

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

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Saskatoon

Day 2 – Tape 6

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Lisa Weber: So I'm gonna talk a bit about the Ewing Commission, which was the formal commission established by the province to deal, or to quote "investigate the Half-breed problem" is what it was referred to. So I've highlighted four areas that I want to talk about in this context about the Commission. 'Kay, so first of all, the problem. So in order to justify its action, the province, as in any, any province, provincial government will do, this is how do we bring this within our jurisdiction to deal with it? We can't just go out and do it if it's not within our jurisdiction, right? So they had the juris-, I don't have the fancy flags that Larry had. So you had Half-breed Métis who were landless, the road allowance people, you heard, have heard reference to that phrase undoubtedly. Métis people are certainly familiar with that phrase. You also, however, at this point in time had many non-treaty or non-status Indians who were in equally bad social circumstances as a result of the Depression, having lost their status through changes to the *Indian Act* and therefore, losing the right to reside on reserve lands, resulted in them too facing the same situations. What quite often happened is that they would gravitate to the same communities, quite often, as these landless Métis. In the academic literature it is referred to, as they, they would quite often sort of settle near reserve lands, but that's definitive. 'Kay, so to deal with all of these social issues within their proper jurisdiction, the province characterized it as dealing with quote "problems of health, education, and welfare pursuant to the provincial *Public Enquiries Act*."

Secondly, I wanted to talk about the subjects or the people, but it's the subjects who were studied in the Half-breed Commission. So the Commission stated that the subjects were quote "by either term Métis or Half-breed, and that means a person of mixed-blood, White and Indian, who

lives the life of the ordinary Indian and includes a non-treaty Indian," quote. Now, it's very significant and in 19-, in 1930 non-treaty Indians included those persons who had lost their status, as I said. So we have here, the Commission is treating non-treaty Indians the same as the Métis in this all-encompassing study of the social conditions, and that's, you know, that's legitimate. I mean, that was their jurisdiction to deal with social issues.

Thirdly, the proceedings. When I said that, initially, the Métis Association had evolved as a result of the advocacy or the desire by the people to politically reorganize themselves for the improvement of their lives, it was the Métis Association. So the Métis Association was, was lobbying with the provincial government that early on in the Commission proceedings, that it was by virtue of rights, of rights of land through the failure of the scrip. They were saying in their submissions in Edmonton very early on in the proceedings, the situation that people are in socially is certainly contributed by the failure of the scrip. But the Commission refused to talk about that. And I've got a quote here. And you can see this, I mean, you can all see the tone in the transcript. This is from the Commission. Quote "I do not see much good in raking up any mistakes that were made years ago. Do you wish to establish that there was a moral responsibility on past governments of the condition of the Half-breed population today? I'm simply saying that they will not get as far to harp on what has happened in the past," unquote. So it appears that the Commission did not, commissioners did not want to talk about Métis land entitlement. And further that if the Métis representatives of the MAA who were trying to talk about it, trying to make that connection that without land we have no place to live, without a place to live and to grow our gardens and to raise our children, we're going to be faced with this hardship, but they wouldn't, they wouldn't go there. They said, "We're not going there, and if you want to go there, then there's no point to this."

So the solution said, I was talking about four areas. There was three points that I wanted to make about this. So the Métis colonies were the proposed recommendation of the Commission after doing its, it had about

thirty-five community hearings after the proceedings in Edmonton. They were proposing land as the solution after they wouldn't talk about land with the Métis Association. The proposed Métis colonies be established pursuant to the *Métis Population Betterment Act* of 1938.

So, if you recall, further to that, the Ewing Commission had specified that the Half-breed subjects included non-treaty Indians. It explicitly said that in the report that this study includes non-treaty Indians and that non-treaty Indians includes people who are enfranchised. The legislation, however, which was enacted for the purpose of implementing the recommendations of the Commission, the *Métis Population Betterment Act*, later to be known as the *Métis Betterment Act*, it explicitly excluded Indians—those Indians, I should say, who were by the Commission's own definition included in the study. And I wish I would have brought that section of the *Act*, but within the definition section, it specifically says that Métis includes person, persons of mixed blood, but does not include either an Indian or non-treaty Indian, okay? Further, what's, what's also significant about this legislation is that it provided that the minister would, or could, rather, establish settlement associations for the purpose of management of the settlement areas, okay? And in doing so, I would submit that would, that would basically cut off any involvement of the Métis Association of Alberta as the political representative. The MAA had been involved in, in bringing the study together in, in advocating with the province to do something. The Commission was the result of those efforts. Now, as a result their solution in establishing these settlement areas, they cut off, cut off the representation of the MAA unless they would come to the settlements and live. Then they could perhaps become a member of the board. So they were excluded and replaced by the settlement councils, which were established at each area. At each settlement area, a supervisor would also be appointed by the province, and they would operate under the very strict supervision of the provincial government. So this, arguably, I would say would be the first obvious split between the Métis Association and the settlements.

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