitoba's "provincial rights" claims in 1883-84 insisted that equality of the provinces must be a cardinal rule of the federation. In cases of federal/provincial conflict, he argued that the constitution should be the deciding legal document and, in case of disagreements, the courts should rule.

Norquay warned his friends when Riel returned to the North-West Territories in 1884-85. He wrote to his sister's family near Prince Albert: "Bad Councils apparently have prevailed. I only hope that no acts of an irreparable character will be perpetrated." But he also agreed with those in the North-west who criticized Ottawa: "I feel for my countrymen [the Assiniboians] because I think they have not been treated as they should be." Most importantly, he believed that reforms could be won.[11] He deplored the outbreak of violence, supported his two sons who joined Canada's field force, and wrote critically of the 1885 resistance: "I hope that this insane movement will soon come to an end and that you will all return safe. But if fighting has to be done my desire is that the Rebels will be knocked to h–l [sic]. I only wish I was with you if ever any serious action does become necessary."[12]

> **"Whereas Norquay downplayed approaches that might contribute to the racializing of his countrymen, Riel emphasized Métis-ness."**

A vast conceptual distance separated Norquay from Riel. Norquay saw Assiniboians as voters, as residents of a province, as individual economic actors. No matter their language or religion, they had become Manitobans and they possessed rights as individual citizens of a nation-state.

Riel thought in terms of a Métis peoplehood, a "new people," whose First Nation and European "blood" created a distinct "race" (his words). As a "primitive people, simple and of good faith, placed by Providence in happy circumstances," these Métis had had in the past almost no need of government except in the buffalo hunt, when a leader and a number of captains organized affairs and where majority votes decided important questions: *C'était l'état d'un people neuf, mais civilisé, et jouissant d'un gouvernement à lui, fondé sur les vraies notions de la*

11 Norquay to Andrew Spence (Prince Albert) 27 March 1885, Norquay Premiers Papers [NPP], *Letterbook E.*, E305-306.

12 Norquay to "W.R. Nursey [,] Military Camp, Qu'Appelle or elsewhere," 7 April 1885, NPP, *Letterbook D.*, p. 235. The dashes in "h – l" are Norquay's own, not mine.

13 "A new people, but civilized, enjoying its own government, founded on true notions of public liberty and equity." They created "the laws of the prairies." These phrases appear in an important article that Riel wrote in the week before he died. *CWLR*, v3, document 3-156, pp. 278-294. These quotations come from p. 278, 281-83. He said that the North-West operated "sous la protection des lois métisses." *CWLR* v3, p. 283.

liberté publique et sur celles de l'équité. These Métis created *les lois de la Prairie*.[13]

Whereas Norquay downplayed approaches that might contribute to the racializing of his countrymen, Riel emphasized Métis-ness. Though willing to expand his political community's boundaries to include anglophone Protestants, Riel's primary goal was to defend a distinct Métis peoplehood. These people constituted a nation.

Riel was a risk taker. He was prepared to risk violence in pursuing political ends. Norquay was a negotiator. When faced with difficult decisions at several moments in his career, and when violence was talked of, he refused to embark on that path.

The contrast between the two leaders' views of adaptive strategies had implications not just for their generation but for today's and tomorrow's Canada. Riel's thinking about nation led directly into the talk of "race" – he used the term himself to describe the Métis – that dominated political discourse for over a century. It also underlay his successors' drive for the inclusion of Métis in the 1982 constitution as a collectivity possessing Aboriginal rights. Norquay, in contrast, avoided the racializing constructs, preferring instead to see province and nation-state as inclusive political communities and the individual voter as their foundation.

Riel's strategy fit the political circumstances of the twentieth century. What might happen in the twenty-first? Is it possible that citizens will transcend the racializing and racism of the past? If they do, they will find that Norquay's political philosophy anticipated and articulated their ideals.