

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 5

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Jean Teillet: So in my paper, I talk about the value of the debate. I think it is valuable to talk about this, I think it's right. Riel should not be a myth, he shouldn't move into the realm of the unassailable. We should be talking about him, and, in fact, we do. Barely two years goes by in the Canadian history where we do not get intimately involved for one reason or another in some intense debate about Louis Riel, and I say that's a good thing to do. There are members of my family who say he should be exonerated, that we should push forward with these exoneration bills. My cousin Leo's a big fan of this one, not because he thinks that they'll ever pass, but just because it keeps the issue alive, and he thinks, "Well, that's fine," and he's, as far as he's concerned, the government will never do a government bill. It will never pass and we all know, or anybody who has anything to do with the government knows that the ability of a private member's bill to get anywhere is almost zero. We have also seen that private members take advantage of these things. Denis Coderre, who's now our Minister of Immigration, rode the heels of the Riel issue right into cabinet. Right? Rejean Cocque [?], is now in Cabinet, all of these people, they ride it, they use the Riel family, they use Louis Riel, and they use you, in order to get their political careers advanced. And they never think about the Métis people. None of this exoneration of Riel, or this Riel show, has anything to do with the Métis people, and that is why I have a hard time with it.

I think the debate is valuable, but I think that the debate is only valuable if it has to do with the Métis people, for which Louis Riel died, for which he fought with his life and died. And that's the point of this whole thing, is that it's useful to have an apology or some kind of exoneration only if it's a part of a meaningful process that addresses the Métis people. And let me give you an example of where this has happened in the world, and I'm

looking at South Africa. In the big regime change that happened just a few years ago, they knew there was tremendous anger. The people, the black people in South Africa were so angry about apartheid and everything that had happened, and so in an effort to keep the peace, there was an agreement before the regime change between the white apartheid government and the incoming Mandela government. It was an agreement to create the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was an agreement that was necessary for people to say their stories, that it had to go on the record so that South Africa could not continue to tell the world that all of these atrocities had never happened. Once it was on the record, they could never again say that was all lies, that they didn't do it, that it didn't happen. And as a part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, they gave that commission amnesty powers. They were ele-, they'd set up principles and a body, and they heard stories from people on both sides of the, of the issue. And they issued, I think they heard over 7,000 amnesty applications, and they issued over a thousand—they call it amnesties, but it's actually a pardon. Amnesty is given to a group of people, pardon is the same thing given to an individual. And so they issued over a thousand of them, but they rejected people. Now the point of this is, the point that I'm trying to make here is, that those amnesties were not isolated. It was not just a, "Oh, okay, you're forgiven for what you did," and there's nothing more that comes with it. What came with it was financial reparation recommendations. Also, the kind of social symbolic recommendations, like Paul Chartrand was talking about, you know, a Louis Riel Day or a statue or a street renaming—all that kind of stuff, those came along with it, too.

But what I'm trying to say is this: Riel cannot be and we can never allow him to be, extracted from the Métis people, and that was what they did in South Africa. They made sure that the amnesty or exoneration for the people who had done wrong was accompanied by further steps, part of a process, for trying to make peace or reconciliation with the people, and that is what is fundamentally missing with all of this talk about Riel. It is an isolated thing. It is the one man to blame back then. They hung him for that,

and now it'll be the one man to exonerate, and nothing will be furthered from it. And that is what I think we must resist always. We must say that, yes, we may agree to exoneration for Riel someday, but only if it's a part of a meaningful package that comes together at, that has, addresses the issues. And I don't mean tokenism because otherwise that's what it is. The other way to look at it might be this, which is to note that this is a long history. This kind of use of the pardon, and I've documented it in my paper. Long, long history of using pardons or exoneration or bills to do this kind of thing. They never change what you really thought about what went on.

And just cast your mind back to one of the most famous ones, which is Ford's pardon of Nixon. Now you might remember that, right? Nixon, Nixon was up to be, supposed to be impeached, right? And in order to forestall impeachment, he agreed to step down from the presidency of the United States, but there was a package deal. Ford is the vice-president. He's gonna take over, and the package deal was this: Ford would pardon Nixon, even before he got charged with anything, right? So it's this in-advance pardon for anything that he might have done, right? And they did that, right? So they pardoned him. Now I want to tell you that Nixon's people, lawyers, actually investigated the idea that Nixon might pardon himself, if you want to examine how, how useful this tool is, right? To, for political expediency, he made Nixon seriously consider pardoning himself in advance of being charged of anything. But he didn't do that, right? So, but Ford did it, and, and in advance of that. Now, I want to ask you, anybody who was around in Watergate days, did the pardon of Ford, by Ford of Nixon, did that change your idea of Nixon one iota, of what he did? Did it change in any way how you felt about the events of Watergate, or this man who walked around saying, "I am not a crook"? I would venture to guess that most of you would say no. And I would say to you that that is precisely what will happen with Riel. Pardons or a bill, it doesn't matter how you do it. The legal effect is the same—they never lose their taint of mercy, they never lose the taint that, that the person actually did the deed for which they've been convicted. They never change your idea about the history of the past. So I'd say that the only

lasting effect from this would be that the government would have appeared to have exonerated itself. And I think that it's been suggested before,—I'm not unique in suggesting this or new—but I think that, in fact, what might be a better way to go is that the Métis people, we should seriously think about pardoning the government.

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