The Manufactured Halfbreed

by Joe Desjarlais

I recently read a Provincial government document entitled *British Columbia’s Approach to the Métis Peoples of British Columbia in Relation to Land and Resource Issues*. This policy document exposes and illustrates the systemic discrimination by the Province regarding historic Métis people and communities.

The province has tasked their technicians to write a document with “key messages” to describe Métis and their place in British Columbia’s social, political and legal fabric. This document reveals that our current government is in denial about the historical presence and significance of Metis in BC. They politicize Métis through a policy framework that distorts the identities of these people and fosters identity competition and historical schizophrenia.

Daniel Francis once wrote a book about the Imaginary Indian. He argued that public discourse about native people deals in stereotypes. Typical perceptions are bound up in myth, prejudice and ideology. This recent exposed policy document demonstrates that similar standard representations impact Métis public policy in British Columbia. Assimilation and marginalization still seem to governments the only possible future for Métis people and communities.

None of this banal official language about Métis as “stakeholders” bodes well for historical Métis distinct communities in BC and elsewhere looking to secure their place within Confederation. These standard ideas and images, however, didn’t just happen. They were manufactured. Let’s take a moment to step back from this “policy” for a selected look at the history of aboriginal policy in BC.

I recall the “New Relationship” spin by the Campbell era Liberal government a number of years back for all Aboriginal people in BC. At the time as you may recall, the Minister trumpeted openly in the BC service plan, “this new relationship will continue as it began- based on principles of mutual trust, respect, and recognition of aboriginal rights and title.” Under Strategic Context, the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation described itself unabashedly and paternalistically as the “key champion to lead the provincial effort of reconciliation with Aboriginal people of British Columbia.” I dug a little deeper at the time into earlier service plans and noticed that when it came to treaty negotiation principles. “Aboriginal self-government should have the characteristics of local government, with powers delegated from Canada and British Columbia.”

They co-opted the language of reconciliation and “new relationship” in its fullest historical sense and turned it into meaningless cliché. There was a five page summary on the New Relationship campaign. It was structured as a vision statement with goals, and principles, with the nucleus of a plan of action. There were ‘processes’ to consider and ‘institutions’ to develop, dispute resolution processes, protocols, working groups, mechanisms, progress timelines, and many other examples. Incredibly, only one sentence out of five pages referred to a desire for congruency with aboriginal knowledge and values. It was not viewed other than in pragmatic terms to solve existing socio-economic gaps. In their world, it appears that the wisdom of elders, connections to the land, the deep intellectual, cultural, and oral traditions and histories are the product of an outdated time in history.

The *British Columbia’s Approach* policy document states a key message that “the Province will continue to work with the Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC) and Métis communities to close the gaps in education, health, housing and economic development to reach the goals of the Métis Nation
Relationship Accord.” This accord, signed off between the Métis Nation BC and the Province in 2006 was primarily concerned with social and economic processes. There is no mention of any rights based obligation. Any “nation to nation” language was reduced to rectifying social inequalities. Despite being a document between two parties, the government set the legitimacy for the tone of the document. Consider their disconnected phrasing: “These Métis people refer to themselves, and are referred to by others, as the Métis Nation.” It makes you wonder what the government’s views are on “Métis nationhood.”

We do know that governments have long been in the business of identifying the “Indian” in Canada for purposes of assimilation. Historically, the Canadian government and their institutions have defined “Indians” in terms of racial rather than cultural criteria. For example, the legislation of Lower Canada from 1850 saw the need to work out defining and “civilizing” the Indian. For Metis, the Canadian government has long attempted to impose racial criteria that defined the community by their blood-relations (biology) and their status as ‘half-breeds’ (race).

More recently, the Province has been involved with the MNBC in developing the citizenship process. This is implicitly stated in the Métis Nation Relationship Accord (2006) by “Métis identification and data collection.” The Liberal government support of racial definitions and processes of defining an institutional level of ‘self government’ through the MNBC citizenship process based upon biological links to ancestors instead of cultural factors is merely repeating past action by Canadian governments in their “paradoxical” strategy to separate and then assimilate the “Indian.”

Thus, the government is once again involved in the “civilizing” process, dividing the Metis, defining and separating them, isolating them by a “special status” of sorts with a view to political, legal and economic integration, and most importantly to the government, a subordinate relationship amenable to the goals of the state. Culture is secondary, mere window dressing to this overall goal. Data collection (employed by MNBC registry process) is used as a political tool to foster notions of identity through historic linkage. It re-postures individual and family histories in a political context.

The Liberal government by their actions has reinforced the dominant political messages that the MNBC is the inevitable administrative vehicle to drive certainty into the emerging Metis question in British Columbia. A similar process is occurring with the Feds and their recent protocol agreement with the Métis National Council and their affiliates. This co-opted unequal power coalition essentially gives governments the upper hand in controlling who is Métis. Despite the assurances in this policy document, since 2008 however, the MNBC has effectively been a hollow shell. This pseudo-government has run up millions of dollars in debts and appears to be functionally bankrupt on every level. Despite the spin, they have largely ignored cultural transmission, community sustainability, meaningful governance and transformative education.

In short, organizations that have politicized Métis identity have become partners in Canadian government’s long-term plan to exercise power over Métis in order to dispossess them of their land, to rationalize their rights, and to assimilate them into Canadian society. Ironically, by identifying Métis communities through genealogy and biology rather than in the context of historical difference and nationhood, Métis peoples never escape from the historically marginalized position of ‘half-breeds’. Because of this politics of identity, Métis communities are never considered as self-determined and self-governing nations.
Métis people and communities in British Columbia are not the invention of governments and their expert advisors. This document only serves to further remove Métis people from a reality based world into the “world” they want them in. At any rate, the new Government under Christy Clark has encountered a seismic shift in the manner a Constitutional people are perceived in British Columbia, where Canadians and their institutions acknowledge a different model going forward.

In future articles there is more to come on how other people and their institutions in BC history have described Métis people. In closing I think of the refreshing words of Senator Nancy Green Raine from British Columbia on the Standing Senate Committee. The Senate of Canada recently wrote a bellwether report speaking into Metis identity in Canada:

“At the end of this study, we will write a report with recommendations. I am becoming more and more convinced that our recommendations are not about entitlements and registries and things, but about the culture and the importance of the culture and the history. Somehow this history has to get celebrated in all of Canada, which is not the case or has not been the case. When I grew up and went to school, for instance, there was maybe a half a page in my Grade 8 textbook about Metis people — really nothing — and now I recognize that the founders of most settlements in British Columbia were Metis.”