

I am pleased to participate in this debate for personal reasons. I was born and raised in the Province of Saskatchewan in a place not far from Batoche, which will be the scene this summer of the one hundredth anniversary of that final struggle. As you know, Mr. Speaker, I now live in the Province of Manitoba, and Louis Riel was very much the father of Manitoba. There is no debate in history about that particular point. As you may also know, Mr. Speaker, in my previous endeavours I was an historian of western Canada, so that the subject of Louis Riel has been, and continues to be, a subject of great interest to me. In addition to that, I have had the privilege over the years of teaching a number of Métis students at university. I know the importance to them of the subject which is before us.

This is a very timely debate, Mr. Speaker, for two or three reasons. It is timely because this year in fact is the one hundredth anniversary of that rebellion of 1885. The Province of Saskatchewan, from which the Hon. Member comes, has named this Heritage Year in part as an opportunity to commemorate the role of the Métis in the history of that particular province. I might note in passing that I understand that a number of the events which are related to the International Year of Youth will also be directed toward Métis youth in particular.

I believe it is exceedingly important to understand, in my opinion, at least, as an historian and as a politician, that Louis Riel should be remembered for his life rather than his death. The part I regret most about the Hon. Member's motion is that it directs attention primarily to his death and the way in which that event was subsequently handled by historians. Louis Riel should be commemorated for his contribution to Canadian history. He was a distinguished western Canadian in that he was the father of Manitoba. Unfortunately, even as I listened to the Hon. Member, it seemed to me there was some confusion of events between the rebellion of 1869-70, which led my province into Confederation, and the rebellion of 1885, which was an unsuccessful military event and the people whom Riel led were the principal losers in many senses of the word.

● (1710)

The young Riel, the Riel of 1869-70, was a remarkable young man. He had recently returned from his studies for the priesthood in Quebec, studies which he unfortunately never completed because of the untimely death of his father. That had a tremendous impact on him personally. He returned to the Prairies an unemployed person, not unlike many of the young people today who have talent and no opportunity to utilize their talent. He came back to a very agitated society. By 1869 the Red River was undergoing a dramatic socio-economic change. Those of you who are familiar with the history of the West may well remember that Fort Garry in the early part of the 19th century was a fur trading post. It also became a retirement home, if you will, for fur traders who were unemployed after the union of the two principal fur trading companies in 1821. Many people, some from the Orkney Islands and others from eastern Canada, particularly those who were the byproducts of marriages which had taken place according to

the country style between fur traders—both of French and Scottish descent—

Mr. Benjamin: Order! What has that got to do with the Bill?

Mr. Clark (Brandon-Souris): It has a great deal to do with the Bill.

Mr. Benjamin: It has nothing to do with it.

Mr. Clark (Brandon-Souris): The purpose of the Bill is to recognize the role of Louis Riel in history.

Mr. Benjamin: No, the purpose is to revoke his conviction, you idiot? Read the Bill!

Mr. Clark (Brandon-Souris): I am suggesting to the Hon. Member, and I think he was not listening, that it is important to recognize and commemorate the life of Louis Riel rather than the death of Louis Riel. There was a very unique culture developing in the Red River area to which Louis Riel came back at age 23 in 1868. He then became a very distinguished leader of the new and growing Red River society.

As a result of the troubles, Mr. Speaker, the people of the River River, not just the Métis but the collective community, united together for the most part in opposition to what they perceived to be the encroachment of central Canada. They were of course acting very much in the tradition of western Canadian history.

As a result of deliberations which took place over several months, the very small postage stamp Province of Manitoba entered into Confederation in 1870. It was very clear that one person more than any other was responsible for that, and that individual was Louis Riel.

As a result of his success he was elected to the House of Commons twice. Regretfully, because of the conflict which existed in Canada in the 1870s—

Mr. Benjamin: Called bigotry.

Mr. Clark (Brandon-Souris): He was barred from taking his seat. The tragedy of Riel in 1870 was that he and many others in that community became a part of a struggle with which they were not in any way involved. This struggle was between the English and the French, the Catholics and the Protestants. I have talked about this on other occasions at regional meetings of the Métis Federation, and what matters to them is that Louis Riel and his role in Canadian history should be and must be recognized to a much greater degree than it has been up to this point in time. I would hope that our intention during the course of this year will be to commemorate the accomplishments of the entire Métis nation—

Mr. Benjamin: Yes, by passing this Bill.

Mr. Clark (Brandon-Souris): —not to focus simply on one individual. Riel was only a small part of a group of people whose accomplishments in Canadian history were very substantial.