

# METIS NATIONAL COUNCIL



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## THE METIS NATIONAL COUNCIL

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#### INTRODUCTION:

The Metis National Council is entering our eighth full year of operations since our inception in 1983. Initially, the Metis National Council (MNC) formed so the Metis People could be adequately represented at the first First Minister's Conference on aboriginal/constitutional affairs on March 15-16, 1983. The MNC is the National voice of the Metis People in Canada. We are one of the four National aboriginal representative organizations currently receiving core funding from the Department of Secretary of State.

#### WHO ARE THE METIS:

The Metis emerged as a distinct people and national community in Rupert's Land toward the end of the 18th century. Children of the fur trade, we played a lead role in the fur trade economy and the development of the Northwest. We developed a unique aboriginal culture and identity; a New Nation on the soil of the New World. We formed a political consciousness, Metis Nationalism, and expressed this nationalism whenever our collective rights were threatened.

At the time of the Hudson's Bay Company transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada in 1869, the Canadian government agents ignored the rights of the Metis majority in the Red River settlement. When guarantees for our rights to land and self government were not forthcoming from Ottawa, we acted to safeguard our lives, homes and property. Louis Riel and a Metis Provisional Government took control of the Red River settlements and entered into negotiations

with the government of Canada. These negotiations resulted in Parliament passing the Manitoba Act in 1870, bringing Manitoba into confederation as a province.

With the passing of this legislation, we believed we had a deal which guaranteed our right to govern ourselves on our land within Canada. The Canadian Government had something else in mind. The provisions for Metis lands in the Manitoba Act, were exercised in such a manner that in ten years, our ancestors in the province of our creation were dispossessed.

Displaced from Manitoba, many Metis moved west and north, joining other Metis communities within the historic Metis homeland such as Batoche, St. Paul, St. Albert, Battleford and Cypress Hills. From these communities, we petitioned the federal government for the recognition of our land rights and continued to exercise self government over our affairs. As settlement began to crowd in on us again, we began to fear for our lands, for our culture, and for our right to be self determining People. For twelve years, the federal government turned a deaf ear to our petitions. Finally, the decision was made by our People to bring Louis Riel back from Montana to lead our struggle for the constitutional protection of our rights.

Ottawa responded by sending thousands of troops to the prairies to crush our People. The Metis resistance of 1885 ended with the defeat at Batoche and the execution of Riel.

Although the federal government promised to satisfy Metis land claims in the Northwest, the events of Manitoba were to be repeated. Only a few of the Metis remained in possession of their land. The rest were left in abject poverty and despair, dispersed to isolated rural and northern communities or the slums of the new

towns and cities. Our reward for daring to stand up and fight for our rights was racism, discrimination, hostility, poverty and injustice.

Despite these conditions, the spirit of the Metis Nation and our quest for a self governing homeland within Canada has never died. Metis Political Associations emerged in Manitoba in the 1880's, and in Saskatchewan and Alberta in the 1930's to promote the rights of the Metis People. Despite our oppression in the past, our People have fought for Canada in World Wars to protect the People that live in this country. As the political climate changed in Canada in the 1960's, the Metis Political Associations took on a lead role in forging a new place for the Metis People in the new Canadian Federation.

At the First Minister's Conference on aboriginal rights in 1983, Prime Minister Trudeau recognized that there are three distinct aboriginal peoples who have contributed to Canadian history and have become entitled to their own special place in Canadian society. These three aboriginal groups are the Indians, Inuit and the Metis. In his opening remarks to the Conference, the Prime Minister also recognized a political realignment which had given birth to the Metis National Council shortly before the conference. "...in recent months it had become evident that the Metis people in great majority felt that they were not properly represented under the Native Council of Canada, and for that reason, I invited a representative of the Metis People to sit with us this morning, a representative of the Metis National Council".

Founded by the three Provincial Metis Associations on the prairies, the Metis National Council has since expanded in membership to take in the regions of the Metis Homeland in British Columbia and Northwestern Ontario. It has represented these regions and the Metis People of these regions at National forums, Conferences, and

First Ministers Conferences and will continue to do so.

#### WHAT RIGHTS DO THE METIS SEEK?

The Metis have never sought separation from Canada. The purpose of the Metis resistance in 1869 and 1885 was to gain better living conditions and more rights for the Metis within Canada. This continues to be the Metis objective. We do not seek sovereignty or separation from Canada. We seek the right to greater control over our lives and want this accommodated within the Canadian federation. We seek our own form of political representation and control over those aspects of our lives which are key to the preservation of our unique culture, as well as our social and economic development. The rights we seek can be identified under two broad categories; land and resource rights and self-governing rights.

Metis land is land which would become the Metis Homeland. These lands will likely consist of a number of separate land areas on which Metis of the area would have the right to reside. The ownership of these lands and all of the surface and subsurface rights (including forests, minerals, etc.) would belong to the Metis. We also want the right to develop and determine how to develop all of the surface and subsurface resources on these lands. This would include all hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering rights on crown lands and on other lands to which we are given the right of access. In addition, we seek preferential access to the opportunity to develop or participate in the development of resources on crown lands adjacent to Metis land, including resource revenue sharing. We are also seeking equitable compensation for the lands that traditionally belonged to the Metis.

Under Metis self government, we are seeking the right to establish Metis local government on a Metis land base, as well as the right

to self governing institutions off a land base. Also we are seeking the right of access to sufficient revenues to allow Metis self governing bodies to provide services comparable to those provided by the federal and provincial governments, but adapted to the special needs and circumstances of the Metis People.

The Metis National Council and our constituent associations at the provincial level are currently the principal institutional vehicles for the political organization and representation of the Metis people. They are the only political institutions entirely in the hands of Metis People, chosen by democratic means through ballot box elections. While other institutions and structures will be created as self-government evolves, it is important to start now to apply the concept of self-government to the institution already in place to represent the Metis People.

#### STRUCTURE OF THE METIS NATIONAL COUNCIL:

To dispel any possible misunderstandings over representativeness, it might be appropriate to describe how the Metis National Council is organized. Like all major organizations, it has a local, provincial and national structure. The local structure can take several forms depending on local conditions, as can its relationship to the provincial structure. The one condition the MNC places on local organizations is that all Metis in the community concerned, must be allowed to participate in local meetings, votes and elections. Not all Metis are equally active, but every Metis has a right to participate in the local organizations of associations belonging to the MNC.

The provincial association is the most important component of the structure and the focus of most political attention. Again provincial structure can vary from province to province, but all associations belonging to the MNC are meant to represent all Metis

in the political life of the organization. This includes selection of the leadership of provincial associations. To give practical effect to this right, all executives in associations belonging to the MNC are not selected in indirect elections at general assemblies, but are chosen in general and direct province-wide elections in which every Metis has a right to vote. These elections are conducted by secret ballot, at regular intervals (usually 2-3 years) in communities throughout the province or region. The participation rate in these elections is very high. Direct election of provincial executive positions and the secret ballot, with all Metis as eligible voters, have been made conditions of admission into the Metis National Council. It means effectively, that the leadership of provincial associations belonging to the MNC has been as legitimately elected as any premier or politician, and he/she has as much right to claim to speak for his/her constituents as they do for theirs.

At our Annual Assembly two years ago, the MNC elected Yvon Dumont, president of the Manitoba Metis Federation to be our interim National Spokesman. However, the national structure of the MNC can be simply described. The MNC is composed of the leaders of each of its constituent provincial and regional associations. Under the principles of MNC's organization, these leaders are for the most part today and will in the future be elected leaders. Collectively, they will guide the destinies of the Metis National Council.

The MNC has dealt with the question of "representativeness" within our own ranks by making sure that all Metis can participate in the selection of their representatives, and that all representatives are directly selected by the Metis People themselves. The MNC considers this is the surest way of ensuring that leaders are accountable to the base, and that Metis organizations remain open and democratic. It should discard all spells about who the MNC represents: Metis representatives represent their electors—the Metis People.