

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 5

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Rudyard Griffiths: ...but my remarks are really gonna be very informal and I think they're gonna focus more on this question of cultural symbol. And I came to these thoughts through the Institute, and through our experience with "The Retrial of Louis Riel," and being caught up in the really strong currents that Riel continues to make as he passes through Canada's past, but also through our, our present. I guess I'm gonna assume there's a fair degree of knowledge in this room about, with "The Retrial of Louis Riel," but just a quick overview.

What it was was a newspaper series, a series of television programs, on RDI and CBC, where different arguments were put forward, for and against, convicted of the charge of treason, and then an internet verdict where Canadians could indicate which argument they felt was most compelling based on the evidence presented. Well, the response to this program, I think, or the series of programs, was nothing short of phenomenal. We, you know, 600,000 television viewers on CBC Newsworld and the French language news service. I mean, these are numbers that are ten times what their standard viewing audience is. On the internet verdict, 10,000 people came on in the period of 24 hours to, to express their opinions, and again, just a phenomenal response. So suddenly, Riel, rightly so, becomes a headline news story in our national newspapers. It becomes more important than that, I think, water cooler talk, it's something that everybody for the, that week or that period was discussing.

Well why? Why all of a sudden in this country that supposedly thinks its history is boring, that is immersed in technology, that's immersed in the future. All of a sudden an event, a tragic event, more than a hundred years ago, and the individual at the centre of that event is thrust into the national debate, and dominates the debate. Well, I think there's a couple of factors at

play. First, as our first speaker suggested, this is interesting history; this is where the rubber hits the road in Canada's past. It's a moment where so many of the compelling ethical issues that we are still grappling with as a country today manifest themselves. So I think the fact that this, this ongoing conversation about Riel and his significance to Canada, suggests that, that there are issues that we are confronting today that are hardwired into the set of issues and, and concerns in dynamics—political, cultural, social, and otherwise—that were played out in 1885 and before.

What is also at play is regionalism, and Paul's right to that extent, that in Quebec, ninety-five percent of the people who are, participated in the, the, the internet verdict said, voted for Riel's acquittal. A quarter of those from Ontario voted for his conviction. So those old tensions, those old sectarian divisions between Protestant and Catholic, between the Orange Lodge and everyone else—those ancient memories exist beneath the surface.

And I think also what interests me is that we see in Riel and we see in that brief week last fall when this was water cooler talk, an opportunity to air those divisions, and I think we as a country do ourselves a huge, huge disservice if we don't tackle what is difficult, thorny, uncomfortable, and painful in our past. The alternative is a kind of amnesia. It's airbrushing Trotsky out of the photograph. It's whitewashing history. So I realize and I apologize here, and I said it before, for the hurt and the pain that this project caused to certain people.

At the same time, Riel and Canada need each other. Canada and Canadians today in the twenty-first century—what we're talking about is Riel as a symbol and a hero in the twenty-first century—need to hear those same stories, they need to hear those same, learn those same lessons, of how do you overcome incomprabout, sorry, incontrovertible difference between different groups? In that, maybe we need to instil in our own political culture some of the spirit of rebellion, the sense of cultural resistance that infused Riel and that has infused the Métis people.

So, just to conclude, I'm, personally, and I mean the Institute doesn't have a policy on this, but I personally think the pardoning of Riel is a huge

mistake. That is to white, whitewash history, that is to solve Canada's past, and there are all kinds of people, the federal government included, who historically, well before 1885, have been trying to solve Canadian history, have been trying to solve our, our sectarian divisions. And I think we as a country now, a country of great complexity, a country of new divisions that are emerging, and also old divisions that have been with us that are re-emerging, need to hear these stories and need to learn this history.

So my final point would be that while it is, at times, I'm sure very painful for a community like the Métis to have this history once again thrown onto the national stage and all of the associated issues of voice appropriation that go along with that, it is immeasurably important for Canada, and that is why Riel as a hero and as a symbol will endure in the twenty-first century and long may he. So, thank you for your time and for the opportunity to speak, and I'll look forward to a great debate.

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