Mêtis and Non-Status People in British Columbia

One of the legacies of colonialism in Canada is the division of Aboriginal people into categories. The fact that the Indian Act labelled Aboriginal people as "status" or "non-status" did not change the depths of their identities, but it changed the way Canadian society viewed them. Moreover, through its policies, the government perpetuated the notion that there were only two major groups of Aboriginal people in Canada, First Nations and Inuit. Only in 1982 with the repatriation of the constitution were Mêtis included as the third Aboriginal peoples.

The nature of early settlement in British Columbia, dependent on resource-based industries, such as the fur trade and gold rush, resulted in many mixed families, usually with an Aboriginal mother and non-Aboriginal father. The contributions of these families and their children to the building of the province have often gone unrecognized. While the experiences of their descendants have been varied, it is safe to say that many of them have been marginalized by Canadian society.

The words Mêtis and Non-Status are both used to describe people of mixed lineage, although there have been differing interpretations of their definitions. While the government created the legal definition of "status" and "non-status," Aboriginal people themselves have always held the notion of self-identification as key to their identity.

The struggle for recognition of Aboriginal identity and rights, an enduring commitment for Mêtis and Non-Status leaders, was given renewed vigour when the Constitution Act of 1982 recognized Mêtis as one of three distinct Aboriginal groups in Canada. Since this affirmation of their identity as an Aboriginal people, Mêtis and Non-Status people have organized councils to promote their culture, to have their role in Canadian history recognized, and to try to attain rights that have been denied them.

Children of Contact

Non-Status and Mêtis people are the direct result of contact between First Nations and Europeans, tracing their roots to marriages between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men. The earliest settlements in western Canada were male-dominated societies comprised of employees of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company who lived in forts at key locations within traditional First Nations territories. Marriages sometimes came about to form an alliance between a local First Nations group and the traders, and sometimes simply out of a man's desire for companionship and the domestic skills of a woman. The nature of these marriages varied, as described in Chapter 4. Unique marriage ceremonies were conducted in "the custom of the country"—that is, based on the customs of the local First Nations group. These partnerships are often referred to as "country marriages." In British Columbia, the fur trade gave way to the gold rush, and while more non-Aboriginal women arrived as settlers at this time, many of the miners married Aboriginal women.
The marriages between Aboriginal women and their fur-trading and gold-mining husbands created a new and significant segment of the early population of the province. Some would argue a new race of people emerged from these unions. Children of mixed marriages had their feet in both worlds, and the knowledge and skills that they gained from the separate cultures of their parents was advantageous in the economies of B.C.’s early days. But as immigration began to swell the province's population, the children and grandchildren of mixed families became marginalized and often invisible as a unique culture. "Half-Breed" became a term of shame and derision. Some children were accepted by their First Nations relatives, and became part of that community. Many others, however, felt rejected by both worlds.

The separation of children with mixed lineage from their parents' cultures became further entrenched when the Indian Act imposed its own definition of who was and was not "Indian." First Nations women who married non-Aboriginal men suddenly lost their cultural identity, at least officially. They and their children were denied the rights and benefits they would have retained if they had married a man with status. Instead, they were classed as "Non-Status Indians." Officially, they were Indian people who were not registered under the Indian Act. Generally, they were considered to be First Nations people under the common usage of that term. Although they did not have rights and benefits under the Indian Act, it is widely held that they nonetheless retained Aboriginal rights.

People were considered non-status for reasons other than marriage. They, their parents or grandparents may have lost their status through enfranchisement, either voluntary or involuntary. For example, people who earned a university degree were automatically enfranchised and so lost their status. In some cases, people who were out on the land when the registrar came by their community were missed from the band list. Some of the issues of loss of status were addressed under Bill C-31, which amended the Indian Act in 1985 to restore Indian status to women who lost their status through marriage. Their children could also apply for status, as could those who were previously enfranchised.

In some regions of the country, families of mixed marriages developed unique cultures, blending aspects of both sides into a distinct culture or race. This culture was recognized as early as the days of French colonization, when the term Mētis, meaning "mixed," arose. In eastern Canada, Mētis people trace their ancestry to the earliest colonizers. On the Canadian Prairies, originating from the Red River settlements in Manitoba, a strong and vibrant people with their own language identified themselves as Mētis, and were recognized by governments as having land rights. However, as you will see, these rights have yet to be realized.

Mētis people stand strong in their identity as a distinct Aboriginal group and do not consider themselves included in the term "First Nations." However, the meaning of Mētis is contentious and is interpreted in various ways today. To some, it refers to anyone of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parentage, while others maintain that it specifically refers to those who can trace their ancestry to the Red River days on the

It is primarily culture that sets the Mêtis apart from other Aboriginal people. Many Canadians have mixed Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal ancestry, but that does not make them Mêtis or even Aboriginal. Some of them identify themselves as First Nations persons or Inuit, some as Mêtis and some as non-Aboriginal. What distinguishes Mêtis people from everyone else is that they associate themselves with a culture that is distinctly Mêtis.


The Commission’s recommendation about Mêtis identity reflects two criteria that are important to the Mêtis community: self-identification and community acceptance. People must identify themselves as Mêtis and be accepted by the nation of Mêtis people "on the basis of criteria and procedures determined by that nation."

It is the last statement that points to the area of controversy. What criteria will be used to define Mêtis? The answer to the question will have major political and economic implications for the Mêtis people.

The Long Struggle for Recognition

After the 1885 conflict Mêtis families migrated west, many of them to northeastern British Columbia. Some Mêtis gathered on the shores of a small lake in the Peace River region, south of Dawson Creek where, in 1893, they founded Kelly Lake, the only Mêtis community in British Columbia. After World War II, thousands of Mêtis people from the Prairies moved to British Columbia. They often faced similar social and economic conditions as the indigenous population of Non-Status people living in the province.

Both Mêtis and Non-Status people coped with a lack of acknowledgement of their identity and Aboriginal rights. So overt was the racism in British Columbia that for much of the past century some people felt they needed to keep their Aboriginal heritage secret. People speak of the "lost generation" who felt compelled to hide their identity, some women going so far as to wear light-coloured make-up when they went to town. Poverty was common for many people, both for those living in rural communities and those in urban centres.

A renewed drive to organize for political action came in 1968, with the creation of the British Columbia Association of Non-Status Indians, or BCANSI. Its main goal was to improve the opportunities for Non-Status Aboriginal and Mêtis people in British Columbia by increasing access to education. It began largely through the efforts of one man, H.A. "Butch" Smitheram.

At the same time as the BCANSI was growing, the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs was also getting established. The two bodies became the dominant voices of Aboriginal politics in B.C. Open they held their annual conventions at the same time in
the same city. Both groups received funding from B.C.’s First Citizens’ Fund, a fund set up by B.C. Premier William Bennett to assist Aboriginal groups.

In the mid-1970s, BCANSI evolved into a different type of organization than Smitheram had envisioned. It sought to unite status and non-status people, and its name was changed to the United Native Nations in 1976. The Native Council of Canada changed too, and is now called the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. It continues to act as an advocate for Métis and Non-Status people.

United Native Nations Society

The United Native Nations Society has as its motto, “Working Together for Our Children.” It is organized through local chapters throughout the province. Each local is managed independently. The locals work with members on and off reserve; with local bands and tribal council; friendship centres; local Aboriginal organization; and Métis locals in their areas.

The society has undertaken important initiatives to improve conditions for all Aboriginal people, including Status, Non-Status, and Métis people. Since 1977, it has provided housing through its B.C. Native Housing Corporation. Since 1985, the corporation has helped to house more than 2,000 families and assisted more than 6,000 families with home improvements and renovations. Another program is the Family Reunification Program, which helps Aboriginal people regain contact with their families following adoption or foster care. The Nu-Sayla (My Vision) training program helps Aboriginal people with career planning and job search strategies.

Organizing the Métis

When the Constitution Act of 1982 recognized Indians, Inuit, and Métis as Canada's three distinct Aboriginal peoples, the struggle for recognition took a giant leap forward. Still, it did not define Mêtts or determine where Non-Status people fit in. Ongoing discussions about a correct definition for Métis have been very controversial.

Following the recognition of Métis in the constitution, the Métis National Council was created in 1983. It is recognized by federal and provincial governments as the national body representing the Métis Nation in constitutional negotiations at the national level, and in important matters concerning the Métis on the international stage. The Métis National Council represents five provincial groups, stretching from British Columbia to Ontario.

The Métis Provincial Council of British Columbia (MPCBC) is the elected governing organization for the Métis in the province. Among its many roles, the council acts as the political representative for its members to governments and funding agencies, and advocates for its members.
After 1982, a great deal of organizational work was done to establish locals in communities throughout the province and build awareness of Métis issues. Through this development work, many people rediscovered their Métis identity. Often they knew a little about their Aboriginal heritage, but had never been able to express it. By joining together with people in their own communities who shared similar backgrounds, they felt a renewed sense of identity and self-pride.

Through the locals, people were able to register as Métis. Three main criteria were considered. The first two, self-identification and community acceptance, were key to the democratic philosophy of the Métis movement. No acknowledgement by outside agencies was important. The third came to the heart of the question posed earlier: what criteria are used to define Métis? The answer in British Columbia is that you are accepted as Métis if you can show genealogical proof of your Aboriginal ancestors.

The Métis seek rights in two areas, land and resource rights, and self-governing rights. They seek greater control of their own lives within the broader Canadian society. They seek a land base in the Prairie provinces or compensation for the lands they once owned but lost through development. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Métis leaders knew that to achieve full recognition of their identity and their rights, a specific and widely accepted definition of Métis would be necessary. Pursuing Métis land claims to the Prairie provinces was one of the driving forces to shape a definition linking the Métis to the homelands. So it was that on September 27, 2002, delegates to the Métis National Council Annual Assembly in Edmonton, Alberta, unanimously voted to accept a definition of Métis that ties it to the historic Métis Nation. As part of the definition, the assembly also approved definitions of terms which clarify the national definition of Métis.

The importance of the democratic rights of every Métis person was at the heart of another historic decision made at the assembly, which voted to hold nation-wide ballot box elections for the President of the Council. "For the first time in our history it gives our people the right to vote for the national leadership. Power to the people," said President Gerald Morin after the vote was passed. "This is history in the making. We have taken some major steps in realizing Riel's dream."

The implications of the new definition are extremely powerful. For "Red River" people--those who trace their ancestors to the original families who were given scrip it means a stronger and more unified voice in political, economic, social, and cultural realms. For others of mixed lineage who do not fit the new definition, it will undoubtedly create a number of feelings, including confusion and anger. Some feel that the definition is exclusionary.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The Métis and Non-Status people are in many ways the "Children of Contact," since they are mostly descended from Aboriginal women married to fur traders. Children of mixed families formed an important segment of British Columbia's population in its early years but became more and more marginalized as the province grew. Both
governmental policies and societal attitudes left many people with no Aboriginal benefits and a feeling of shame towards their Aboriginal identity.

On the Prairies a distinct Mêtis culture developed, with its own language, culture, and customs. The battles of the people for recognition of their culture under the leadership of Louis Riel were significant events in Canada's history.

In British Columbia the struggle by Mêtis and Non-Status people has taken different paths. At first attempts were made to unify both groups under the umbrella of the British Columbia Association of Non-Status Indians and later the United Native Nations Society.

Official recognition of the Mêtis as one of Canada's three Aboriginal peoples in the Constitution Act, 1982, led to concerted political action to organize and register Mêtis people, and as a result many people rediscovered their roots. Still, the definition of Mêtis was very controversial. Two elements, self-identification and community acceptance, were agreed upon, but the third key element regarding ancestry was not. Some believed anyone with mixed lineage could be Mêtis, while others believed Mêtis heritage was linked to the original Red River settlements in Manitoba. At the Mêtis National Council Annual Assembly in September 2002, the delegates voted unanimously to link the definition of Mêtis to the Red River ancestry. The implications of this decision will bring both challenges and opportunities to Mêtis and Non-Status people in the coming years.

CASE STUDY: Mêtis Commission for Children and Family Services

Imagine that government social workers come into your home to check on your living conditions, look in the refrigerator and see only a few items sitting on the shelves. Based on this observation, they believe your children do not have adequate food, and they add this evidence to other information that legally allows them to take your children away from you. What they have missed are the pantry shelves in another room well stocked with jarred moose meat, dried fish, and other traditional foods.

This scenario is just an example of what Aboriginal families face when outside government agencies have the power to remove their children, with no consultation with the local community, and no understanding of cultural practices, be they Mêtis or First Nations. Since the 1950s, the provincial government has had legislated authority for Aboriginal social welfare. As you saw in Chapter 10, this often resulted in Aboriginal communities being unable to make decisions about their own children.

Aboriginal children have been significantly over-represented in the case files of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. In the past few years, only 8 per cent of the under-eighteen population in BC were Aboriginal children, but 30 to 40 per cent of the children in the care of the ministry were Aboriginal.
Who should provide assistance and support for Aboriginal children and their families? The strong belief that Aboriginal groups should be able to control their own social welfare services went unrealized for years, until the mid 1990s. Finally policies were put in place that make it possible for Aboriginal communities to administer their own assistance to Aboriginal children and families.

It was in this climate of change that the Mêtis Commission for Children and Family Services was born in September 1999 with the aim of protecting Mêtis family values, eliminating poverty, and promoting the self-sustaining capacity of Mêtis people and communities.

The commission is affiliated with the Mêtis Provincial Council, although it is registered separately under the Societies Act. A director is appointed in each of seven regions in the province, and each is approved by the Mêtis Provincial Council. With offices in Victoria, its staff includes an Executive Director and Special Policy Advisor.

The commission does not deliver services; it develops policies and advises the Mêtis Provincial Council of British Columbia as well as government organizations. Working within the framework of provincial legislation, it defines operational standards for the delivery of culturally appropriate services for Mêtis children and families. Among its many other roles, the council provides advice on social issues pertaining to Mêtis people, including social issues in the Tripartite Self-government Negotiations process of the Mêtis Provincial Council of B.C.

The creation of the Mêtis Commission for Children and Family Services is significant for Mêtis people at several levels. The work it does in supporting Mêtis cultural identity for children and families throughout the province serves as a unifying force for the Mêtis community. In addition, the commission plays a solid leadership role in the development and implementation of Aboriginal social welfare matters for the whole province. It stands as a positive sign, to Mêtis and non-Mêtis alike, of the growing recognition that the Mêtis community is achieving in British Columbia.

For instance, one of the commission’s current priorities is to see provincial legislation changed to restructure social welfare funding. At present, service agencies are funded based on the number of children they have in care. But the commission joins others in arguing that apprehension should not be the ultimate goal. Funding must support keeping families together and having fewer children in care.

Another example of the commission’s leadership role is its ongoing work in the formation of Regional Aboriginal Authorities. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the province moved to decentralize delivery of all social services. This has turned into an opportunity for Aboriginal groups in the province to finally be able to make their own decisions about their children who are vulnerable.

In its discussions and negotiations to implement changes to social services, the province has officially recognized the government-to-government relationship it has with
four leading Aboriginal groups, including the Mètis Provincial Council of British Columbia.

In June 2002, recognizing the need for a unified stand, Aboriginal leaders met in Tsawwassen to agree on a way to work together to assert their inherent right of governance over the lives of their children and families. All the leaders sought one ultimate goal: the care of their children. They signed what is called the Tsawwassen Accord, whereby they unanimously voted to work together to develop Regional Aboriginal Authorities to lead the way in reducing the numbers of Aboriginal children in care. The accord sets out the terms under which the Aboriginal Authorities will be organized, calling for a stand-alone authority rather than one that blended Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service delivery.

And so, at an historic ceremony held at the UBC Museum of Anthropology on September 9, 2002, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by the province and four Aboriginal groups: the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, the First Nations Summit, the Mètis Provincial Council of British Columbia, and the United Native Nations. Nine other organizations signed as supporting members, including the Mètis Commission for Children and Family Services.

The purpose of the MOU was to put into action a decision-making process for the well-being of Aboriginal children and families that:

1. is on a government-to-government basis;

2. recognizes that First Nations, the Mètis Nation, Inuit and other Aboriginal peoples assert jurisdiction over their children and families, regardless of residency;

3. recognizes the importance of transferring the delivery of services to Aboriginal communities;

4. draws on the expertise of Aboriginal service delivery agencies and research institutions;

5. reflects the historic and new relationship established at Tsawwassen on June 11, 2002.

As the Regional Aboriginal Authorities are created, Mètis representatives sit at the table with other Aboriginal people, working together to improve the quality of life for all their children. For the Mètis Commission for Children and Family Services, its involvement is seen as a major achievement, one in which Mètis people are accepted as equal partners.

GLOSSARY NOTES
Mètis sash: The Mètis sash was traditionally made with a finger-weaving technique used by First Nations of Ontario. This method had long been used to make clothing and useful objects such as tumplines out of
plant fibres, and was adapted to use wool after European contact. The governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan have created the Order of the Sash, which recognizes the achievements of Métis individuals.

Genealogical: Tracing family descent from an ancestor.

Scrip: Scrip, or Land Scrip, is a certificate issued to Manitoba Métis families entitling them to 240 acres or money for the purchase of land, issued in compensation for lands lost by the Métis after the Northwest Rebellion.