THE MÉTIS NATION: THE ONLY NATION —ENGLISH, FRENCH OR ABORIGINAL— THAT ACTUALLY PARTICIPATED IN THE FOUNDING OF CANADA

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Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so.—E.J. Hobsbawm

In Canada's ongoing and sentimental search for a coherent national theory, we reach for the tools of nationalism. This is revealed in the recent search for a common origin story that, if only properly explained and understood, would provide a universal organizing principle that we can all believe in and relate to. To this end, it has been suggested that we should reconsider Canada as the result of three founding nations – English, French and Aboriginal. It has a nice ring to it and the number three resonates in Christianity. Unfortunately it is not accurate or appropriate to use the idea of three founding nations as the founders of Canada.

It is wrong because it conflates two different concepts – language and nation. English and French, at least in Canada, are languages—not nations—and Aboriginal is not a language or a nation. Aboriginal is a basket term that describes the many original nations in Canada who lived here before European settlement. With one notable exception, Aboriginal nations were not participants in the creation of this country. They were ignored and excluded. Their treaties made them wards of the state, not founding partners. This is not a pretty history, but then our history—especially with respect to Aboriginal peoples—has "not been so sweetly reasonable, nor so rationally symmetrical." That history does not change with revisions that ignore the historical facts.

Canada is a political entity that was created by negotiation. The original negotiating partners in the creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867 represented two dominant language and religious groups – French/Catholics and English/Protestants —situated in different provinces. Whether either

group was recognizable as a nation in 1867 is debatable. But at that time, both groups chose to become one nation, Canada. The terms on which these two groups joined together into a nation has been the subject of an ongoing national debate, but one thing is clear: Aboriginal nations were not included.

Aboriginal groups were referred to as nations as early as 1763 in the Royal Proclamation, which referred to them as "the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom we are connected, and who live under our Protection." In the sense of the early meanings of nation that refer to common origin or descent, they were indeed nations. Later, nation became associated with common traditions, aspirations and interests that were subordinated to a central power. Whatever else we can divine about the early usage of the term nation, one thing is clear. It did not carry the meaning we give it today. It is our modern world that has sought to equate a united culture with the term nation.

The change point appears in the Age of Revolution, when 'the people' began to be equated with the nation-state. This use of nation as the state was avoided in the American Revolution, where its founders went out of their way to avoid referring to a single 'nation' and instead to the several "United" States. It's how the Americans hoped to avoid the concept of a centralized and unitary government. Such ideas were incompatible with the federation the Americans were hoping to achieve. Instead of 'nation' they used 'the people' to describe the several 'states' in the aggregate. These united peoples were separate polities (states) with, at the time, no common culture, language or religion.

The French Revolution was entirely different. Although it is largely forgotten today, there was no common language in France. In fact, the revolution repeatedly referred to this fact. In France, the galvanizing idea was the opposite of the American confederation. Revolutionary France sought to become one indivisible nation. For the French, a nation had one essential element, the collective participation—not of the upper classes, but of the masses. The citizen of France had only to possess a national sentiment and desire one common government.

All of which begs the question: What is a 'people'? Can we naturally equate the aggregate of individuals who live in a territory/state with an ethnic identity, a single linguistic group or on some other ground of collective recognition of the group's membership? A single ethnic identity and language played no part in the French or the American revolutions. What was important was that the common people came together against a particular interest. For both the French and American revolutions, ethnic, religious and linguistic differences had to be ignored; there were simply too many for their common project. In those revolutionary times, the nations selectively chose among menu items they wished to emphasize: ethnicity, language, religion, territory and common historical memories. There were no claims to unity based on all of the above, and in fact any attempt to do so would have undermined the main goals of these revolutions.

The Métis were one of the Aboriginal nations in Canada. They first proclaimed themselves a new nation in 1815-16. In their self-declaration, the Métis use of the term nation places them within their times, which was an era in which many new nations in the Americas were founded. The Métis

Nation claim to legitimacy was based on cultural roots from its Indian ancestors. It was this claim of old roots and fresh bloom in the advancement of its interests that gave the world the first glimpse that this new nation maybe had a future.

Our modern understanding of a nation is likely not what the Métis meant when they proclaimed themselves to be one in 1815-16. They certainly did not mean a nation-state. They did not assert an exclusive prior claim to the territory, since they did not exclude the claims of the Indians. They also did not mean to exclude the fur traders or the *Canadiens*. They had no existing polity at that time either, if by that we mean a governance system. The only governance they exercised was during the buffalo hunt but it was not applied to any other form of their society. They had one institution at the time, the family. What these interconnected Métis families had in common was a national goal and they used a combination of force and negotiation to obtain it.

Perhaps the Métis were not a fully-fledged nation in 1815 despite their claims, but they were certainly a nascent one. Still, they had a sense that they were something other. This distinction, this view that they were different and unique, was the fertile idea that began to take root. From that first generation born in the North-West of the 1790s, the idea that the Métis were distinct from their parents' peoples flourished. When they hit their adulthood, this cohort loudly proclaimed itself to be a nation and then proceeded to make it so. Throughout the world we have seen that a nation comes into existence when a sizable group of people in a community say they have formed one, act to protect their interests, and over time coalesce into that proclamation. By 1870, when Louis Riel's provisional government began negotiating with Canada towards the inclusion of Rupert's Land and the North-Western Territory, the Métis were fully established as an Aboriginal nation.

The Métis Nation was the only one of the "aboriginal peoples of Canada" that was an active partner in the negotiated founding of Canada. It is, therefore, accurate to include the Métis Nation as one of the founding nations of Canada. If we accept the notion that neither the English nor the French were nations in 1867, then it may be accurate to suggest that the Métis Nation was, in fact, the only nation – English, French or Aboriginal – that participated in the negotiated founding of Canada.

In 1992, unanimous resolutions in the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, the House of Commons and the Senate recognized the contributions of Louis Riel in the origins of this country. The resolution approved by the House of Commons and the Senate is as follows:

> *That this House take note that the Métis people of Rupert's Land and the North Western Territory through democratic structures and procedures took effective steps to maintain order and protect the lives, rights and property of the people of the Red River;*
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> *That this House take note that, in 1870, under the leadership of Louis Riel, the Métis of the Red River adopted a List of Rights;*
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> *That this House take note that, based on the List of Rights, Louis Riel negotiated the terms for admission of Rupert's Land and the North Western Territory into the Dominion of Canada;*

That this House take note that these terms for admission form part of the Manitoba Act;

That this House take note that, after negotiating Manitoba's entry into Confederation, Louis Riel was thrice elected to the House of Commons;

That this House take note that, in 1885, Louis Riel paid with his life for his leadership in a movement which fought for the maintenance of the rights and freedoms of the Métis people;

That this House take note that the Constitution Act, 1982, recognizes and affirms the existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Métis;

That this House take note that since the death of Louis Riel, the Métis people have honoured his memory and continued his purposes in their honourable striving for the implementation of those rights;

That this House recognize the unique and historic role of Louis Riel as a founder of Manitoba and his contribution in the development of Confederation; and

That this House support by its actions the true attainment, both in principle and practice of the constitutional rights of the Métis people.

Aboriginal peoples were all participants in the founding of Canada as it exists today. Unfortunately their role in that story is, for the most part, a sad one. They should not be included now in a misguided attempt to mitigate a sense of guilt with respect to our collective treatment of the original inhabitants of Canada. Inclusion of Aboriginal peoples into the central themes of this country is a good idea. But it is perhaps best understood as a way of opening a dialogue that is more inclusive. In this respect, it would be a better idea to acknowledge that Confederation is incomplete and will remain so until Aboriginal peoples are fully included. A truly just and democratic Canada would work towards a modern inclusion in all the created stories of our future – in our aspirations and economies, and in our cultural, spiritual and historical stories. Inclusion does not mean revising the past with myths about Aboriginal inclusion. With the exception of the Métis Nation, the only Aboriginal nation that actively and positively participated in the negotiated founding of this country, we are the product today of Aboriginal exclusion. Let us start there, with the historic facts, and then change the exclusion from now on so we can tell new and better stories about Canada that include Aboriginal peoples.