Culture

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Article abstract

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On pense généralement que les organisations politiques autochtones au Canada ressortissent à un phénomène récent, qui serait survenu surtout à partir de 1965. Au contraire, plusieurs de ces organisations existent depuis au moins cinquante ans tandis que d'autres remontent aux années 1890. Dans ce texte, nous prenons comme exemple l'évolution des organisations politiques des Métis dans l'Ouest canadien. Ce faisant, nous parlons des influences sur leurs structures, et des conséquences sur la situation contemporaine.

Native political organizations have become an increasingly prominent factor in the Canadian political scene. To the casual observer, it would seem that they represent a relatively recent phenomenon, first coming into prominence in the mid-sixties, and gradually taking up a greater and greater proportion of the daily news, as Native leaders who had begun by speaking out on relatively "safe" matters like the need for economic development, improved housing, education and penal reform, gradually began breaking into wider issues such as land claims, constitutional reform and even political autonomy for some of Canada's various Native populations.

It may surprise people that, while there are undoubtebly many new organizations in operation today, the history of some of these organizations, particularly Metis organizations, runs back many years. The Metis Association of Alberta (MAA) for example, held its first organizational meeting on December 28, 1932, and this does not represent the beginning of Metis political activity in Alberta, nor even the first voluntary organization formed to further Metis political interests — it merely represents one stage in a continuous political development dating back into the nineteenth century.

Naturally, many status Indian organizations have been in existence for a long period as well. For

example, the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia was established in 1931. Like the Metis Association of Alberta, it also was the culmination of many years of sporadic local organization. There are many similarities between status and non-status Indian political organizations as far as their histories and principles of organization are concerned. Throughout the course of their existence, they both have played many different roles and pursued many different aims ; from integration and assimilation in the early years to cultural integrity and political autonomy in later years. However, this paper will concentrate on the development of Metis political organizations alone, particularly those of the Metis of Alberta[1].

The mid-sixties saw a radical change in the role of these organizations. There was an almost simultaneous burgeoning of Native political associations all across Canada at this time. Old organizations, like the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, the Metis Association of Alberta, and others, which had been more or less moribund for years, suddenly sprang back into activity, and dozens of new organizations, both provincial and national, like the Manitoba Metis Federation, Committee for Original People's Entitlement, the Native Council of Canada, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada sprang into being.

There are many different reasons for this sudden florescence, although this is not the place to discuss these in detail. However, one of the most likely reasons was a political climate that was particularly open to minority causes (this was also the time of a great burgeoning of Black, Chicano and other ethnic organizations in the United States) and an increased political awareness among the Native people of Canada.

One of the most significant aspects of this florescence was the fact that in the mid-sixties, for the first time, the Native organizations began receiving funding from the federal and provincial governments. Core funding for basic operating costs made it possible for these organizations to keep a fulltime office staff, to hire field-workers to increase their political representation by starting new locals of the associations in various Native communities, to hire consultants to design projects which could tap into various other governmental subsidy programmes like those available from the Department of Regional Economic Expansion (DREE), and perhaps most significantly, to pay salaries to the senior officers of the associations, so that they could devote full time to their political work.

An entirely new political arena — that of Native politics and Native politicians — was thereby created by the advent of this government funding, and it has created many new patterns in the lifestyle of Native people in Canada. The Native leader is forming an important part of a new phenomenon, the rising of a Native middle class. A new career, that of Native politician, is now open to people of Native ancestry, and there are hundreds of Natives pursuing this career in Canada today.

This new political arena, and its concomitant development of Native voluntary organizations is an interesting phenomenon. One particular aspect of this, to which I would like to direct special attention, is the fact that almost all of the Native political organizations in Canada today have a totally non-traditional character with regard to their organizational structure. They are in fact *replications* of the political structures that surround them, rather than examples of adapted "Indianness". To be sure, there is a fairly large tradition of voluntary organizations among North American Indian tribes, but one would search in vain to find any significant characteristics of these organizations reflected in most of the constitutions, by-laws and characters of contemporary Native political organizations in Canada, particularly in the Prairie Provinces.

This facet of Native organizations is hardly surprising in the contemporary situation. Their structure is very much determined by the day-to-day aspects of administration and operation in a modern bureaucratic setting, and moreover is imposed from the outside by provincial regulations. The organizations have to be registered under the Societies Act of the province within which they are operating before they can be legally recognized. This alone puts them under more governmental control than is often realized. The regulations not only include the need for a constitution and by-laws, there are restrictions on what these by-laws can cover, and how they can be rescinded or altered. Other requirements include a means of appointing officers to the association, the need for an annual meeting, and so on. These regulations have their origins in the dominant Euro-Canadian society, and they in effect have imposed foreign principles of organization on the Native associations.

Because these organizations are so dependent on outside sources for funding, particularly the government, they have to conform closely to the various government regulations determining the structure of organizations, particularly with regard to their being registered and to their having a recognized system of accounting and auditing set up. Whenever formal application is made to either a federal or provincial department for funding for a project on behalf of the Metis Association of Alberta, even for a small grant of a few thousand

dollars, it is routine to have to append copies of the association's constitution, date of incorporation (often a copy of the actual certificate of incorporation has to be included) and details of how the grant is to be audited, even if the department has had a long history of dealing with the association, and these details are already familiar to the person processing the application. If the Metis Association of Alberta chose to widen its resource base by applying to private foundations such as the Donner Foundation, the Bronfman Foundation, and so on, it would become subject to even more rigorous regulations and boundaries than it is now, since it would have to become registered with the federal government as a charitable organization.

The non-traditional aspects of contemporary Native organizations are quite extensive, and are seen in such characteristics of Western democratic tradition as the practice of choosing a president, and the use of secret ballots in choosing elected officials. Medcalf (1978 : 106), who notes a parallel development in Native organizations in the U.S., tends to attribute much of this to the modern-day practices of White, professional consultants (particularly lawyers) who relied on the already existing "paper structures" of corporate-type charters to draft tribal constitutions persuant to the Indian Reorganization Act. White consultants have had a powerful influence on the nature of contemporary Canadian Native political organizations also, but the persistence of non-Native principles of political organization was in evidence long before professional consultants became a regular part of the scene, particularly among the Metis. Nor are the White-influenced characteristics completely attributable to the need to comply with governmental regulations — they showed up long before there was any legal requirement for them.

One of the earliest illustrations of this can be found in the Saint Albert Metis Association (also known as the Alberta Half-Breed Association and the Half-Breed Association of Saint Albert) which was in operation from at least 1897 to 1901, and which claimed to represent "the whole Metis population of the Saint Albert district in the (North West) territories". This organization was mainly formed to express concern over the way the government was handling the land claims of the Metis, and sent various petitions to Ottawa, either requesting scrip for the children of Half Breed heads of families, or recommending various changes to existing scrip programmes[2].

The Saint Albert Metis Association was organized along formal lines derived from principles used in the dominant White society, rather than from any "traditional" organizational principles of the Metis. It used elected officers (a president, secretary, treasurer) and used some variant of parliamentary procedure to organize its meetings. These rules of procedure may have been extracted from an organizational manual. Several of these manuals were in existence and readily available at the time, including a Canadian one (Bourinot, 1894) which contained a sample constitution of a Catholic organization, and so possibly was familiar to the priests in the Saint Albert vicinity, and the famous Robert's Rules, published even earlier, in 1876. At any rate, whatever the source of the structure, the Saint Albert Metis Association's meetings were held under formal parliamentary procedure, rather than any structure derived from indigenous sources. Motions were proposed and seconded, committees formed to perform specific tasks, and so on.

This is of interest because it has been traditionally assumed by Canadian historians that many of the earliest forms of political organization developed by the Metis were derived from the rules and regulations which structured the buffalo hunt. These rules, while following a traditional format, were changed and adapted on a year-to-year basis. The best-known set of rules is that set out for the 1840 hunt, as described by Alexander Ross (1856 : 249-50). These rules determined, for example, that no buffalo were to be run on Sunday, no party or individual was allowed to leave the main group without permission, no one was to run the buffalo before the general order, etc. There were also regulations dealing with theft, and the settling of minor disputes. These regulations were enforced by ten captains, with ten soldiers each under him. Ten guides were also chosen ; these men were the absolute chiefs of the expedition while the caravan was in motion ; the captains were in control while they made camp. Each guide and each captain took turns serving on a rotational basis.

These rules, according to G. F. C. Stanley (1936), formed the basis of the regulations outlining the provisional government the Metis formed at St. Laurent on December 10, 1873. Stanley (1936 : 404) writes :

The law of the prairie applied only to the actual hunt and upon their return to the plains the hunters relapsed into their former state of untrammelled liberty. Nevertheless, the organization of the buffalo hunt was readily adaptable to political purposes and to this extent the Metis were prepared to accept a form of government. Guided by Father André and encouraged by Gabriel Dumont, the Metis agreed to elect a council and submit to the laws and regulations imposed by it.

Besides the obvious difficulty of assuming that any group of people could live in "untrammelled liberty", another aspect of Stanley's assertions, that of assuming that the rules of the buffalo hunt ("the law of the prairie") were the source of the regulations of the provisional government of St. Laurent, can be questioned as well. There is really not that much similarity between the rules and regulations of St. Laurent and the organization of the buffalo hunt. Instead of ten captains and ten guides sharing the duties of leadership on a day-to-day basis, St. Laurent had the typically White concept of a formally designated council, consisting of a president and seven councillors elected for one year.

A far-reaching code of regulations was adopted by the community, covering such things as monthly meetings of the president and council, penalties for councillors not attending these meetings, penalties for refusing to carry out the orders of the council, or for contempt of the council. Regulations were adopted covering contracts between parties, punishment for horse thieves, seducers, slanderers, etc., and for damages caused by horses and dogs. Some of these rules were derived from the rules of the hunt, to be sure, but the *structure* of the council was not. It is as unlikely that the concept of an elected president and councillors derived from the buffalo hunt as it is that it derived from any of the political structures on the Native side of their heritage.

This is not to suggest that the buffalo hunt had *no* influence on the structure of the government of St. Laurent. One obvious influence can be seen in the organization of the "police force" used to enforce the regulations of the provisional government. The force consisted of captains and soldiers chosen in the manner of the buffalo hunt, and given similar powers. The format of the government, though, was quite consciously based on White parliamentary procedure and organization of meetings ; obviously coming from the direction of Father André, who was closely involved in the setting up of the provisional government (Stanley, 1936 : 404).

This likely influence of the church forms an interesting parallel with the development of other Native organizations. In his history of the Native Brotherhoods of the Northwest Coast, Drucker (1958 : 17-18) postulates that the many church-affiliated societies organized by the various Presbyterian missions provided the training ground for White techniques of group cooperation which eventually inspired the organizational format of the Alaska Native Brotherhood. Many missionaries had set up local governments with elective officers, and often with committees, such as water committees, road committees, etc., in the various Indian villages in which they were serving (Drucker, 1958 : 103-4).

It is also likely that the Saint Albert Metis Association benefitted from the organizational experience of the local Roman Catholic priest. The president of the association, Octave Bellerose, and several of the officers of the association were illiterate, and it is unlikely that they possessed the knowledge of parliamentary procedure demonstrated by the documents the association has left behind. Undoubtebly the priest at Saint Albert had a familiarity with some method f formally conducting meetings, and either provided an example by holding church meetings, using a format the Metis adopted for themselves, or else he formed an active part in organizing the association himself.

But whatever the source of the format, both the relative sophistication and the extensive influence of White political structures demonstrated by the provisional government of St. Laurent and the voluntary organization of the St. Albert Half-Breed Association are fairly typical of early Metis political organizations. The Metis offer an extremely early example (one of the earliest in Canada if not in North America) of the development by Native peoples of structures to deal with the dominant society, based on a real understanding of the workings of White political institutions and a knowledge of where the real power in White society lay.

This aspect of Metis development has been ignored somewhat by historians, due to the pervading portrayal of the Metis as a "primitive" force opposed to "progress", representing :

... the last organized attempts on the part of Canada's primitive peoples to withstand what, for want of a better word, may be termed progress, and to preserve their culture and their identity against the encroachments of civilization (Stanley, 1974 : 24).

This concept has been questioned many times, most recently by Redbird (1980), but it still has had sufficient influence to draw attention away from any activity of the Metis that does not fit the commonly accepted model of "primitive".

The Metis were, by virtue of their major economic pursuits, already well tied into the international market. They were linked to the English mercantile empire through the Hudson's Bay Company, both as clients and employees ; without it, they would have ceased to be, or have never existed in the first place. Thus the representation of the activity of the Metis as localized reactions against "civilization" are fruitless and misleading.

Metis resistance activity represents not only reactions to local conditions, as typically interpreted by the historical literature on the subject, but also an awareness of the broader political scene and how this affected their lives. At Red River, they maintained their own links with London for years. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century they maintained a lobbying agent in London in the person of Alexander Isbister, who attempted to present the Native's point of view to the Colonial Office :

[Isbister] left Rupert's Land in the late 1830's, went to Scotland and graduated from Edinborough University. By the late 1840's he had maintained his contacts with the native people in Rupert's Land so well that he became their agent in London. Constantly pestering the civil servants in the Colonial Office with petitions and letters, Isbister made a great impact on the manner in which... the development of the prairies in the 1850's [was perceived] (McNab, 1978 : 28).

This is hardly the kind of contacts and political activity associated with "primitive" opposing "civilized" forces. The fact is that the Metis demonstrated an appreciation of the political techniques of the dominant society from very early on.

The persistence as well as the format of Metis political activity is worth noting. Contrary to popular belief, the Metis did not drop all efforts at political organization at the beginning of the 20th century. The Metis Association of Alberta, or L'Association des Métis d'Alberta et des Territoires du Nord-Ouest, as it was first called, came into being in 1932, and was the culmination of an extensive mobilization of Metis communities in northern Alberta that had begun as early as the 1920's. A provisional council had already been in existence some time before the formation of the association, and at least 31 active locals were represented at the inaugural meeting.

Like earlier aspects of Metis political activity, there was little that could be described as "traditional" or indigenous about the association. White parliamentary procedure was by this time already well-established as the format for all Metis meetings, and the main thrust of the association in those early years was basically assimilationist and dominated by various White values. The direction of the association and the thrust for a formal organization in those early years came from the most influential of the founding members; Joe Dion, the first president, Malcolm Norris, vice-president, and Jim Brady, secretary-treasurer. Although there was a fundamental opposition in their world-views, they were all influenced by various European or Western traditions, rather than by any specifically in-

digenous ones. Dion could be characterized as a devout Catholic, who believed that anyone could succeed through self-discipline, and that the Metis must be assimilated into the economy of the dominant society. Norris and Brady were influenced by socialism, and tended to perceive the history of the Metis and their contemporary problems in terms of a class struggle (Hill, 1978 : 31 ; Sawchuk, Sawchuk and Ferguson, 1981 : 193).

Despite these differences, all three were united on the need for formal parliamentary procedure during meetings and a formal structure for the organization itself. Brady wrote the first constitution for the MAA in the late thirties. Although the association did not register under the Societies Act of the Province of Alberta at the time (the MAA was not formally registered until 1961) the constitution and by-laws were compatible with the requirements for registration, and were clearly drawn up with the intention of registering the association.

This stressing of a formal structure and rules of order also influenced the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA). Dion and Norris were both involved in the establishment of that organization as well. Norris was approached in 1939 to assist in organizing the IAA, and he provided the organization with a constitution and by-laws almost identical to that produced for the MAA by Brady (Dobbin, 1981 : 145-50).

Despite the divergencies among the leaders, the early years of the Metis Association of Alberta were remarkably successful. The stated aim of the association was to have land set aside for the Metis, and this objective was eventually achieved, as a result of continuous political lobbying by the association. The province of Alberta finally set aside several Metis settlements, or colonies, in 1939, and most of these are still in existence today. They represent a unique achievement for the Metis of Alberta ; no other province has at present specific areas set aside for the use of the Metis.

While the aims and motivations of the association may have changed to reflect the times, the Metis Association of Alberta is still in operation today. It, like the rest of the Metis and non-status Indian organizations across Canada, represents the persistence of a political activity among a Native people that is only now becoming documented and understood.

Conclusions

This history of the development of Metis political organization can explain some important contradictions which have developed in the con-

temporary scene. Both status and non-status Native leaders have routinely (and understandably) expressed the sentiment that the imposition of White, Western influence and rule has resulted in the negation of their indigenous ideology and society. As Native leaders, they often interpret their own role and activities as a resistance to and a rejection of that negation. Yet their political organizations, the vehicles through which they attempt to assert their own nativeness as well as political sovereignty, are themselves replicas of the wider political system which they oppose. The core of Western society's ideology and political practice has been reproduced in the Native organizations.

In other words, the implications go far beyond a simple borrowing of organizational principles from the dominant society; much of the political behaviour, and the ideology that informs it has been duplicated as well. The leadership conventions of the MAA, in which the president and vice-president of the association are chosen, are a good example of this. These elections, with their campaign speeches, electoral platforms, manipulation of voting blocs, and general political wheeling and dealing, are more reminiscent of the leadership conventions of the Liberal or Conservative parties than anything else.

The result of this is that, often, the only thing differentiating Native political organizations and their internal workings from that of any other political organization in the society is their assertion of apartness, and the general assumption of the Native people themselves that their organization is being run on different, vaguely expressed, principles of "nativeness". Thus the manipulation of the symbolic meaning of "being Metis" and references to the symbolic, half-mythic figures of Lous Riel or Gabriel Dumont is the most obvious (and perhaps only) solid manifestation of what sets the MAA apart from other political organizations in contemporary Canadian society.

This is not to be taken as a criticism of the direction Native political organizations have taken today. While it could perhaps be argued that reproducing the major political structure and ideology of the dominant society has cut down on the alternatives open to Native political resistance movements (just such a point has been made by Medcalf, 1978), it can also be argued that this response is the most practical and efficient one Native people could have made in the face of the monolithic political structure confronting them. By adopting much of the political ideology and practices of the dominant society as their own, they have met the leaders of that society on the society's own grounds and terms. They have gained valuable

practice in the process, learning at first hand how to operate within the political system that is directed against them. Furthermore, the process gives them a legitimacy in the eyes of the dominant society which they might otherwise lack. Since the Natives' political organizations are run on principles recognizable to the dominant society, the leaders of these organizations are more easily accepted as legitimate leaders of their people, both by the dominant society and by the politicians who must deal with them.

NOTES

1. Different versions of this paper were presented at The Metis in North America: A First Conference, presented by the Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois, September 3-5, 1981, and at the 1982 Canadian Ethnology Society meetings, Vancouver, British Columbia, May 7.

2. Public Archives of Canada. RG 15, Vol. 19. file 138650: Vol. 787, file 566003.

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