

THE THEMES IN MURRAY DOBBIN'S LECTURE

"You cannot know where you are going unless you know where you've come from."

- Maria Campbell

There is no human group, Native or White that can successfully plan their futures or deal with present community problems without knowing their history. The communities we live in today are the result of many factors, including decisions that may have been made twenty, fifty, or even a hundred years ago. These decisions were not accidents and they were not simply the result of the actions of specific individuals.

Ever since men and women lived in bands or tribes they have been affected by social and economic systems which operate whether or not individuals want them to. Some of these systems--like the fur trade--are world wide systems, affecting millions of people. They are tremendously powerful--far more powerful than even the most powerful leader in history.

There is a lesson to be learned from our recognition of the influence of these larger systems on our lives. If we look for solutions to problems by looking just at the people who carry out decisions (such as a government employee), we will fail to find solutions. And if we try to solve our individual problems by ourselves (as if they were just personal problems) we will all fail. History shows that human progress (better living conditions, better health, education, etc.) comes when people act together, facing the "systems" or "institutions" which create the problems in the first place.

Native Peoples have been colonized in Canada and part of what this "colonization" has meant is that their language, culture and history has been deliberately distorted to make it look as though Native people are responsible for their own problems. If we take a closer look at Native history, however, we find a very different story--a story of huge empires built out of Europe. Those empires have forced Native people everywhere to take part in them.

The fur trade in Canada--which began almost 400 years ago--is a good example. Slavery in Africa, the destruction of Indian civilizations in South America, the British take-over of India--all of these developments were part of a system called "colonialism". And in every example, wealth from all over the world poured into Europe. The people producing this wealth--black slaves from Africa, Indians in North America--got almost nothing for their work. For example, when the word "trade" is used to describe the fur business with the Indians and Metis, we could just as easily use the word "robbery". The fur traders got up to twenty times as much money for a beaver hide as they paid the Indian. And when an Indian bought a gun or an axe from the trader he had to pay four or five times as much as a White man.

The Aboriginal peoples of the world did not have any choice about creating wealth for the Europeans: they were forced to work. In Canada the Indian people became dependent on European goods--guns, gunpowder, iron axes, knives, and kettles--that they could not make themselves. Over time, they became so dependent on European goods that they could not survive without them. Having lost the knowledge of how to live with their own technology, the Indians faced starvation unless they brought fur to the trader.

In the fur "trade" Indians and Metis (or "Half Breeds") had different jobs. Indians were only allowed to trap fur--because if they didn't trap, there would have been no fur (they were the ones who were the experts) and no profit for the Europeans. The Metis and Half Breeds would trap if they wanted to but it was the hardest work--and the traders allowed the Metis to do other work: they were the go-betweens (middlemen) between the White trader and the Indian trapper. They worked for the Hudson's Bay Company--and they paid less for goods than the Indians were charged. But this doesn't mean that they had an easy time of it; they were also extremely exploited. The Metis had to work for the Company and buy their goods from the Company because there was no one else to work for or buy from. So the Company paid whatever it wanted for the work the Metis did--usually just enough for the worker to survive.

The whole fur business system was like a pyramid. There was a handful of "bigshots" at the top (living in England) making all the major decisions; below them there were a lot of minor "bigshots" (also White men) running the business in Canada. Below the businessman there were workers (both White and Metis and Half Breed); and under them, and at the bottom (because they were the most exploited of all), the Indians. All these people were individuals, but the work they did was determined by the system (no Indian ever had the choice between trapping and being a manager). The system permitted the Metis to work at better jobs than the Indian because this was profitable--not because the bigshot liked the Metis any better.

So, the exploitation of Native People wasn't a matter of nasty White men--it was a system (called "mercantilism" or "colonialism", or both). Sure, there were cruel men but there were kind men, too. It didn't matter much because they all had to play by the rules of the fur trade system. At a personal level, a White trader might be friendly to an Indian and like him--but he still gave him almost nothing for his fur and charged him terribly high prices for goods. White traders often married Indian women and usually treated their wives well--except that they often went back to England or Scotland, leaving their wives behind because they had agreed to work for the Company for a certain number of years.

While all Indians had to trap fur, not all Metis were equal in their work. The Metis sons and daughters of White workers became poorly paid workers; the sons and daughters of the White managers often got an education and became junior managers with much higher pay and better living conditions. So, while all Metis recognized that they had much in common (all were exploited, and the Metis could not get the best jobs because those jobs were reserved for Whites), some Metis were actually exploiting other Metis. For example, there were, later on, Metis businessmen who paid Metis workers just as poorly as the Company paid them.

The Metis and Half Breed people were involved in two great struggles with the Canadian government--one in 1869 - 70 at Red River (in Manitoba) and one in 1885 on the South Saskatchewan River (Batoche). The first struggle was for both political and economic rights. The Canadian government was planning to take over the Western territories by simply buying them from the Hudson's Bay Company--without any consideration for the Metis pioneers. The Metis struggle led to the formation of Manitoba--at that time a Metis province. The struggle in 1885 was mostly an economic one--the Metis and Half Breeds demanded recognition of their land rights and took up arms when the Canadian government refused to recognize them. Both struggles were similar to those going on around the world for human rights--and Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont were popular leaders in the same anti-colonial tradition as leaders of people in many other countries.

The Metis lost their two great struggles--not because of lack of courage or ability or knowledge of their enemy but because the odds against them were overwhelming. Again, it has to do with huge economic and political "systems". When such systems change they usually change quickly and throw millions of ordinary people into confusion and disorder. When the feudal system changed into the industrial system, millions of peasants in Europe (who had worked almost as slaves on land owned by rich landlords) suddenly were forced into the cities. In order to survive, they had to work almost as slaves--sixteen hours a day, in factories. When these great systems change, ordinary people have no choice about taking part; they either go along with the changes or face starvation.

The two Metis struggles were very much apart of the huge changes taking place when an old system (the fur trade) changed over to a new system (the industrial system--commercial agriculture). Other people--a small number of extremely wealthy and powerful individuals who controlled business and government--decided that the system would be changed. Ordinary poor and working people--Native and White--had no say in these decisions. But their lives were far more affected than the lives of those making the decisions, for it was the work of ordinary people that would change. The rich still got rich from the work of ordinary people--whether they were trappers or factory workers or farmers.

After the last Metis struggle in 1885, things changed rapidly in the Canadian West. The fur trade almost disappeared (except in the North) and the Metis "nation" of the plains quickly fell apart. That nation had grown up as part of the fur trade--it was Metis activity in the fur trade which united the Metis people. When the fur trade was replaced by commercial farming, that unity was destroyed. Those Metis who had received an education or were experienced workers integrated into the new system; those with less experience were racially abused and exploited and forced to the sidelines (like the road allowance people in the South). Those Metis who did receive "scrip" (a certificate from the government which could be used to get land) were either defrauded of it or forced by poverty to sell it cheaply. As a result thousands of Metis lived lives of poverty, living partly off the land and partly from poorly paid, occasional jobs (such as harvesting farmers' crops).

When those Metis with education and experience as wage workers integrated into the new system they left their poorer Metis cousins without leaders. It was these educated and experienced people who had provided the Metis with leadership during the struggles of 1869 - 70 and 1885. Without this educated class of Metis to lead them, the large majority of Metis people had no political voice for almost fifty years. It was not until the 1930's, two generations after the battle of Batoche, that the Metis people once again began to unite and organize, to defend their interests and rights.

In the 1930's, White workers and farmers were engaged in tremendous fights against big corporations and governments: it was the time of the Great Depression and millions were suffering from poverty and unemployment. The Metis, who had been suffering before the depression, were the worst off of any people in Canada. It was these terrible conditions which led to the formation of the Metis Association of Alberta and the Saskatchewan Metis Society.

The Alberta organization was officially formed in 1932 and fought a ten year battle with the provincial government to establish settlement areas which would be for the exclusive use of the Metis people. In Saskatchewan, the Metis Society fought a similar battle, but they were demanding land from the federal government, land they rightfully claimed was owed to them as a result of past promises.

The Alberta Metis won a partial victory: they got ten large areas of land for settlement, but they got very little money to help them establish farms or timber industries. Most remained very poor even though conditions did improve. In Saskatchewan, internal divisions and government interference in the Metis Society resulted in the failure of the Metis to get land from the federal government (a few small farms--at Green Lake, Lebret, Mortlach, etc., were set up by the province in the 1940's).

One of the major problems the Metis people faced was the lack of experienced leadership. Most educated Metis were getting along all right and didn't want to have anything to do with the poorer Metis. But in Alberta many of those better-off and educated Metis united with the poorer Metis and helped lead their struggle with the government. This was the first time in almost 50 years that Metis nationalism united all classes of Metis. In Saskatchewan, the Metis Society was also led by some educated Metis but many of them had ties to the Liberal Party and government and they used the Metis people. This caused divisions and disunity--and led to the collapse of the Saskatchewan Metis Society in 1943--just six years after it formally organized in 1937.

After the war there was almost no sign of Metis organizations--they had fallen apart during the war (like many popular organizations in White society) and were unable to get going after the war ended in 1945. It was not until the early 1960's--fifteen years later--that Metis in northern Saskatchewan and later in southern Saskatchewan, began to organize. Two organizations were formed and they later joined together in 1967 to form the Metis Society of Saskatchewan. In Alberta, as well, in the early sixties, Metis people began building a new Metis Association. In the late sixties and early seventies Metis and Non-Status people across the country followed the lead of Alberta and Saskatchewan and formed organizations.

Two things stand out in the history of the Metis people in the twentieth century. One is that their development and living conditions, etc., were not the same everywhere on the prairies. For example, the Metis of southern Saskatchewan experienced a flood of European settlers as early as 1895. Within twenty years, the Metis had been forced off the land and were a small minority in a country which had belonged to them just a few years before. In northern Saskatchewan, however, Native people did not experience major changes until after the Second World War. In the North, the churches and the Hudson's Bay Company continued to run the lives of Native people as recently as thirty years ago. In both situations what happened to Native people depended on what the decision-makers in government and business decided. When resources were needed by these companies and governments, Native people suffered as they were shoved aside so business could get at the valuable resources. In the South the resource was the land itself--used for growing wheat. Next, it was the forests and still later uranium and oil sands. Each time that a new resource was exploited, Native people (with no control over resources) suffered, one way or the other.

The other thing that stands out in modern Metis (and Indian) history is the fact that the political and economic struggles of the Native people have mostly been against governments. White workers and farmers fought many of their battles with big corporations--for better wages or better prices for their wheat. But the Metis didn't have jobs with big corporations and they didn't own very many farms. They were fighting for the right to have jobs and farms--and their fight ended up being with the government, because only the government could provide the land, education and health care that Metis people needed. Governments at first responded to Native requests and demands with little more than contempt: terrible conditions were simply ignored until the Metis organized. Then the governments responded by policies of segregation--trying to isolate Metis in small concentrations so they could be dealt with cheaply. After the war things changed slowly--for the Metis organizations were dead. In the 1960's, Native people--Metis and Indian--demanded better treatment and some change resulted. In the early 1970's, for instance, the Saskatchewan government established the Department of Northern Saskatchewan which was supposed to end colonialism in the North. But, while some people benefited, for most people things changed very little. It was still the big companies, making profits from the forests and uranium deposits, that got the most out of the North and out of the government.

Today the history of the Metis continues much as it has in the past--people struggling with the governments rather than directly with corporations, for decent living conditions, education, health care and democratic control over their own communities. As they say in countries around the world where people fight for their rights, "The struggle continues".

- Murray Dobbin
September 19, 1982