



Are we really quite certain we want to sanctify Louis Riel?

Preston Manning says Louis Riel is a bridge-builder and a proto-Reformer. Jane Stewart, the Minister of Indian Affairs, says she is sorry about Riel's execution, and adds that the government will try to honour his place in Canadian history. That might mean a posthumous pardon, or perhaps a declaration that Riel was a Father of Confederation. Either step would be a big mistake.

Let's look at the pardon first. Riel was hanged after being convicted of treason. The historical record is clear that he provoked the North-West Rebellion of 1885 for his own purposes. He was irritated because the government had refused to accede to his secret demands for money for himself. True, the Metis of the Saskatchewan Valley had grievances involving river lots and land scrip, but Ottawa was well on the way to dealing with these. Riel resorted to arms precisely because a successful resolution of the Metis complaints would have undercut his leadership.

At this point in his life he saw himself as the divinely inspired voice of the Holy Spirit. He styled himself the "Prophet of the New World," and planned to establish an exotic version of Roman Catholicism in North America, with the French-Canadian-Metis playing the role of Chosen People. Metis land claims were only a small factor in his grandiose scheme of world renewal.

His rebellion cost dozens of lives and millions of dollars in property damage. The ensuing reaction also took away the political influence that the Metis had enjoyed in the North-West up to that time. Minister Stewart is right that his death was a sad event, but that does not mean that it was unjust. We wouldn't hang a Louis Riel today because we have abolished capital punishment, but it was the accepted retribution in his day for what he had done. Riel himself set the standard when he had Thomas Scott executed by firing squad in the earlier rebellion in Manitoba.

Calling Riel a Father of Confederation rests on a certain view of his role in the Manitoba Rebellion of 1869-70. It is not quite as misguided as the demand for a posthumous pardon, but it is still bad history.

After purchasing Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869, Canada planned to govern its new acquisition as a territory because the enormous region was very thinly inhabited. The only civilized settlement was at Red River, and that had only 12,000 people. Territorial status was not intended to be a permanent arrangement; the advance of settlement would have led to the conversion of territories into self-governing provinces.

Enter Louis Riel with his demand for immediate provincial status. In order to bring the Rebellion to a close, the federal government finally accepted this demand, but with severe qualifications. It made Manitoba an undersized, "postage stamp" province, deprived of control over public lands and natural resources. Without a normal tax base, Manitoba was in financial difficulty from the beginning; and it became the prototype for Saskatchewan and Alberta as second-class prairie provinces—a situation that persisted until the Natural Resource Transfer Agreement of 1930.

Riel's Rebellion also led to needless linguistic, religious and

racial hostility in Manitoba. Prior to 1870, French and English, Catholics and Protestants, Indian, Metis and whites had managed to get along tolerably well in the Red River colony. By tarnishing the French, Catholics and Metis as rebels, the Rebellion provoked suspicion on the part of the new immigrants—most of whom were English, Protestant and white—flooding into the province.

This is not to defend any intolerance that the newcomers exhibited; it is merely to point out that Riel's rash uprising made things far worse than they needed to be. Maybe we should not judge Riel too harshly. He was, after all, only 25 years old when he started the Red River Rebellion. But forgiving Riel's immature judgement does not mean we have to pretend he was a great statesman.

The manipulation of Riel's image raises important contemporary considerations. Canada faces hundreds of aboriginal land claims. Most of these are Indian claims, but Metis leaders are also launching their own cases. Such claims depend crucially on exact reconstruction of history. To ignore the historical record

in an attempt to rehabilitate Louis Riel will set a precedent for these claims that will prove costly for Canadian taxpayers.

Also, both the governing Liberals and the Reform opposition have come out strongly against the right of Quebec, or of any province, to separate unilaterally from Canada. But Louis Riel announced unilateral declarations of independence not once, but twice, first in Manitoba in 1869, then in Saskatchewan in 1885.



The young revolutionary



The aging martyr on trial in Regina

In view of the coming struggle over the independence of Quebec, does the government really want to canonize Canada's foremost practitioner of UDI?

When dollars are scarce, politicians are tempted to deal in seemingly inexpensive symbolic gestures. But faulty symbolism may be the most expensive form of action in the long run.

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