

*Louis David Riel***LOUIS DAVID RIEL**

MEASURE TO REVOKE CONVICTION

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West) moved that Bill C-217, an Act to revoke the conviction of Louis David Riel, be read the second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to discuss this Bill in order that a wrong of long ago can be righted. I will be brief in order to give my colleagues in the other two Parties time either to confirm their election promises that they support this measure, or to deny yet another promise to the Métis people by not allowing this Bill to pass.

● (1700)

I do not seek a pardon for Louis Riel which would, of course, be the purview of Her Majesty and the right of the Crown and, as such, would require a motion seeking permission to receive royal consent as opposed to assent. Instead, Sir, I seek a revocation of the conviction of Louis David Riel. I seek the expression of Parliament's will that this conviction was wrong, that Louis Riel was never guilty of the offence of high treason, and that Parliament now wishes to take the action it should have taken at the time, 100 years ago, to recognize the Métis and other native people's right to self-determination and the right to negotiate the terms of their entry into the Canadian confederation.

Louis David Riel, his role in Canadian history, and the long-standing controversy over his execution for treason, have long aroused in many Canadians a profound sense that errors of both commission and omission remain to be addressed and rectified. There is a great sympathy in the public mind for action in the reclamation of Riel's stature as the father of the Confederation we now enjoy and as the founder of the Province of Manitoba, in recognition of the cause Riel fought and died for, a cause with which the people of Canada are only now grappling through the aegis of constitutional discussions on aboriginal rights.

Parliament has a special interest in the Riel legacy because of the dual, often Janus-like, role that this House has played in the events leading up to the execution of Riel and the destiny of Diaspora left to the Métis people in 1870 and again in 1885. This destiny has been further reinforced by federal action again and again ever since. Riel served as the first duly elected Member of this House for the constituency of Provencher. Yet, for reasons intimately tied to his subsequent persecution, he was denied the right to take a seat here and instead was forced into exile. Later, 100 years ago this November, Riel was hanged, not the least of the motives being the unseemly revenge against his actions in 1870. This was the error of commission undertaken by the Government of the day and, until rectified in this House, it is an error shared by every Member of this House.

The fundamental terms of the union, struck by Riel's provisional Government with the Dominion of Canada, as it was then known, despite their legitimate constitutional stature,

have yet to be met. This is a continuing error of omission. Parliament, therefore, has a privileged interest in ensuring that the errors of commission committed against one of its former members, who was so shabbily treated in the early 1870s, so unjustly tried, convicted and hanged in 1885, be redressed.

We cannot revive Riel or compensate for the damage done to his family and to his people, but we can take action to ensure that Canada and Canadians accept that an error was made and that justice, however delayed, is nevertheless done. Parliament has a special obligation to respect the earnestness of the Métis people in their opposition to any measure, such as a pardon, which would merely legitimize the errors of commission and perpetuate the errors of omission.

Today's climate of federal and provincial reticence seriously to respect the need for entrenchment of aboriginal and Métis rights in the Constitution means that we must act to remove barriers to change. We can start by having Parliament say that Louis Riel was innocent of the charges brought against him. This small action in the centennial year of Riel's death is not intended to close the book on this issue but is only the first chapter of our fundamental, and ultimately more pressing, obligation to the Métis people as a whole. That obligation to settle the grievances of land claims and constitutional rights has been waiting 100 years to be settled. If Parliament acts now, we can start down the road to justice, knowing that we have removed some of the unjust actions of our predecessors.

Just as Japanese Canadians seek redress for actions taken by this Parliament in wartime, so too do I seek redress for wrongs done in the aftermath of another war in which Canada extended its sovereignty into another nation's territory, the Métis and Indian lands to the west, and then prosecuted their leaders as being treasonable to the country, a country of which they had never actually agreed to be part. Until all of the treaty rights which were negotiated for and never received and the rights which were taken away without treaty are returned, this issue and the good name of Louis Riel will not be resolved.

I ask this House at a most appropriate time, 100 years since Louis Riel's death, to do something about which we will all be happy, that is, to correct the wrong which was committed 100 years ago.

Mr. Lee Clark (Brandon-Souris): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to the House today on the motion of the Hon. Member for a number of reasons. First, I want to applaud the Hon. Member for Regina West (Mr. Benjamin) for bringing this motion before the House. In doing so, he is perhaps making more Canadians aware that this is in fact the one hundred-year anniversary of the rebellion to which he refers. I hope that the results of his motion and the anniversary celebrations which are occurring this year will be more than just a reawakening in the public's mind of the fact that 100 years ago there was a rebellion—in fact, a second rebellion. I hope that Canadians will take the opportunity during the course of this summer to learn more than they now know about the role of the Métis in Canadian history.