

STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS

Métis National Council General Assembly
March 23, 2013

On March 8, 1983, a group of Métis leaders gathered in Regina amid a crisis confronting the Métis Nation.

In a way it was a crisis of raised expectations.

Our people had experienced a long history of suppression and marginalization since defeat at Batoche and the execution of Riel.

But the outlook had appeared to brighten when Prime Minister Trudeau embarked on his mission to patriate the Constitution with a Charter of Rights reflecting Canadian values and an amending formula rooted in Canada.

With Canada searching for a new beginning, perhaps we as Métis could finally assert our long denied reality as one of the founding peoples of this country.

To have our existence, contributions and rights recognized in the new constitution.

Indeed, early in 1981, thanks to the skills, commitment and persistence of Harry Daniels, the Métis were recognized as one of the three Aboriginal peoples to be included in the new constitution.

A few months after that, the Manitoba Métis Federation under the leadership of John Morrisseau launched a land claims lawsuit against the federal government to fulfill the commitments under the *Manitoba Act* that had induced Riel's Métis provisional government to bring the Red River Settlement into Confederation as the Province of Manitoba.

Canada's new constitution afforded us an opportunity to sit down with the First Ministers and negotiate our rights as one of the Aboriginal peoples at a constitutional conference scheduled for March 15 and 16th, 1983.

So with our expectations raised on rights, it came as a shock shortly before the conference to learn that the three prairie Métis associations would not have a seat of our own at the constitutional table.

That we were expected to participate through an organization that had actually insisted that Métis self-government and land base be removed from the constitutional agenda.

According to that organization and the federal government, a Métis was anybody of mixed ancestry who chose to identify as such so the prairie Métis didn't need their own seats.

Suddenly, our hard fought gains of constitutional recognition appeared to dissipate.

This was the crisis confronting the Métis Nation on that **eighth** day of March, 1983, one week before Canada's first constitutional conference after patriation.

On that day in Regina, our three prairie Métis associations formed the Métis National Council as an expression of Métis nationalism and our identity.

Not as off-reserve mixed-bloods, but as a distinct people and nation with a common history, culture, territory, language and political will to be self-governing.

And, in the tradition of Riel placing his foot on the surveyor's chain, we said, "**NO** - this shall not pass".

NO, to the federal government defining us as it chooses.

NO, to other Aboriginal peoples defining us as they choose.

NO, to anybody for that matter defining us as they choose.

And NO to the constitutional conference or any negotiations where the rights of Métis are being discussed without our full and equal participation.

On that day we declared war on Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

We would sue him personally in the Ontario courts.

We would seek an injunction preventing him from convening the conference until the Métis were at the table, with our issues on the agenda.

And with the clock ticking down toward the conference, we did just that.

The Crown attorney in the trial, a future Supreme Court of Canada justice, challenged Jim Sinclair on who were the Métis.

Sinc shot back: "John A. Macdonald didn't send troops to New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island; he sent them to Manitoba and Saskatchewan".

Suddenly the federal government was learning who the Métis were.

They pleaded with us to drop the case; they promised an arrangement that our distinct voice would be heard through another Aboriginal organization.

And we told them “**NO**”; the Métis National Council would represent the Métis Nation and no one else.

And when they asked what we would do if we lost the case against the Prime Minister, we said we would go back to the prairies and mobilize the Métis Nation against Ottawa and a sham constitution.

And on that day I received a letter from the Minister of Justice.

The Métis National Council would have its own representation at the table and our own issues restored to the constitutional agenda if we dropped our lawsuit against Prime Minister Trudeau.

And, fellow citizens of the Métis Nation, we have never looked back on who we are as the Métis Nation.

Yes, there would be lost opportunities in our quest for self-government.

We came close under the Métis Nation Accord with Prime Minister Mulroney and under the Kelowna Accord with Prime Minister Martin.

But we never backtracked on our **definition** of who we are as a distinct people and nation with an ancestral homeland on the prairies that extends into contiguous parts of other provinces and territories.

- ∞ A **definition** adopted by this Assembly as the National Definition of Métis in 2002 and enshrined in the constitutions or bylaws of all the Governing Members.
- ∞ A **definition** supported by the Supreme Court of Canada in the *Powley* decision requiring rights-bearing citizens of the Métis Nation to prove an ancestral connection to, and acceptance by, historical Métis communities.
- ∞ A **definition** that shapes the citizenship code of the Métis Nation and the criteria for inclusion in Métis Nation registries.
- ∞ A **definition** that shapes the representation of the Governing Members in this Assembly and in the process for changing our bylaws, including those that will be needed to establish a Métis Nation constitution, the guide for our self-government in the 21st century.

There can be no backsliding on this fundamental part of our existence if we are to move forward as a nation.

Suggestions that we can somehow adjust our boundaries to take in people who have **never** been part of our nation betray who we are and what we stand for.

They are historically and culturally inaccurate and, from a political point of view, the height of folly.

At this Assembly we will discuss progress on the new constitution, new accords with the federal government and a great historic victory in the courts.

All of these are building blocks for a self-government agreement that we have discussed many times before, but never with the immediacy that we will have to discuss it now.

The *Daniels* decision and its appeal sets the stage for removing whatever obstacles that may have existed in the past for federal legislation to recognize our self-government, with legal authorities vested in our constitution.

But we cannot move forward to grasp this opportunity for self-government without first consolidating our citizenship **and** our boundaries.

We must ensure that the National Definition is applied to all citizens of the Métis Nation without grandfathering.

We must complete the National Acceptance process adopted in principle by this Assembly in 2002.

We must complete the certification of our registries based on common standards.

On the basis of strength in the integrity of our citizenship system, we can move on the adoption of a new constitution, much of which has been reviewed and approved, in-principle, by the Métis Rights Panel, and will be discussed at this Assembly.

The days of putting off difficult decisions for fear of upsetting people are over. The stakes are too high.

We will be condemned by future generations if we blow the opportunity to make the breakthrough on our rights because we continued to haggle over matters that should have been resolved with the creation of the Métis National Council.

It is only through a strong nationalist voice that the Métis National Council and its Governing Members can address the opportunities and challenges faced by the Métis Nation in its dealing with Ottawa and the Provinces.

That means vigilance to ensure these governments know who they are dealing with.

The current federal government is not disposed to engaging in rights-based talks but has demonstrated a willingness to work with us in areas where we share common objectives and interests.

Through the Métis Nation Protocol, the Métis National Council has responded positively to this approach, but again, only on the basis of who we are, and what we are about as a distinct people and nation.

With Minister Chuck Strahl, we saw to it that our veterans finally obtained the recognition of their wartime contributions and sacrifices, proudly joining them and the Minister in the return to Normandy France for a tribute to their heroism and the dedication of a permanent exhibition on the Métis people in the war memorial centre at Juno Beach.

With Minister John Duncan, we saw to it that our veterans were honored in Winnipeg during the Year of the Métis Nation and our World War II veterans received the Métis Nation's highest respect in a ceremony at Batoche, with our Korean War veterans honored in Ottawa.

Through our work, with both Ministers under the Protocol, the federal government opened up its economic development policies and programs to our people with unprecedented Métis-specific initiatives.

No longer would we be excluded from these policies or lumped in with other Aboriginal peoples under the "off-reserve" category.

The result has been substantial federal investments in Métis Nation financial institutions and the upcoming conclusion of a Canada-Métis Nation Accord on Economic Development that will cement our continued collaboration.

Through the MEDS process, we have worked, and continue to work, with both federal Ministers, their five provincial counterparts and industry in the development of a Métis Economic Development Strategy to be adopted by the end of this year, the subject of engagement sessions we have held throughout the homeland including two this week in Vancouver.

On the thorny issue of federal funding, after years of chafing under ever restrictive federal funding and micro-management of our financial affairs by federal bureaucrats, we have reached agreement on a government-to-government financing arrangement.

A Canada-Métis Nation Accord on Governance and Fiscal Accountability to be signed shortly will provide for multi-year, flexible block funding with primary accountability to our own electors rather than federal bureaucrats.

Fellow citizens of the Métis Nation, we have indeed come a long way since that day in 1983 when prairie Métis leaders, most of them now passed away, stood up to an assault on our integrity and formed the Métis National Council.

The MNC has never strayed from the **path of Métis nationalism**, and I vow here today, never will.

That path began almost two centuries ago on the Frog Plain and the Battle of Seven Oaks where the forces of Cuthbert Grant unfurled the flag of the Metis Nation we fly today.

A path taking us to resistance in the Red River and Saskatchewan Valleys against the schemes, deceptions and the armies of John A. Macdonald.

A path through the dark decades of dispossession and displacement.

A path to political revival and renewed hopes, but with constant challenges and repeated setbacks.

A path leading us to March 8, 2013, the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Métis National Council, when a great champion of Métis nationalism named David Chartrand strode into the chambers of the Supreme Court of Canada to receive a ruling decades in the making.

A path that led us the next day back to Red River, now known as the city of Winnipeg, and to the resting place of the founder of our movement and martyr to the cause of Métis nationalism.

Fellow citizens of the Métis Nation, victory in the *MMF* case, is the turning point in relations between Canada and the Métis Nation.

This is the **path** forward for our people.

Our time has truly come.

And **now** it is a great honor for me, on behalf of the Métis Nation, to show our heartfelt appreciation and thanks to President David Chartrand whose vision and tenacity in the face of adversity has finally brought justice to our people.