

Métis Nation

Here is what a historian said about Louis Riel: As long as Canada exists, Canadians will want to know who Louis Riel was, for the man is the epitome of the particular dynamics of prevailing tensions in Canada—English against French, Indians against white people, east against west, Canadians against Americans.

Hopefully, in contemporary Canada, such tensions have vanished and groups are not pitted one against another. The fact remains that Louis Riel lived and fought at a time when these tensions were strongest, when the Canadian nation was still in its infancy, when the country's frontiers were still unmarked, and when rights and values still had to be established.

Mr. Speaker, this brings me to the second point of the motion: recognize Louis Riel as the founder of Manitoba and a Father of Confederation.

I have no hesitation in acknowledging the key role played by Louis Riel in the entry of Manitoba into Confederation. First, it should be pointed out that the provisional government led by Louis Riel had been democratically elected by the population of the West to fill the gap between the time when the Hudson's Bay Company renounced its responsibility over Rupert's Land and the moment when a new system was implemented by Canada, which then comprised four provinces: Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

At that time, there was uncertainty about the future of Rupert's Land: would it become the colony of a colony or part of the new Dominion?

Louis Riel was wholeheartedly in favour of provincial status. He was one of the strongest supporters of this option, and in fact, he and other members of the provisional government executive council printed a list of rights in both French and English which was to be the official document of the delegates sent by the provisional government to the Canadian authorities. This list ultimately became a key instrument in the development of the 1870 Manitoba Act, under which the province joined Confederation.

This list of rights contained in embryo form the rights and freedoms we enjoy today as well as protection of the language and culture of the minority, which have now become a characteristic of our Federation.

Mr. Speaker, I am fully aware of the great role and importance of Louis Riel. However, I have serious reservations as concerns the part of the motion presented by the Hon. Member for Cochrane—Superior (Mr. Penner) which asks that Louis Riel be recognized as the founder of Manitoba and a Father of Confederation.

Mr. Speaker, I have these reservations because, in my opinion, it is up to the Manitoba Government alone and not to the Canadian Parliament to make decisions on issues related to its foundation. As for the Fathers of Confederation, I imagine

that all Canadians have seen the portrait reproduced in numerous Canadian history books which shows them sitting or standing around a long table. These people were in attendance at the Quebec conference in 1864, and they were the delegates of what was then called Canada, namely Quebec and Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and even Newfoundland which, as we know, only joined Confederation 85 years later. At that time, what is now Western Canada was not a party to the negotiations, which explains why no Western Canadian is shown in that picture. Of course, this in no way belittles the role played by famous westerners such as Louis Riel and his followers, Father Ritchot, John Black and Alfred Scott who negotiated with Canada with a view to obtaining provincial status for Manitoba.

That picture in no way belittles either the role played in British Columbia by Anthony Musgrave and Dr. J. Helchen, who, after violently opposing Confederation, fought to have British Columbia admitted in 1871. Also deserving was F.W.G. Haultain, first minister for the Territories who worked to make room for Alberta and Saskatchewan in Confederation in 1905. Those people may not be as well known as Louis Riel, but nevertheless they played just as genuine and commendable a role.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that my distinguished colleagues now know many westerners deserve a special place for their efforts to have their respective areas join Confederation. Although they did not all attend the famous Quebec City Conference, their forefathers contributed to make Canada what it is today.

Mr. Speaker, the House will understand that if I admire Louis Riel for the part he played in the creation of Manitoba, I have qualms about a motion which would recognize him as a Father of Confederation without granting the same honour to all the other deserving figures in the history of our country. We should then have to rewrite our history. However, the place which should be rightfully Louis David Riel's in the history of Canada may have been neglected; I believe therefore that his contribution as well as that of his supporters in the development of Canada should be recognized for what they were.

● (1720)

[English]

Mr. Bob Hicks (Scarborough East): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to add my comments as a Canadian and as a former educator to this motion. The Hon. Member who preceded me in this debate referred to the list of rights drawn up by Louis Riel in a document which became key in determining the provisions of the Manitoba Act of 1870.

Clause 1, for instance, provided that:

The Territories, heretofore known as Rupert's Land and the Northwest, shall not enter into the Confederation of the Dominion of Canada, except as a province.