

The Role of the State in the Metis Struggle for Self Determination

By

Murray Dobbin

Transcribed by David Morin

Since the late 19th century's native people on the prairies have constantly faced the power of the state[□] in their struggle for human rights and social justice. It was the state which dispossessed them and it is the state which native people still confront to have their grievances dealt with.

The state has not always dealt in the same way with native people – different historical periods and situations result in different strategies by the state. The first role of the state in dealing with prairie Indians and Metis was to clear native people from the land. The corporations in the east looked upon settlement of the west as a guarantee of huge profits – but native people had to be removed for settlement to take place efficiently (sic). The Indians were starved into submission and forced to sign treaties which placed them on reserves of marginal land. The Metis were given scrip – a scheme quite deliberately devised to make it as easy as possible for speculators to get the land from the Metis and into the hands of settlers. Both schemes were extremely successful – the Indians were centralized and many of the Metis lost their land to speculators.

During the post war period and even slightly before, a new strategy of dealing with native peoples was employed. As more and more native people were forced off the land, the newly created “welfare state” focused on native people. The welfare state was a reflection of a more liberal society in which the state accepted a wider responsibility for the well being of citizens – to the extent

[□] By the term state I mean all the elements that organized society uses to maintain order and the status quo (sic): government (the legislature and bureaucracy), police, the courts, the armed forces, security services, etc.

that it would not allow those rejected by the economy – old people unemployed those unable to work – to starve to death. These measures such as family allowance, UIC, welfare, pensions, were all introduced as a result of long struggles by working class people, their organizations and political parties.

Many of these measures were meant to be temporary aid to people who would soon be back in the job market. But for native people who had been isolated from the economy by structural racism and policies of isolation, the welfare state meant dependency. Indians became increasingly dependent on the Indian Affairs Branch; Metis on the provincial government welfare branch – especially in the north.

Until the 1950s these policies of isolation and welfare dependency kept native people largely unorganized and out of sight of the wider white society. But in the early 1960s major social changes were occurring (sic) on the prairies. Urbanization was a major factor and it affected native people as well. Thousands of Metis and Indians began moving to the cities as jobs disappeared in the country and small towns. Racial conflict, which had been minimized by lack of contact, became a major social problem which the state was obliged to deal with.

The state, however, found that it was ill equipped to deal with the problem of thousands of unemployed native people alienated by a white, hostile urban environment. Totally lacking any policies or any experience in making policy for native people, the state turned quickly to small, educated elite of native people – those who had managed against all the odds to integrate into the larger society. The early sixties were characterized by literally dozens of meetings between government agencies and native people – meetings where government said it wanted to “listen.”

By the mid sixties many of the educated native people involved in these meetings were working for government – in friendship centres welfare agencies etc. At the same time new native organizations were being formed at the grass roots level. It was within these organizations that a major struggle would take place between the state and native people.

The use of an educated elite of native people to help the state deal with the “native problem” had parallels around the world. It is referred to as “neo colonialism” and involves the use of native people to control other native people. In general it involved giving some of the benefits of the dominant (white) society to a small privileged minority of natives in return for their help in making sure the majority of natives didn’t cause trouble. The theory was that for example a native person on welfare wouldn’t feel as oppressed and angry at a native welfare worker as she/he would at a white welfare worker. Also the image of successful natives in government helped create the myth that all native people had a place in the dominant society.

To put the matter simply the change from colonialism to neo colonialism is a change only in how the state controls the colonized people. Colonialism is a system in which the colonized people have no control over their lives – economically socially politically or culturally. The power to make decisions in these important areas of daily life are almost all in the hands of others either the state or corporations and business. Neo colonialism involves the use of some native people to maintain that control. The state is willing to share some of the wealth of a racist system with a few native people in return for a more effective method of controlling the vast majority of native people.

The use of native people in government bureaucracy is just one aspect of neo colonialism. Another is the encouragement of native businesses owned by native people. In northern Saskatchewan for example the NDP government

provided loans to native people wishing to set up small trucking firms to serve the uranium mines. Again, it is a case of giving a small share of wealth created by capitalism to a small number of native people. Part of the objective is to ensure cheap labour and the assumption is that native workers will be more willing to work for low wages for a native employer than for a white employer. In both cases – the bureaucratic native elite and the small business native elite – these privileged natives are dependent on the state for their elite status. Special loans are provided, job qualifications are set aside, etc. to provide special opportunities for a few native people. The state provides these special privileges – and the state can take them away whenever it chooses. It is in this sense that the native elite is dependent on the state: if it does not behave (sic) itself (that is, help the state control the majority of native people) then the state can remove the privileges.

The most threatening and effective form of neo colonialism devised by the state has been its efforts to intervene and control native popular organizations. The state in the late 1940's began funding native organizations which had previously been completely independent. They began with core grants to help the associations organize; then the elected leaders of the organizations got larger and larger salaries – making them dependent on the state just as the native bureaucrats in government were. As the years went by more money was provided to organizations – money for various housing, economic development and service programs.

What was the effect of these grants? Besides creating what Malcolm Norris called a "captive (dependent) leadership" the government determined what the organizations did by the kind of grant they provided. There was money for NAC houses but not for political education programs. The organizations ended up doing two conflicting things: trying to represent their

people politically and providing the services that government was supposed to provide. When those service programs proved to be inadequate (dealing only with symptoms and not causes) then the native organizations ended up sharing the blame of the failures: It is difficult to publicly criticize a program if you are in charge of it.

Another important consequence of government funding of native political organizations is the attitude of the non native public. Ultimately native people must persuade or force the majority of society to accept their demands for social justice. The existence of well established native organizations give the public two false impressions:) that native people get a lot of help and money from the government and) that native people are represented by aggressive and independent leaders and organizations. In a racist society these are the things that non native people want to believe because it soothes their feelings of guilt.

The most important effect of government funding – or state intervention for this is really what it is – is that the state by manipulating grants and what they can be used for can determine to a large extent what strategy the organizations will use. It is no coincidence that when organizations were independent of government money in the mid sixties they followed a militant strategy which confronted government. Now after fifteen years of grants they are following a constitutional strategy which requires co operation with the state.

The fact that almost all native organizations in Canada are now following a constitutional strategy worth examining. It is my view that this strategy was encouraged by the government because it is ultimately in the interest of the government for the native people to follow this strategy. This strategy seeks self government for native people. This is a worthy goal but it can only come

about if native people are provided with a solid economic base on which to build that self government. The most important question then becomes "Is a capitalist government willing to hand over sufficient resources in Canada to give native people genuine self government i.e. real self determination involving a high standard of living, social justice and first class citizenship in Canada?" The answer to this question can only be "no". To allow for this would mean taking those resources out of the hands of the rich and powerful people of Canada – and it is these same people who run the state and are negotiating in Ottawa with native leaders! Jim Brady wrote years ago about this question:

"no capitalist government would ever agree to the complete abolition of the Metis question. Thus it will not be a question of Metis rehabilitation but of restricting certain undesirable sides of (the question) and limiting certain excesses. Objectively no reconstruction of the Metis will come about."

There are several ways which the constitutional strategy benefits the state – and at the same time goes against the interest of native people. Before getting into these it is important to say two things. First, the constitutional strategy can be useful to certain native groups in Canada – those living where resources have not yet been developed and handed over to corporations and some of those who have not signed treaties with Canada. Secondly, if an organization can follow other strategies at the same time and not put all its energies into the constitutional battle, then it retains some of its independence.

But the fact is that most organizations are putting all their efforts into the constitutional strategy. What are the consequences of this decision? First, it divides natives themselves – we now see native people who share virtually identical problems in the west, divided into Metis, non status Indian and status Indian. This is a classic divide and rule situation and by following the constitutional strategy, native leaders have themselves contributed to dividing their own people. Jim Brady used to say that the only power native people had

was "organization " The constitutional strategy effectively neutralizes that power Organizational power is the power of numbers – and you cannot effectively use numbers in a constitutional battle that takes place in court rooms and government conference rooms In a constitutional battle the government has all the power: what will native leaders threaten to do if the government refuses to meet their demands? If there is no politically aware mass movement ready to take to the streets the native leaders have no effective bargaining power (except the law which rarely works in favor of poor people) This has been another consequence of state intervention and the constitutional strategy: native organizations have long ago ended the kind of political education and direct action politics that they used back in the late sixties The constitutional strategy does not oblige leaders to educate their membership and it denies the mass of Metis and Indians the opportunity and the responsibility to genuinely participate in the political process except to vote approval of the strategy whenever elections come around

There are other consequences of this strategy for native people Because the constitutional negotiations take so long (it has been ten years already) and can be indefinitely delayed by the government the government can continue to avoid its responsibilities in meeting the needs of native people These negotiations could easily go on for another ten years meaning that a whole generation of native people will have grown to adulthood waiting for the government and their own leaders to come up with solutions to their daily problems It is obviously in the interests of the state to delay their responsibilities for as long as possible Negotiations over constitutional rights not only allows (sic) them to delay but it gives the appearance to the general public that something is being done Furthermore once the negotiations come to an end (if they do) the non native public can sooth its own guilt feelings by

saying to itself: fine the native people now have what they want a constitutional agreement. Now we can get on to other matters.

This last point is more important than it might appear and it leads to two final consequences of this political strategy. The importance of non-native public opinion is simply this: Unless there is broad support for progressive native policies by non-natives, no government will implement such policies. In a general way, this illustrates another consequence of allowing native mass organization to become weak: to win significant reforms, significant social and economic progress, native people must build alliances with other non-native groups fighting for similar goals. In the first place, if the native organizations have let political education and mobilization of its membership slide, then there is nothing with which to build an alliance. Alliances are built between people; if the membership of native organizations are not active on a regular basis, they cannot come together with non-native working people and poor people. Furthermore, the constitutional strategy tends to separate native people from non-native people – it institutionalizes special status and gives a message to non-natives that says “Our problems are different from yours and our solutions are different.” In fact, the problems are the same in the end: a small number of rich people get all the benefits of capitalist society and the vast majority, native and non-native, face constant insecurity if they do not face constant poverty. This is the final consequence of the constitutional strategy – it denies the fundamental class nature of Canadian society. Not only does it divide native people in their particular struggle (the anti-colonial struggle as Brady put it to “be freed from the pernicious influences and disabilities which colonialism has imposed”) but it divides all native people from their fellow workers who share their poverty and oppression. Brady, though he spent thirty years of his life fighting for the native cause, stated; “We (Metis) have no independent social

base other than the working class. With the working class as the necessary assisting forces we can be strong. If we go against the democratic forces we are reduced to nothing." What Brady meant was that if the Metis separated themselves from the general struggle for progress their struggle would be meaningless.

If the constitutional strategy has all these implications for the native struggle, how did it come to be adopted by native organizations? It is useful to look at what Jim Brady had to say about this question back in 1937 when Alberta Metis faced a struggle for virtual survival during the depression. He wrote:

"Constitutional 'principles' in the abstract have no significance in our struggle. In one instance the popular forces will be found using provincial powers against the reactionary control of the central government powers. In other instances reforms initiated by the central government will be opposed by the sectionalism of provincial groups. We must establish at the outset that the relation of social forces will determine the constitutional issue of any problem at any given historical time.

The Metis problem is basically related to the general problem of the economic and social needs of the Canadian people. The hardship, poverty and suffering of the Metis people is forcing to the forefront the issue of government measures to cope effectively with the economic and social problems of the people as a whole."

Brady with Norris in the preamble to the Metis' Presentation to the Ewing Commission, Edmonton.

What are the social forces which today "determine the constitutional issue of the day"? It is the same "hardship, poverty and suffering" experienced by the Metis of the thirties. How do such conditions work in determining the strategy that the native people choose? In the thirties the Alberta Metis fought the government publicly with a mass organization, with many meetings to determine Metis feelings and political education. In other words, those conditions demanded the use of the Metis' only weapon: organization.

If conditions today are similar and require a mass organization and public action, then what explains the almost exclusive use of the constitutional strategy by Metis and Indian organizations? In general we must again look at

state intervention to find the answer. The state or government has altered the social forces which, if left by themselves, would have naturally led to direct action by a mass movement for social change. By intervening in such a massive way in the organizations of native people, the government is able to determine indirectly the kind of politics that is practised by those organizations.

In the mid '70s two features of prairie native groups started to become clear. The first was the drawing away from public confrontations with government over jobs, social conditions, education, racism, etc. The organizations in this period became more like service organizations than political voices of the mass of Metis people. There was a marked decrease in the participation by the membership on a regular basis. By the late seventies, as one AMNSIS (Association of Metis and Non Status Indians of Saskatchewan) director told me, people only came out to local meetings if some sort of grant was being discussed or given out.

The second feature of this period was the gradual development of the constitutional strategy. More research needs to be done into just how this developed, but some observations can be made. It was in this period that the federal government made it known to native groups that funding would be made available for aboriginal (sic) rights and land claims research. It was just a matter of applying for it. Such an offer was difficult to resist. First, native peoples do have legitimate aboriginal rights and land claims – they have always known this. But perhaps of equal importance in explaining why the offer was taken up is the fact that any other strategy was much more difficult, especially given the fact that the ability of organizations to mobilize large numbers of native people was failing. The organizations were already becoming bureaucratic. In other words, the constitutional strategy was one which fit very well the kind of bureaucratic politics that was already the trend in native

organizations. It did not involve the hard work of political education, democratic debate over the future, mobilizing people and confronting the governments that gave grants. It involved hiring researchers and lawyers to study the law and history and it involved negotiations between native leaders and federal politicians. It is not really a political struggle at all.

None of this necessarily suggests a conspiracy on the part of government or insincerity on the part of native organizations and their leaders. The whole process of government intervention into democratic organizations is an insidious one; decisions are made gradually over time and the implications of these decisions are often not clear until years later. This is why Malcolm Norris in the last years of his life had a single, desperate message for native activists: avoid government funding of your organizations at all costs. Norris knew from experience that such funding would inevitably compromise the independence of the organizations and would disrupt and distort the normal decision-making process of the movement, a process determined not by the availability of state funding but by the social forces of the day.

Perhaps we could leave the last word to Jim Brady who, on the occasion of divisions and confusion in the old Metis Association of Alberta, wrote to two of his colleagues the following comments on popular movements, leadership and class society:

“Movements and great causes can only advance when they produce leaders of integrity upon whom the rank and file can trust and rely. We must avoid the implications of becoming brain trusters (and) guard jealously against any tendency which will divorce us from the confidence of the mass of Metis. To root our organization deeply among the Metis we must concentrate our work in every settlement area. Each (settlement) must become a stronghold of the Metis Association. Here we must take up the smallest grievances, teaching them the value of struggle and education. Our program must always be formulated in close touch with the practical activity of the (settlements) and the everyday life of our people. The Metis will always be the victims of deceit and self-deceit as long as they have not learned to discover the interests of one or another of the classes behind moral, religious, political and social phrases, declarations and promises. Unless a radical change is effected

the ideals for which we struggle will be defrauded to the nauseating level of political chicanery and petty officialdom "