

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 5

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Paul Chartrand: There are private bills, Senate bills, have been proposed, all sorts of ideas about pardoning Riel, you know, putting it in a general way. Reasonable minded people looking at the facts would agree, Riel was unjustly hanged. Some, including some of my friends, would recognize that. Riel was unjustly dealt with, by virtue of the politics and politicians on the hill in Ottawa in 1885. And some would go now, cap in hand, simpering to Ottawa, asking the descendants of these Ottawa politicians who dealt with Riel that way in 1985, what they think about Riel. To them, it's important how they feel about Riel. Well, it's not important to me.

When my father retired at the age of seventy-five, the first trip he undertook was to Batoche in his new car. I'll always remember when we came back. We spoke of and about what he saw in the church. He said you can see the bullet holes in the church, and I remember his favourite line was this: "You know, when Gabriel is leaving after the fall of Batoche, and he's, he's telling one of those Michifs staying back, he said, "Tell Middleton that I'm still in the woods. Tell him that I still have nineteen cartridges to use on his men." And I still see the look in my father's eye when he said that. That's all I care about. I just care about the view my father, my family, my people, about these questions. And I don't care, and I would never go cap in hand to Ottawa, asking what those people think about Riel.

Riel is a symbol, the Riel that matters to Canada is a symbol, an idea. And the reason he died is to tell you what symbol of what, he's a symbol of the cause of the Métis people. Now when you look at these bills, one thing that will be very noticeable, not one of them proposes to do a damn thing about the cause of the Métis. They're pure symbolism. Well that, so what they wanted to do is they want to forgive Riel, and forget the Métis. That brings a new twist to the idea of forgive and forget.

Why is that? I thought about this. What is it that people see in the idea of pure symbolism without doing anything about the cause that made Riel a symbol? Well, I'll tell you what I see. There's nothing the Métis cause, nothing for the Métis cause. So what is Riel without the Métis cause? Well, you have to only, to read your history books to find out. He was a symbol for, of, of the fight between the English and the French struggle in Western Canada. And I propose that the, the enthusiasm for pardoning Riel today is a part of the agenda of Quebec, Quebec federalist agenda because according to this way, you can go, English Canada, led by Ottawa, as an interest to go to Quebec and say, "Look, you separatists should be happy in Canada. You have a hero in Riel! And we like him, too, so you feel comfortable in Canada."

Well, you know, that we, struck me when I saw something that was done, which I had viewed as a charade last fall orchestrated by the Dominion Institute and the CBC and our friend here will be having a say about that later on. Let me say how the symbolism is so pure in what the CBC and the Dominion Institute did. They had a play. It was bad enough that they purported to try yesterday's facts with today's laws. A sure way to guarantee ridicule will fall upon our people once more, and if there's one thing we don't need anymore of, it's ridicule. So look at the symbolism in that play. Riel was played by a Quebec federalist, Guy Bertrand. Why? It has to be the symbolism of the Quebec federalist agenda. If they want an actor for Riel because of his, his, his acting skills, or his good looks, they would have got Harry Daniels, the moderator! Not Guy Bertrand. They didn't consult the Métis people. They asked a journalist, Maggie Siggins, who read all the newly published books of Riel in 1985, and she doesn't cite all the important stuff. And they put her up as an historian. Well, we have at this conference some of the most eminent historians who lambasted Maggie Siggins for her imaginary invention of Riel. So, as I said at an interview, these people, doing these things, are like the black faces in Al Jolson in the United States, pretending to be Métis people. I think it was a shameful, a shameful thing to do.

For myself, I, I, I, I had great difficulty, you know, seeing, seeing that thing and seeing that charade, and I can tell you my view of this is if we as Michif people have any shred of a notion that we have some sort of spiritual self-sufficiency, then we might say, like, I think, yes, the way that Canada treated Riel is a stain on Canada. Let the stain remain.

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