

## The Métis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conference

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Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 5

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**Jean Teillet:** I always feel somewhat strange listening to these kinds of debates because, for the most part, Riel's talked of as a symbol and a hero. And, I believe, Rudyard Griffiths called the whole issue ancient memories, and that they were beneath the surface, and... But I'm a member of the Riel family. Riel, Louis Riel is my great grand uncle. My great grandfather, my grandmother was Sarah Riel. My great grandfather was Joseph Riel, who's Louis Riel's little brother. And so, for me, all of this talk, this is my family we're talking about. This is an, you know, my great grandmother just died last year. This is not ancient memories for my family. Nor do I believe for a moment that it is ancient memories for any of the Métis people in this room. He's our present, live, live issues, this is our family of today.

When I think of Riel, my family thinks of Riel. We gave up our best and brightest son to the Métis cause. We didn't give him up for the Francophone cause of Quebec, we gave him up for the Métis cause. And so it's very difficult to hear Riel from my family's perspective, appropriated by Quebec, or the CBC, or whoever. We find that very, very difficult.

We, we also find it difficult to discuss the whole exoneration issue. Some of that is because we're split on it. You know, we're just a family, we're not a government, we don't have a, a unified voice. We're like any Métis family. If you've got five people in the room, you've probably got six different opinions on any given topic because by the time you've gone around to the first person again, he might've changed his mind. And we're very much like that. It's a big Métis family, the Riel family. And I should clarify for those of you who don't know, when I speak of the Riel family, Riel himself has, Louis Riel himself has no living descendants today. He had three children, none of them had children. So when I speak of the Riel family today, we are the

descendants of his brothers and sisters. And we care about this. It is something all of you know; the Métis people know what it's like to be an Aboriginal person in Canada. The labels you live with are the worst labels that we ascribe to any human being on the planet: we're dirty, we're, we're drunks, we're stupid, we're lazy, we are everything. Métis people bear one more of those: we're traitors. We have these brands on our foreheads, so we're dirty, drunken, stupid, lazy traitors. And the Riel family wears those labels more visibly than other Métis do, because we couldn't escape them. And I grew up in St. Boniface and St. Vital in Manitoba, and my aunts and uncles, my dad, my family, we still had, when I was kid, stores we couldn't go into because, pardon my language, fucking Riels. We were not allowed into stores. I had teachers who would not speak to me for a whole year because I was a Riel.

My family dealt with this because we were thought of as traitors on a daily basis. My aunties and uncles—this is something they feel so strongly—some of my aunts and uncles can barely talk, it is such a personal feeling for them, what they lived with in their lives. So, as I said, we're a bit divided in the family. Some of them want him exonerated because they want that part of their lives to be gone, they want to be able to hold up their heads and not have people discriminate against them because they're Riels. Others think that it won't make any difference, and I have to say I'm in that camp. I'm in the camp that says if we did it, it would be as it like this CBC show. You'd be a ten-day wonder or a one-day wonder, and then it would be over, and it would not change anybody's mind about what really happened in 1885.

Now, you have in your materials a paper that I've written on this topic, and I'm not gonna wander you through it 'cause it's quite a legal paper, on it. But the essence of it is this: I think that there is great value in the ongoing discussion about Riel, not because of Riel himself. Riel, himself, never thought he was the one to be discussing. He didn't seek his own exoneration. He gave himself up for trial in order to have another forum to debate this. He could have escaped to the United States, as Gabriel Dumont did. He didn't have to be captured and stand trial and be hung. He didn't have to do it. It

was a choice to do it. Now, whether you consider that misguided or not, that's an opinion for today. But the fact is, he made a choice to do that. So, it wasn't a choice made for his own personal safety, or his own life. It was a choice made to continue the battle that he had been fighting all his life, for the benefit of the Métis people.

Now, you'll notice that Mr. Griffiths talked for this whole time, and he never once, I think, said the word "Métis people." For him, Riel is about Riel and Riel alone. Riel is dissociated from the Métis, and Riel is dissociated from today, from what exactly what I'm telling you, which is that it is not ancient history. Riel is part of our everyday life and existence, he is our family. He is not just the Riel family's best and brightest son, he's your best and brightest son. And we need to think about what we, whether we want to do anything with that.

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