

A COMMENT ON THE MOVE AGAINST THE NAME "LOUIS RIEL DRIVE"

by Keith Turnbull

An article appeared in the *Leader-Post* on Wednesday, October 12th entitled "Regina Group Against Using Riel's Name." The presenter of a petition to City Council is protesting the changing of the name of the Lewvan Expressway to "Louis Riel Drive" because, he says, Riel is a convicted traitor. "Why not name the thing (Adolph) Hitler Drive or (Benito) Mussolini Way?" asks the petitioner.

There is no question that Louis Riel was tried, convicted and hanged for "Treason" in 1885. But was he a traitor? And should he be compared with those two most vicious of international gangsters, Hitler and Mussolini? Obviously not! Let's examine some of the facts.

The 1870s and 1880s were difficult times for people living in the Northwest Territories. The buffalo herds were disappearing and the Plains people were facing starvation. The white settlers were facing major economic problems and could not convince the government that they should have title to their land. The Métis people, as buffalo hunters and subsistence farmers, understood that they would be forced to become part of the "mainstream" economy, and knew that they required title to their land.

Although all of these groups were not always in agreement as to the best tactics to employ, they were in agreement that their grievances had to be dealt with by the government. Louis Riel, who had been living in Montana after his exile from Manitoba (he had led the struggle to found that province) was brought to Saskatchewan to provide political leadership to the people of the Saskatchewan area.

The struggle saw the organization of a United Front amongst Indian, Métis and non-Native Canadians. At no time was it considered to be a "race" war; rather, it was a fight against the policy of the Conservative government of John A. Macdonald to develop the west and extract its wealth without considering the democratic and

economic rights of the majority of people living in the area.

The people sent numerous petitions, but when they were finally answered, they were answered with bullets. The federal government chose to raise a massive army and send it to the Northwest. (The army was almost 5,000 strong; the total population of Saskatchewan was only 26,000!)

Throughout the spring of 1885, Riel sought peaceful, political solutions, but the actions of the Canadian government continuously forced the issue. The Métis were forced to fight often against Riel's wishes. Riel himself carried only a cross, never a gun.

Why was the government of Canada so intent on fighting a war in the West? First, it provided employment for the large number of jobless youth of southern Ontario. Second, it was an excellent ploy to garner public support for government funding of the privately-owned Canadian Pacific Railroad, the first Canadian mega-project. The railroad was vital to the opening of the West, both for the production and shipping of grain, and for the sale and delivery of manufactured goods from the factories of the East. It also provided a link with the Pacific Ocean for Canada and the British Empire.

Fortunes were to be made from the opening up of the Territories, but the people living in the area were largely excluded from the plans jointly formulated by government and business (often the same individuals). Riel and the population of the West desired only justice and equality of opportunity; to be a part of Canada on equal terms with the rest of Canada.

Today, as in 1885, the Native people's fight for equality continues, as it must, for Native peoples have not, in large part, benefited from the development of the West. In Regina, 80% have not had the benefit of education past Grade 11 and 76% live

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below the poverty line as established by Statistics Canada.¹ Unemployment, especially amongst youth, is the normal situation. Equality of opportunity is, almost a hundred years later, still a dream.

Riel was a man who believed in equality and justice for the majority. Hitler and Mussolini, on the other hand, had their own form of "justice" which served the few (preferably wealthy) "pure Aryans," at the expense of the many, including the Jewish people of Europe. To compare Louis Riel to these architects of fascism is a gross insult to everyone in this country who believes in equality, justice and the right of human beings to live in security and dignity.

On the contrary, Louis Riel should take his rightful place beside all of those leaders from around the world who have led their peoples in the struggle against colonialism and for the national liberation of their countries.

¹General Native Economic conditions in Regina and Saskatoon.