

G M Jan 29/98

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## The Provinces



Prairies

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# The drive to rehabilitate Louis Riel

CALGARY

**I**N her statement of reconciliation with aboriginal people, Jane Stewart, federal Minister of Indian Affairs, said the execution of Louis Riel was sad and she wanted to recognize his contribution to Canadian history. Reform Leader Preston Manning had tried to pre-empt her by calling Riel a bridge-builder. Liberal MPs are now drafting a parliamentary resolution to declare Riel a Father of Confederation, or grant him a posthumous pardon, or both.

This may sound like politicians enjoying a harmless game of historical revisionism, but it is also a serious game of contemporary politics. Canadian taxpayers would be well advised to check their wallets before their pockets are picked. The ulterior motive for rehabilitating Louis Riel is to build support for the view that, in Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy's words, "promises were made to the Métis that were not kept."

The alleged breach of faith has to do with 19th-century Métis land grants about which most Canadians know very little. When Manitoba became a province in 1870, the Manitoba Act set aside 1.4 million acres of land for distribution to "the children of the half-breed heads of families." Each child got 240 acres. Subsequent legislation gave the Métis adults in Manitoba scrip worth \$160, with which they could buy Dominion Lands at a dollar an acre. After some delay, the government made similar grants to the Métis of Saskatchewan, Alberta and part of the Northwest Territories. Adults got scrip for \$160 and children scrip for \$240, redeemable in Dominion Lands. All these grants of land and scrip were legally rationalized as being "ex-die," towards the extinguishment of the Indian title," which the Métis had presumably inherited from their Indian forebears. Métis organizations in the prairie provinces now say that fraudsters tricked their ancestors out of their benefits. Either the Métis never got the land and scrip in the first place, or — in the alternative, as lawyers say — if they did get it, they received no enduring benefit because the government allowed them to sell their land and scrip to speculators for derisory amounts of money. Although historically false, both theories are politically useful, allowing Métis organizations to claim that their people still possess unextinguished aboriginal title to western lands.

The long-term strategy of these organizations is to use both litigation and negotiation to force the federal government to take responsibility for the Métis. They want the same things that status Indians have now — a land base, trust funds, a registry, federal financial support, a Métis Act and a declaration that they are Indians in the sense of Section 91(24) of the Constitution Act of 1867.

If this comes to pass, it is bound to be expensive for taxpayers. Parliament appropriates more than \$6-billion a year for approximately 550,000 registered Indians. How much more will it cost to accord parallel treatment to the 210,000 people who called themselves Métis in the 1996 census? And how many additional people with some Indian ancestry will claim Métis status if federal payments are on the table?

**I**RONICALLY, the Métis, although not as prosperous as the Canadian average, are already better off than Indians by any objective indicator. Métis have higher average income and educational attainment, and lower rates of unemployment and welfare dependency, than Indians do. They are better off because they have been treated since Confederation not as dependent wards of the Crown but as citizens with the same rights and duties as everyone else.

Indeed, the available statistics underestimate how well the Métis are doing because they apply only to those who designate themselves Métis in the census. There are hundreds of thousands, probably millions, of people with Indian ancestry who simply call themselves Canadians and whose demographics are similar to national norms — a great but lamentably uncelebrated success story of Canadian history.

Creating a federally funded Métis status will benefit the Métis politicians, lawyers and administrators who will manage the programs. But over the long run it will make ordinary Métis people worse off by inducing them to become administered clients of the state rather than self-supporting citizens.

Granting Louis Riel a posthumous pardon, or declaring him to be a Father of Confederation, would be a crucial step in the wrong direction. It would inevitably be interpreted as a statement that Riel's rebellions were not the psychodrama of a self-styled prophet but justified attempts at redressing grievances.

The grievances are historically fictional but, if validated by Riel's rehabilitation, they will become politically real. At that point, how will our politicians resist taking further steps to create official Métis status?

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