

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 5

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Tony Belcourt: For those of you who watched and were involved in what was going on last fall, I was playing a fundamental role in, in the outrage that we had raised about the production of the series about, the “The Retrial of Louis Riel.” It wasn’t so much the production itself that outraged us, it was the whole process and everything that was going on. The, the Métis people, Métis leaders, instinctively felt, and I think justifiably so, that if anything is going to be on CBC of a magnitude of the kind of show that was being talked about, which was about the Métis people, then surely the Métis people should have been involved and consulted in some kind of way. The Riel family, perhaps, involved or consulted in some kind of a way. Riel is the very essence of who the Métis people are. We see him as our leader, our hero today, just as he was then. When you talk about Riel, you’re talking about the Métis people. My, my first contact with the CBC and the Dominion Institute were summarily dismissed. The response was, “Don’t worry about it, we know better, you’ll be happy in the end, we’re doing the right thing here, the end’s going to justify the means.”

The, the other thing that, that I, in Ontario, coming from the perspective as the, the leader of the Métis in Ontario, that I have to tell you about is that whenever Riel’s name is invoked in any kind of way, the most sensitive place in the whole of Canada is in the province of Ontario. The legislature in Ontario passed a bounty of five thousand dollars on Louis Riel’s head in 1872, equivalent to about six hundred thousand dollars in 1990 terms. And all of that money was paid out. And ever since then, ever since Riel was finally hanged in 1885, the province of Ontario has made certain that it lives in denial about the history of the Métis people in the province of Ontario, the history of our communities in that province. Indeed, in a court case that we will hear more about tomorrow, the *Powley* case, when we

finally got to the Supreme Court of Canada in March the 17th of this year, the Ontario government's position, which had been consistent throughout, was that Métis communities never existed in the province of Ontario and don't exist today. There never were Métis people there and there are no Métis people there today. That despite the fact that we have proven without question at trial and at two levels of appeal the existence of the historic Métis community in Sault Ste Marie in the early 1800s throughout the period of Riel, and even in today's terms. We feel that in Ontario, the Métis people feel that prejudice, the bigotry, the snide remarks that are made throughout that province.

I met somebody here today who told me his white ancestors come from Picton, Ontario, and he tried to contact them, just recently. Got a name out of the phonebook that is the same as his name, and when they found out that he was a Métis from northern Saskatchewan, all of a sudden the phone went dead, and he's never been able to contact them since. That's what we deal with in the province of Ontario. You cannot raise Louis Riel's name in our province without that just having a profound ripple throughout the whole province. Something major is at stake whenever Riel's name is made mention. Something major is at stake for the Métis people, positively or negatively. And when the CBC decided to do what it did, we obviously tried to get involved to see if we could engage them in doing the right thing. We didn't believe that playing Russian roulette with whether or not to hang Riel again or the Métis people is, was something that would be appropriate for the national public television network of Canada. The Riel issue for us symbolizes the bottom line. Where is the respect, for Riel or for the Métis people?

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