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Gov't bill causes Natives concern

Erina Ingrassia

When Louis Riel first led the Metis from their Red River settlement to Ottawa in 1869 with a petition to stop the Westward expansion, he was charged with treason and sentenced to be hung.

Although the expansion of the west was destroying the Metis' settlement and many Indians were starving as a result of the deprivation of their buffalo hunt, the Fathers of Confederation would not be swayed.

Business was business, and the C.P.R. had priority over the Canadian citizens' livelihood.

Louis Riel was sentenced to be hung. However, John A. MacDonald closed one eye and let Riel go—providing that he would never return to Ottawa again.

Years later Riel, supported by the French, added sparks to the political fire by speaking on behalf of western discontent over the territorial destruction caused by the building of the railroad. John A. MacDonald was a man of his word. "Riel," said Sir John, "should hang though every dog in Quebec bark in his favour."

On November 16, 1885, Louis Riel was hanged in the RCMP barracks in Regina. The Railroad went right through.

Now, nearly 100 years later, the Canadian Aboriginal peoples are still engaged in their struggle to survive.

In a debate last week at York sponsored by the Native Students Association of York University, chief representatives and administrators for aboriginals in Canada presented native views on Canada's constitution.

Three key issues were discussed by the panel and the select group gathered to share their concerns on this controversial issue:

- The search for a definition of the term "aboriginals".
- Concern with Bill C48, currently before Parliamentary Committee.
- The problem of Indian solidarity.

Leroy Little Bear, Chairman of Native American Studies of the University of Lethbridge, Alberta offered his views an aboriginal rights.

"If you're going to have a broad definition, I would rather have the courts decide and not the politicians. A clear definition of 'aboriginal people' might hurt. Times change and people change. We cannot see the future, and a clear definition might hurt the future of our people."

The panelists felt that legal boundaries, once rigidly established, are hard to erase. Because the Constitution takes precedence over Court decisions, it is important for the survival of the native people that the definition of both 'aboriginal people' and 'aboriginal rights' remain open-ended.



Bill C48, which goes before the House of Commons today, states the Oil companies' case. These corporations want to exploit the natural resources of north and northwestern Canada. According to Little Bear, the Aboriginal Representative in the House, there is no regard whatsoever for the environmental, or aboriginal concerns stated in the Bill.

Little Bear says, "The federal government cannot take the authority to exploit the resources without any concern for environmental and aboriginal rights. The Bill is now beginning to come to public awareness. We are sure that other interest groups will be concerned with environmental issues. This is not strictly an aboriginal issue and we must voice our concerns."

Duke Redbird, President of the Ontario Metis and non-status Indian Association in Toronto added, "It seems to me that the word 'development' is replacing the word 'civilization'. What I'd like to know is who is northern development for? The Indians? The way it stands now it sure as hell isn't."

When the panel was asked why natives didn't band together as one voice in a nation-wide political party rather than working separately, the panel agreed that the effort would be a failure.

"An attempt at creating such a

party did exist in the late '50s and early '60s," said Redbird. "The problems, besides institutional discrimination, were many. First the legal structures existing at the time inhibited the growth of this particular party. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that we're not dealing with a homogeneous group which can reach out and touch one another."

Although the leaders of the groups work together in co-operation, native settlements have their historical differences. Where is the fusion point?

The panel agreed that energy spent to create a National Canadian Indian Political Party would take away from getting a foothold on the recognition of aboriginal rights. Little Bear summed up the panel's sentiments by saying: "We try to work from without. We hope that if everyone works in their own way, we will develop support from various groups, and thereby become effective."

The Canadian Aboriginals are determined to keep the spirit of Riel alive. "There are two realities," according to Redbird. "A personal reality and a legal reality. What we want is the right to determine our own future, now. Whether it comes through a legal statement or practice is a different question and is largely based on history."

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