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It's time for the Metis nation to build a new house

I had the honor recently of speaking at a SUNTEP graduation. As I looked out at the sea of faces my heart swelled with pride and considerable awe remembering that it was not all that long ago when we as Métis people were not allowed to go to school.

For many of us the dream of a graduation from a university was almost an impossible one. The ceremony also reminded me that the privilege of an education is the result of many years of struggle on the part of our parents and past Métis leaders, many of whom have passed on.

And so the present state of our political organization brings double pain when we remember how hard a fight it has been to arrive at this place and to have it so dishonored by a gang of despicable thugs. What else can you call those who cheat, steal and commit fraud on the graves of hard working people?

But I'm not here to write about thugs; rather I want to ask you, the Métis people of Saskatchewan, what are we going to do about this mess in this year of 2006, the one hundred year anniversary of Gabriel Dumont's death. A man who couldn't read or write, but dreamed of an education and a better way of life for his people and who I might add, fought with honor for it.

It has been nearly a year since the Métis Electoral Panel finished its report. It has been two years since the Lampard Report and four years since the Poitras Report and nothing has happened to begin the process of change, nor has there been much movement in the camps of the opposition.

It seems no one can come up with a plan of action which I find pretty scary considering they all believe they are capable of leadership. Recently, I spent several interesting hours with a group of women who came up with these suggestions and I agreed to write them in this column.

The first one is easy: we can practice the cultural law of "non interference." In other words, we can pretend nothing happened and carry on. Number two, we can get angry, have meetings and burn ourselves out speaking loudly about the injustice of it all and then go home frustrated at our impotence or, and this is the big one, we can come together and rebuild, and by rebuild, we don't mean have a new election.

We mean build a whole new house. Recognize that the old one is flawed and that we need to start from scratch. Go out and get new, straight longs and build a house with a foundation and structure solidly grounded in the Métis community. Seriously, where did this idea of Ministers and Governors and Senators come from anyway? Certainly not from the old governance structures of the Métis, that's for sure. Anyways, never mind about that because building a new house is also about new leadership and a new vision, a whole new way of life.

As a young woman and leader in the 1970s, I spent a lot of time visiting with the late Malcolm Norris and I remember him saying that if as a political organization we accepted government grants and dollars we would set our movement back 50 years. His advice was for us to finance our organizations through membership fees and in that way we would be able to lobby from a strong and independent place much like the unions, who wield considerable power in this country.

Malcolm did not advocate separation from state nor did he oppose government dollars. He believed, as many of us do, that governments are responsible for services and programs for Métis people just as they are for all their citizens and it should be the role of our political organization to lobby for those services and programs to the best of their ability.

They can't do that when government owns the house that is only common sense. My late father, who also opposed government funding for political organizations once said, "When you go hunting moose you don't ask them for the bullets."

So the suggestion from my lady friends is a new house, new leadership and a new vision that is financed by our membership. We keep Gabriel Dumont Institute and all the affiliates; we lobby governments to continue funding them to be strong, healthy institutions and programs, able to support in everyway possible a good inheritance for our children and future generations.

And for those who say impossible, we are too poor; we say of course we can do it if that is what we choose to do. Just look around at all the almost impossible things we have already done. How could we possibly fail, have faith.

Thank you SUNTEP graduates for giving me the courage to speak out. Thank you, smart wonderful women for the lively discussion and thank you Marge and Joanna for such a great evening. You are wonderful kokoms and sisters.