

## SENATE OF CANADA COMMITTEE REPORT ON MÉTIS IDENTITY

The Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (the “Committee”) has issued a Report dated June 2013 on “Recognition of Métis Identity in Canada” (the “Report”). The following is a brief outline of some of the pertinent points contained in the Report.

**I. OBJECTIVE AND THEMES OF THE REPORT** - The main objective of the Report was to initiate a constructive public discussion on the identity of the Métis and their recognition by the federal government for legal and policy purposes. It highlighted four general themes: Identity and Definition; Registration and Statistical Information; History and Genealogy; and Relations between Canada and the Métis. The Committee heard from Métis organizations from all across Canada.

**II. SIGNIFICANT POINTS PRESENTED BY BC MÉTIS FEDERATION (BCMF)** - The Report referred to there being two province-wide political organizations who stated that they represented Métis in British Columbia, one of them being the BCMF. The Committee heard that the BCMF defined its membership in terms that included Métis from across British Columbia and outside Western Canada.

Three members of the Board of the BCMF and two consultants associated with the BCMF made significant impacts in the presentations they made to the Hearing held by the Senate Committee in Vancouver on October 1, 2012. The following are some of the crucial points that they made that were included in the Report:

- Keith Henry President of BCMF noted that a substantial number of self-identifying Métis in BC do not meet the Métis National Council (MNC) national definition of who is Métis. He added “... **a substantive number of people are sort of sitting in limbo, do not have representation, do not take part in their own governance which is another inherent right, so it is a substantive issue in British Columbia**”.
- Lyle Letendre, a Director of BCMF, provided a colorful description of Métis “You do not see me with the headdress ... or drums. You see me with a fiddle and a guitar. That is who we are.”
- “George and Terry Goulet, historical consultants of BCMF, provided an historical perspective on the Métis in British Columbia in their presentations and one of their quotes is “[The Métis] came with the three great explorers [Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser and David Thompson] and they all belonged to the North West Company... They all built forts. Prior to ... 1821 ... there were something like 71 forts in the Pacific Northwest... They became the cities, towns and the communities that are part of British Columbia today.”
- A greeting in the traditional fur trade dialect of the Pacific Northwest was given by Terry Goulet at the Hearing, and the Committee included a description of this Chinook Jargon in the Report.

**III. MÉTIS IDENTITY AND DEFINITION** – The following were among the points brought forward:

- The Report stated that “Métis identity is a complex, multifaceted concept...that includes important historical, legal, political and cultural dimensions.”
- In the section titled “Historical Aspects of Métis Identity” the Report referenced the book *The Métis in British Columbia: From Fur Trade Outposts to Colony* written by George and Terry Goulet.
- It was generally acknowledged before the Committee that the MNC should be able to define its own membership in ways that reflect its views of its own constituency. However a number of witnesses disagreed with the MNC definition stating it was too narrow and exclusive.

**IV. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS** – The Committee brought forth a number of observations and recommendations. Those most relevant to the Métis in BC include the following:

- The Committee noted that with respect to Métis identity “**there is no one-size-fits-all**... Instead, complex historical, cultural, legal and political factors have led to diverse expressions of Métis identity across Canada”. This conclusion of the Committee reflected the observations presented to the Committee eight months earlier by George Goulet and contained his exact words “**there is no- one-size-fits all**” in his discussion of Métis identity.

- The Committee recommended that the federal government collaborate with Métis organizations to gather statistical information on Métis populations, and develop a coherent and comprehensive approach to relations between Canada and the Métis.
- The Committee noted the concerns of some witnesses that Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada's (AANDC) current network of relationships is not broad enough to include all groups that represent significant Métis constituencies.
- The Committee outlined the struggle that Eastern Canada and British Columbia have had to find the resources to document their Métis history.
- As a result of the *Manitoba Métis Federation* and *Daniels* decisions, the Committee stated that the need to develop historical knowledge of the Métis remains urgent and the federal government should make such work a priority.
- The Committee recommended that AANDC and Métis organizations and communities develop a **plan to work to build on the work and capacities of existing researchers and research institutions to identify relevant historical documentation on the Métis**. In addition a program should be developed to support Métis communities and organizations in gathering information on the development of their historic communities.
- The Committee confirmed that “The *Powley* decision **did not purport to define the Métis**.” [Emphasis added.]
- The Report stated that the federal government's and AANDC's approach to only being involved in the development of MNC's five provincial registries that are compatible with the *Powley* criteria was “**inadequate for identifying Métis rights-holders**”. [Emphasis added.]
- **The MNC National Definition and the *Powley* criteria are similar, but not the same; and not all members of the MNC's provincial organizations claim section 35 harvesting rights.**” [Emphasis added.]
- The Committee believes that the need to develop historical knowledge of the Métis remains urgent, and that the federal government should make such work a priority. It should collaborate with “...Métis organizations and communities.”
- The Committee noted the concerns of some witnesses that AANDC's current network of relationships is not broad enough to include all groups that represent significant Métis constituencies.
- The Committee noted that officials of AANDC expressed their openness to engaging in dialogue with local and regional Métis groups.
- In the Report, the Committee stressed that Métis identity, membership and representation are for the Métis themselves to determine.
- The Committee recommended in part that AANDC “**begin to engage with local and regional groups representing Métis constituencies ACROSS CANADA. ... with regard to their views on Métis identity and the bases on which they claim to represent Métis constituencies, and table a progress report with the Committee on an action plan by 1 June, 2014**”. [Capitalization added.]

**CONCLUDING REMARKS** – In the Report the final remarks of the Committee included the following:

**“This committee believes that the federal government must take immediate and concrete steps to better understand who the Métis are. This requires, at its base, an inquiry into who the Métis understand themselves to be. This will be no easy task. It is, however, an urgent and important one.”**

Prepared June, 2013 by:

**Terry Goulet**, B.Sc.(H.Ec.) & **George Goulet**, B.A., LLB, LLM.

© George and Terry Goulet