

Métis seeing renaissance of culture and pride

Paul Smith, Guest Columnist

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Louis Riel Day was Nov. 16 and the Métis Nation flag was raised at Cambridge city hall by Mayor Doug Craig and the Grand River Métis Council to mark the day for our most famous Métis leader.

Canada's need for reconciliation with indigenous peoples includes the Métis. And the new Liberal federal government has committed to a path of reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

But what does reconciliation mean for the Métis?

Most Canadians, especially Ontarians, know little about the Métis. Three-thousand Métis people live in Waterloo Region (2011 census).

Most Canadians don't know that Métis residential schools were left out of the legal settlement that led to the prime minister's 2008 apology and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Many believe Métis are just children of a First Nations and non-indigenous couple – not a separate aboriginal nation with its own culture, language, music and traditions.

That is where reconciliation begins, with education and awareness. Recounting Riel's history helps explain to Canadians Métis history and culture.

Louis Riel is a towering figure in Canadian and Métis history. To Métis people, Louis is one of our greatest sons, champion, defender of Métis rights and visionary.

To Canadians, he is now the father of Manitoba and a champion of democracy and responsible government.

For the Métis, the rights and land "guaranteed" in the Manitoba Act of 1870 never materialized and led to a long legal battle eventually won at the Supreme Court in 2013.

During the election, Justin Trudeau committed to negotiate that land claim and resolve other claims.

But Louis was not always celebrated by Canadians.

On Nov. 16, 1885, Louis Riel was executed in Regina, after being convicted of treason under an obscure British law.

He had led a second resistance movement for democracy, this time in what is now Saskatchewan. A Canadian military response ensued. A dark era for Métis and First Nations people on the prairies followed his execution.

Backlash and persecution of the Métis led to their dispersion across the west, and a long period of repression.

Many First Nations leaders were also jailed, including Big Bear (Mistahi-maskwa) and Poundmaker (Pîhtokahanapiwiyin).

The now well-documented abuses in native residential "schools" soon followed.

Fast forward to today, the Métis, like First Nations and the Inuit, are enjoying a renaissance of culture, education and pride.

Hope for reconciliation can also be found in Prime Minister Trudeau's mandate letter to his Indigenous Affairs minister, Carolyn Bennett, which says she will "work, on a nation-to-nation basis, with the Métis Nation to advance reconciliation and renew the relationship, based on co-operation, respect for rights, our international obligations, and a commitment to end the status quo."

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