

CHAPTER FIVE

The Government Takes Control of Native Dissent

The federal government intended to control the anticipated local resistance to its policies for the Canadian West through its appointments to the North West Council and by using a military (or police) force in the West should this prove necessary. Sir John A. Macdonald used the Department of the Interior both as his instrument for the settling of the west and as a means of ensuring its continued political and economic domination over the North West Territories.

The plans contained in the National Policy were designed to ensure that the West would be developed primarily for the benefit of the CPR syndicate and the colonization companies at the expense of the Native peoples and the incoming European settlers. The conflicts that developed with the Indians, the Metis and the settlers as a result of the National Policy were the various expressions of resistance to this colonization scheme. Before the rich resources of the West could be developed, new patterns of ownership had to be established. The National Policy required that the land in the West eventually be privately owned;¹ national and international developers would eventually obtain the land for profitable resale to the new settlers and there would be no place for the Natives in the new social order. Some conflict was therefore inevitable. Surely the government did not expect the Natives to passively abandon their centuries-old way of life and their land base without some resistance.

As a result of the lessons learned during the Red River conflict, the federal government began a gradual military buildup throughout the North West Territories. Police were deployed in a systematic fashion; garrisons were placed at strategic locations according to the long-term plans which were based upon the proposed location of the transcontinental railway and on potential strategic military needs.

In 1873, NWMP Colonel Robertson-Ross was asked to make an assessment of Indian military potential in the West; he uncovered some surprising facts. He followed the proposed Pine River Pass route for the main line of the CPR to determine where troop garrisons should be placed. And he carefully tallied the numbers of Indian men capable of waging war, as well as

the types of weapons available in each Indian band. The following extract is typical of his, and other, police reports:

It appears that the tribe which is the most numerous and war like of the Plains Indians in the Dominion Territory is divided into five distinct clans, each band under its own Chief . . . These bands are known as follows: 1st the Sik-Si-Ka (or Blackfoot proper) This band numbers about 700 men, 1000 women, 1100 children, possessing about 800 horses, 400 dogs and having the following arms:

105 rifles	260 revolvers	436 flint guns
286 bows	78 spears	37 war axes ²

In the Indian tribes he surveyed, there was a combined population of 8,830, and he estimated that at best, only about a thousand were males who were the right age for combat. He concluded that the entire Blackfoot confederacy “could bring into the field no more than 1,000 men, if as many.”³ Clearly, the Indian threat was not as great as the government had anticipated. The Plains Indians’ strength was on the wane. Robertson-Ross had discovered among certain of the plains tribes an unusually low ratio of potential fighting men among the population. The Plains Indians had been weakened by devastating epidemics of smallpox, particularly during the previous two decades, and continued to be ravaged by the disease throughout the 1870s. The loss of the buffalo spelled further disaster for the survivors of the plagues and epidemics; the whole Indian economy had depended upon the buffalo, and their disappearance was a monumental catastrophe for the Indians.

Robertson-Ross estimated that there were some 2,000 Metis people in the Northwest in 1873. He felt that those Metis who had settled around what is now Prince Albert would have to be watched as closely as the Indians were. He therefore recommended the placement of 500 mounted riflemen across the West. They were to be distributed strategically in detachments of no less than fifty men. He suggested that these troops be garrisoned initially at Portage la Prairie, Fort Ellice, Fort Carlton, Fort Pitt and the Edmonton district. In April 1876, Colonel French recommended Battleford as the location for a major police garrison. He wrote the minister of justice:

I beg to state that it is my deliberate opinion — that any serious trouble that the government might hereafter have with the Indians will be within a hundred miles of Battleford.⁴

French’s assessment proved to be accurate. His recommendations were followed and a major garrison was soon established at Battleford.

The NWMP felt that it was the Metis, not the Indians, who presented the most serious threat; indeed, they saw the Metis as the leaders of any potential uprising in the West. In 1878, therefore, the NWMP presented a plan for the

co-option of the Metis. NWMP Commissioner Macleod wrote to the secretary of state in Ottawa:

I am in hopes of either seeing the different bands of Indians and [Metis] and hearing their views . . . or if I am unable to do this I hope that petitions representing their views will be presented to the North West Council, where I can assure them that they will receive every attention. I am personally very desirous that the [mixed blood] element will be represented in the Council at its next meeting. As I feel satisfied that the dissatisfaction which exists amongst these Indians is stirred up by this class. I think it would be well if you would see as many of them as possible and try to get them to petition the Council setting forth what they think.⁵

Macleod's message was clear. He recognized that the Metis were the key to whether there would be peace or war on the frontier. Macleod was advising his superiors to co-opt the Metis, to involve them with the North West Council where their energies could be expended in peaceful dialogue. Following his advice, Pascal Breland, a French-speaking Metis who had sided with the government during the Red River crisis, was appointed to the North West Council in 1882, just when Metis militancy was beginning to surface again.

The deployment of troops across the West was at first based on anticipated organized resistance from the Indians and Metis. However, the National Policy was creating enemies among the Halfbreed and European groups in the West as well. It would be necessary to exert some kind of coercive social control over these groups as well as on the Indians and Metis if the plans to develop the West contained in the National Policy were to be successfully employed.

The governor general appointed the members of the first North West Council on December 28, 1872. Its first meeting was held on March 8, 1873. But since the federal government could disallow any ordinance passed by the North West Council, and since it retained direct control of the NWMP, the council was in every sense powerless as a political body. Whatever its members' intentions were toward the inhabitants of the Northwest, the council was virtually powerless to bring about legislation that would benefit the local residents. Under local pressure, and in order to maintain appearances, the council did suggest certain reform legislation from time to time, which was unfortunately ignored in Ottawa. Members of the council complained that

. . . the Privy Council has not been pleased to communicate their approval or disapproval of the legislation and many resolutions adapted by Council at their meetings Such long delay has paralyzed the action of this Council.⁶

The council was extremely effective, however, as an administrative body for Ottawa's colonial policies in the West. Although it was unable to redress western grievances, the council was at least effective as a means of directing and channelling western discontent into controllable forms of conflict. It did faithfully administer Ottawa's policies in the West, but at the same time, it often appeared to be championing the rights of the local people. At various times the council requested surveys for the settlers, sought reform in the homestead regulations, protested against high tariffs on farm implements, and spoke against the system of granting immense tracts of land to the colonization companies.⁷ None of these complaints resulted in positive action, however, and as the years went by, people began seeking other solutions to the problems they felt were imposed upon them by the federal government.

PROTEST THROUGH DIRECT ACTION

There were four distinct groups of people in the Northwest during this critical era (1875-1885), each with its own particular set of grievances against the federal government. They were the Indians, the French-speaking Metis, the English-speaking Halfbreeds, and the European settlers. Although the federal government was the common enemy, the four groups were unable to unite their efforts into a common struggle. Cultural and religious differences, as well as internal class conflict, kept them apart. In addition, the Indians were divided among themselves because of historical tribal enmities and a long history of inter-tribal warfare.

The European population of the Northwest was divided into two sharply conflicting groups: the speculators and businessmen on the one hand; and the settlers on the other. Both of these groups, however, were allowed into the new wheat economy. For them, protest most often took the form of bargaining with the federal government when it imposed tariffs and generally administered the West according to the needs of the developing Eastern industrialists. Many of the Halfbreed residents who took up land in the region were aligned with the European settlers, since they too had entered into the new wheat economy as commercial producers of grain.

For the Indians and French-speaking Metis, however, the story was vastly different. The lands they occupied were coveted by the European speculators who owned and controlled the colonization companies. Many of the federal government's members, senators and bureaucrats were heavily involved in the profit-making colonization scheme, and the government was therefore a powerful force in opposition to the indigenous people. The lands they occupied were to be used for speculation, involving immigrants, and for the production of wheat, and there was no place in the new order for the Indians and Metis. Indians were being placed on reserves according to the terms of the treaties, but it was unclear what fate lay in store for the Metis.

Indians and Metis were seen by the federal government as constituting a surplus population, that is, a population belonging to a previous economic order — the fur trade. Because their lands were to be expropriated in various legal ways, they could not be fitted into the new agricultural system as producers of grain. They were therefore seen as people who stood in the way of progress.

The Cree and Blackfoot Indians of the plains did not enter into a program of petitioning as did the non-Indian ethnic groups. Largely, Indian resistance took on a unique form. Lacking an independent economic base after the buffalo had disappeared, weakened by disease and internal warfare, the Indians could do little but settle on reserves according to the terms dictated to them by the federal government through the treaty process.

Farm instructors were sent to the reserves to help with the transition; however, the instructors were often chosen on the basis of loyalty to the government and not for their agricultural expertise, so the government's program of agricultural instruction on reserves was bound to fail. Lacking capital for sufficient equipment and given the inadequacy of the instructors, the Indians on reserves failed to achieve self-sufficiency based on a new food supply. The program was successful in one way, however. It ensured that the federal government held in its hands the ultimate weapon of social control, that of the food supply: the failure of the agricultural program for Indians gave the government monopoly control over the Indian food supply. Indeed, the farm instructors and Indian agents were directed to manipulate food distribution as a means of preventing Indian militants from forming organized resistance groups. Withholding food from Indian militants was in fact official government policy. Hayter Reed, in charge of the Department of Indian Affairs between 1883 and 1893, complained to Lieutenant Governor Edgar Dewdney that the police were often sharing their rations with the militant Indian factions. In 1883, Reed wrote Lieutenant Governor Dewdney:

One thing should certainly be done and it is that the Mounted Police be debarred from rationing our Indians. Indian agent Rae complains that many of his worst characters are refused by him only to go to the barracks and receive a belly full.⁸

The Metis, too, shared their meagre food supply with their Indian cousins. Gabriel Dumont complained to Mr. Forget, the French-speaking clerk of the North West Council:

The government should not be surprised if we side with the Indians. They are our relatives, and when they are starving they come to us for relief and we have to feed them The government is not doing right by them I heard the speeches and the explanations given of the Treaty, not only that they would live as well as they had before, but better They are allowed to go about starving and the burden of feeding them falls on us.⁹

By 1884, most of the Indians, except for some of the northern Cree tribes who were still offering resistance, were settled on reserves. Chief Big Bear became a symbol of defiance for the Plains Indians, refusing to be confined on a reserve. In May 1884, Indian Agent Rae attempted to force Big Bear and his band onto a reserve by threatening to cut off food rations.¹⁰ Stung by the insult, Big Bear immediately sent runners to Edmonton, Carlton and Battleford, asking all chiefs and Indians to meet him at Battleford for a thirst dance in June.

Although the thirst dance was an ancient religious festival, it was clear that Big Bear was using it to mobilize the western Indians for a major confrontation with the police at their stronghold in Battleford. Because of the efficiency of the sophisticated surveillance network, however, the police and the Department of Indian Affairs were aware of the Indians' plans well in advance of the event. Hayter Reed knew that Chiefs Mis-Ta-Wa-Sis and Ahta Koop were against such a confrontation, and informed Dewdney: "I am told that Big Bear advocated strong measures; I am told he even went so far as to suggest the killing of agents and superior officials." Reed concluded, however: "Little need be feared if the Metis do not rise."¹¹ Reed's analysis of the situation proved to be correct. However, many bands of Indians did join Big Bear for the thirst dance at Battleford, and armed conflict was only narrowly averted. During the ceremony, it became obvious that some of the chiefs had contrived to force a confrontation with the police, who were vastly outnumbered. The *Saskatchewan Herald* reported on June 28, 1884:

The Indians had a carefully prepared program That it was not carried out was due to a miscalculation as to how much provocation it would take to make the police open fire on them When the assault was committed by the Indians on farming instructor Craig and the warrant issued for the arrest of the offenders the Indians thought their opportunity had come. The time and circumstances were highly favourable, as Indians from all sections of this and neighbouring districts were assembled to participate in one of their most exciting religious festivals and it was improbable that so large a number of their fighting men could be got together on any other occasion.¹²

Big Bear's plans were thwarted by the actions of two men. Instead of a confrontation between superior forces of the Indian bands and the police, Major L. N. F. Crozier and a Halfbreed scout named William McKay made the arrest without mobilizing the rest of the police force. Crozier and McKay calmly rode into the shouting crowd, many of whom were brandishing weapons, and without drawing their revolvers, boldly arrested the suspects. Big Bear refused to let his men fire first. When the police refused to either demonstrate a show of force or use their firearms to make the arrest, Big Bear's chance to start a military conflict under a situation contrived in his favour did not materialize.

By 1884, some officials in the West, motivated by concern for the Indians and by fear of an uprising, wrote to the government on their behalf. Charles Rouleau, stipendiary magistrate for the Northwest, wrote to Dewdney asking for more food for the Indians, and informing him that the crops had failed on all the reserves. He suggested that in order to prevent starvation and further misery, the Indian agents should be given more latitude in the exercise of their judgement with provisions. He also suggested an additional expenditure of thirty or forty thousand dollars for food and supplies for the Indians living on reserves.¹³ Prime Minister Macdonald answered this, and other queries about Indian starvation, in a letter to Lieutenant Governor Dewdney, dated September 2, 1884:

No amount of concessions will prevent starving people from grumbling and agitating. I have made up my mind to ask Parliament next session to increase the Mounted Police force.¹⁴

This response shows that the government was forcing the Indians into a position of dependency rather than assisting them to create a new agricultural economy in which they could become self-sufficient and perhaps strong militarily.

Governor Morris had contributed significantly to the settling of the Indian question by successfully negotiating the treaties that placed them on their reserves. This having been accomplished, the Indians would now come under the control of the police, the Department of Indians Affairs, and the priests who doled out a meagre food supply to those who did not resist the Queen's policies.

The Metis resistance took on a vastly different form. Just as NWMP Commissioner Macleod had hoped, expression of their dissatisfaction was channelled into a peaceful program. After the North West Council had proven to be ineffective as a means of redressing their grievances, the Metis, under Father André's guidance, began a program of petitioning the federal government. This program prevailed right up until the beginning of armed hostilities in 1885.

The Metis petitions of the early 1870s had focussed on demands for laws to protect the buffalo, for hunting and fishing rights, and for the right of the Catholic Church to locate in Metis communities. The petitions of the early 1880s, on the other hand, concentrated on the demand for title to the lands they occupied. The Metis sent dozens of petitions to the lieutenant governor and other officials of the North West Council, to the Department of the Interior, and directly to Prime Minister Macdonald.¹⁵

In 1881, Father André joined in a major petition with Lawrence Clarke, who was the elected representative for the District of Lorne. This lengthy petition asked for a land office in Prince Albert and for surveys of existing

farms as well as title to the lands occupied by the settlers of the region.¹⁶ It was sent to the lieutenant governor and then forwarded to Prime Minister John A. Macdonald. As a result of this petition, surveys were carried out for many Halfbreed and European settlers in the region. However, nothing was done for the Metis, who wanted their lands surveyed according to the layout of their existing farms. Because of the government's failure to survey these lands, incoming settlers were beginning to jump some of the Metis claims. A man named J. J. Kelly jumped Father André's claim at Duck Lake, built a house on the property, and began to farm it for himself.¹⁷

In January 1882, the Metis again petitioned the government for the type of survey that would enable them to keep their long, narrow farms with the existing river frontage.¹⁸ The request was refused, even though the Halfbreed residents of the region had been successful in getting this type of survey and were granted title to the lands they occupied. By 1884, in fact, most of the European and Halfbreed settlers had been dealt with in similar manner and had title to their lands.¹⁹ Only the French-speaking Metis located on the properties owned by the Prince Albert Colonization Company had been refused. These unexplained discrepancies in the administration of the law in the North West Territories were recognized by the Metis and many others who sympathized with them. One Anglican missionary wrote:

There seemed to be no recognized law except the decision of a Magistrate, and no one could tell what this would be or the code that might rule him. There was, in fact, no law, although there was supposed to be a Government. We were not in Ontario, or Quebec, or Manitoba. We were in an undefined territory, subject to the man who happened to be in office, and he was a great distance from his superiors and found no difficulty in shielding himself behind his own reports. If a man took a pair of stockings from the Hudson's Bay Company's store he was quickly arrested and punished, but if he trespassed on land, and cut down timber of great worth to the settler who had fenced it and protected it from prairie fires, the settler was informed that he had no property in the soil or in the trees.²⁰

The Metis, having lost the buffalo as a food source and hoping to take part in the commercial production of wheat along with their neighbours, petitioned the federal government to assist them financially for the acquisition of farm implements. One petition stated:

Those implements, excessively scarce, are only sold here at prices so exorbitant that your petitioners are for the most part unable to procure any.²¹

Other petitions complained about the vast amount of lands tied up in the CPR reserves and asked that people who had been living on these lands prior to their acquisition by the CPR should be compensated for being evicted. This

petition called for the issue of scrip to all those Metis who had not received it under the terms of the Manitoba Act of 1870. It also requested that a commission be appointed to deal with these matters.²² Again, no government action was taken on any of these grievances.

The federal government's original plan for the CPR saw Prince Albert and the surrounding region as a major rail centre. The Metis communities of the district were, therefore, located on lands that were vital to the owners of the Prince Albert Colonization Company and the CPR.

The following petition is typical of the dozens sent to the government by the Metis over the years. It contains most of the concerns of the Metis who were not receiving title to the lands they occupied. Gabriel Dumont affixed his mark to this petition, along with the signatures of forty-six other Metis, residents of Batoche. It is quoted extensively because it identifies both the tone and the content of the requests that were so often made to the government by the Metis.

Compelled, most of us, to abandon the prairie, which can no longer furnish us the means of subsistence, we came in large numbers and settled on the south branch of the Saskatchewan; pleased with the land and the country we set ourselves actively to work clearing the land We were compelled to occupy lands not yet surveyed, being ignorant, for the most part, also, of the regulations of the Government respecting Dominion lands. Great then was our astonishment and perplexity when we were notified that when the lands are surveyed we shall be obliged to pay \$2.00 an acre to the Government, if our lands are included in odd-numbered sections. We desire, moreover, to keep close together, in order more easily to secure a school and a church. We are poor people and cannot pay for our land without utter ruin, and losing the fruits of our labour and seeing our lands pass into the hands of strangers, will go to the land office at Prince Albert and pay the amount fixed by the Government. In our anxiety we appeal to your sense of justice as Minister of the Interior and head of the Government, and beg you to reassure us speedily, by directing that we shall not be disturbed on our lands, and that the Government grant us the privilege as considering us as occupants of even-numbered sections, since we have occupied these lands in good faith. Having so long held this country as its masters and so often defended it against the Indians at the price of our blood, we consider it not asking too much to request that the Government allow us to occupy our lands in peace, and that exception be made of its regulations, by making to the [Metis] of the Northwest free grants of land. We also pray that you would direct that the lots be surveyed along the river ten chains in width by two miles in depth, this mode of division being the long-established usage of the country. This would render it more easy for us to know the limits of our several lots. We trust sir, that you will grant a favourable hearing to this our petition, and that you will make your decision as soon as possible. We await it with great anxiety, and pray God to protect you and keep you for the direction of this great country which you so wisely govern.²³

None of the requests made in this, or other, petitions were granted to the Metis. The owners of the Prince Albert Colonization Company had other plans for this land, as did the CPR. The federal government, it seemed, did not take into account the needs of the Metis, even though it was widely known by government authorities that the position of the Metis was crucial to whether there was peace or war in the Northwest. Time and again local officials had warned federal authorities that they must satisfy the demands of the Metis or risk a general uprising, including an Indian war. The federal government was not as concerned about a general Indian uprising as were the settlers of the West. Government officials, on the basis of information given by their Indian agents and the police, were aware of the weakness of the Indians, their lack of weapons, lack of unity and, most of all, their dependence on a government food supply.

The government would allow neither the Metis nor the Indians into the new wheat economy, whatever the price in terms of social turmoil; the Prince Albert Colonization Company and the CPR wanted to keep Native lands for themselves. The reason given by the federal government for denying land claims to the Metis in 1884, even though all others had been satisfied, was that Mr. Pearce, the government claims agent, "could not speak French and as the employment of an interpreter would have entailed expense, no inquiry was made into the special grievances of the French Halfbreeds [the Metis]."²⁴

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1885, the federal government did not make public the fact that the Metis had appealed to them over a period of years through this campaign of petitions. In fact, many of the petitions were buried in the files of the Department of the Interior until after the 1885 "rebellion." Even then, they were brought down for discussion in Parliament only because of pressure placed upon the Conservative government by the Liberal opposition. Then, in response to the furor being raised over the government's treatment of the Metis, the secretary of state wrote in an open letter to the public:

If the [Metis] had serious complaints against the Canadian Government, the ordinary methods of petition was [sic] open to them as to every free citizen. They did not avail themselves of it.²⁵

This was, of course, a blatant lie designed to hide the facts from the Canadian electorate.