

Reconciliation with Métis still needed

Paul Smith, Guest column

On Louis Riel Day, Nov. 16, the Métis Nation flag flew over Guelph city hall and across Canada to honour Canada's most famous Métis leader.

Canada's need for reconciliation with indigenous peoples includes the Métis, and the new Liberal government in Ottawa 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. Most don't know that Métis residential schools were left out of the legal settlement that led to the 2008 apology by then prime minister Stephen Harper, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Many believe Métis are just children of a First Nations and non-indigenous couple — not a separate indigenous nation with its own culture, language, music and traditions. That is where reconciliation begins, with education and awareness. Recounting Riel's history is a way of raising awareness among Canadians

about the Métis.

Riel is a towering figure in Canadian and Métis history. To Métis people, he is one of our greatest sons, a champion and defender of Métis rights and visionary. To Canadians, he is now known as the father of Manitoba and a champion of democracy and responsible government.

His provisional government negotiated the entry of Manitoba into Confederation in 1870, with the promise of democracy, Métis rights and human rights for all.

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

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

Riel was not always celebrated by Canadians. On Nov. 16, 1885, he was executed in Regina, after being convicted of treason under an obscure British law. He had led a second resistance movement for democracy and responsible government, this time in what is now Saskatchewan. A Canadian military response ensued.

What followed his execution was a dark era for Métis and First Nations people on the Prairies. 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 (Pihtokahanapiwiwin). 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.

Trudeau's mandate letter to his Indigenous Affairs minister, Carolyn Bennett, revealed Nov. 13, 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."

Sunny days. In Canada, better is always possible.

We can hope.

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