

Opening Remarks of
President Clément Chartier
Métis National Council to
House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages
Ottawa, Ontario
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Mr. Chairman and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. With me today is Elder Norman Fleury from Manitoba, an expert on the Michif language.

First, let me provide a brief overview of the Métis National Council.

We are the national government of the Métis Nation in that part of our historic homeland encompassing the prairie provinces and extending into Ontario and British Columbia. Our Homeland also extends into the Northwest Territories and northwestern USA, historically known as the “Old Northwest”.

We represent approximately 400,000 people, about one third of the total Aboriginal population in Canada.

Your study of Canada’s 150th anniversary in 2017 and the role of the two official languages, English and French, affords Canadians the opportunity to reflect on how they wish to relate to Confederation.

It has particular significance to the Métis Nation, the founders of Canada’s first post-Confederation province, Manitoba.

Our ancestors, for the most part, were not directly affected by the events in 1867 because they did not reside in the four confederating

provinces.

They lived in Rupert's Land and the North-Western Territory, both of which were controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company.

Originally the mixed offspring of Indigenous women and European fur traders, they had evolved into a distinct people with their own culture, language and political consciousness. In particular, the Michif language was influenced by the French voyageurs from Quebec, with the nouns being French and the remainder primarily Cree. This is basically a fusion of two languages, forming the language of that newly evolved Aboriginal people, the Métis Nation.

While they were not part of the negotiations leading to the *Constitution Act 1867*, our ancestors were impacted greatly by its enactment.

A major impetus behind political union was the desire of expansionists to push westward in order to reach and unite with the colony of British Columbia.

Little attention was paid to those occupying the vast expanse of territory between the confederating provinces and the Pacific. By 1869, the population of the Red River Settlement—one of the largest settlements on the plains of North America west of the Mississippi and north of the Missouri—consisted of 9,800 Métis and 1,600 whites.

This was the community that lay in the path of the new Dominion of Canada as it began its march from sea to sea.

In 1869, the Hudson's Bay Company sold Rupert's Land to the Dominion of Canada for £300,000 and one-twentieth of the territory's fertile land.

During the negotiation of the sale, no provision had been made for the rights of the Métis majority in the Red River Settlement that was expected to become part of a territory governed directly by Ottawa.

The response of our ancestors in 1869 was to establish the first Métis Provisional Government under Louis Riel that took control of the Red

River Settlement.

It drafted a List of Rights demanding no less than province-hood and sent emissaries to Ottawa to negotiate the terms of admission of Manitoba as a province into Confederation through the *Manitoba Act 1870*, which, amongst others, provided for French language rights in the new western province.

Unlike the confederating provinces, Manitoba would not have control over public lands; as compensation Section 31 of the *Manitoba Act, 1870* provided for a land grant of 1,400,000 acres of land to the children of the Métis heads of families.

A process for distributing these lands to the Métis, envisaged by the Lt. Governor of the province to take one or two years at the most, took more than a decade for the federal government to administer.

Amidst a rapid influx of hostile settlers from Ontario moving on to their traditional lands, the vast majority of the Métis moved on.

Their proportion of Manitoba's population dropped from eighty-three (83) percent in 1870 to seven (7) percent in 1886.

Our leader, Louis Riel, was three times elected to, but denied his seat in, the House of Commons.

The continuing failure of the federal government to address Métis land claims led in 1884/85 to the formation of the second Métis Provisional Government in the Saskatchewan Valley, again under Riel's leadership.

The federal response was an armed invasion, leading to the Northwest Resistance of 1885, the defeat of the Métis Nation at the Battle of Batoche, and the execution of Louis Riel on November 16, 1885.

To this day, there remains a significant number of French speaking Métis in our traditional homeland.

I believe Canada's 150th anniversary provides an opportunity for Canadians and their governments to reflect on what happened in the wake of Confederation.

Confederation and the federal system of government was a means of accommodating regions and cultures within a state.

Through Riel's Provisional Government and the *Manitoba Act*, the Métis established themselves as one of Canada's founding peoples or nations.

Despite this historical fact, we the Métis Nation, must struggle to have our existence recognized and our aspirations realized.

While recognition has been slow in coming, there has been some progress.

In 1992, Parliament unanimously passed a resolution recognizing the unique and historic role of Louis Riel as a founder of Manitoba.

In 2010, Parliament and a number of provincial legislatures declared the "Year of the Métis" in order to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Northwest Resistance of 1885, the Battle of Batoche and the execution of Louis Riel.

The Métis Nation itself declared 2010 the "Year of the Métis Nation", and subsequently, declared 2011-2020 the "Decade of the Métis Nation" with the year 2012 designated: Celebrating our Métis Nation Culture and Language.

I believe this committee should recommend that Confederation commemorations recognize the historical contributions of the Métis Nation as a founding people who had to rise in resistance in order to enter Confederation.

Furthermore, I encourage this committee to start giving serious thought to the 150th anniversary of Manitoba in 2020 with particular

focus on the historical and contemporary role of the Métis Nation in its development, including the constitutional guarantee of French language rights today benefitting Franco-Manitobans.

Given this committee's mandate to deal with official languages, one of the greatest contributions this committee can make is to encourage Heritage Canada and national cultural institutions to support the development and expansion of the Metis Nation's efforts to preserve and enhance the Michif language.

A number of years ago, I encouraged the federal government to put in place a French language training program so that our Métis youth could study that language in Quebec, which I believed would help in the preservation of Michif. This proposal was not acted on.

An important contribution your committee can make in this regard is to encourage Heritage Canada and national cultural institutions to support the expansion plans of Metis Nation cultural and educational institutions.

Prime examples are the Gabriel Dumont Institute in Saskatoon, the Louis Riel Institute in Winnipeg and the Rupertsland Institute in Edmonton, and their efforts to revive the Michif language.

Another concrete measure that can be taken by your committee is to recommend to the federal government that fiscal resources be provided to our governments and institutions so that we can save our Michif language, and that as part of the preparations for the 150th Anniversary, that Canada takes into account that the Metis Nation flag will be 200 years old in 2015.

This should also include funding to our Métis Nation governments so that materials and publications can be translated and published in French.

On that note, after hearing from Elder Fleury, we'll be happy to address your questions.