

# Trudeau can make Louis Riel's dream a reality

One hundred and thirty-five years after Louis Riel was hanged, Justin Trudeau has a chance finally to uphold the rights the Métis leader died fighting for.



Louis Riel, circa 1876. The Metis leader died fighting for rights that, 135 years after his death, remain ungranted by Canada, writes Janique Dubois. (FILE PHOTO / CANADIAN PRESS)

By **JANIQUE DUBOIS**

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This month marks the 130th anniversary of Louis Riel's death. As the leader of the Métis people, Riel was the first architect of Métis-Canada relations. In 1870, he struck a deal with the Canadian government. His people would peacefully enter into Confederation in exchange for the protection of land, cultural and political rights. When Canada failed to hold up its end of the bargain, Riel led a resistance movement to have the rights of his people respected — a crime for which he was sentenced to hang on Nov. 16, 1885.

The history of Métis-Canada relations is one of broken promises. In a recent decision, the Supreme Court confirmed that Canada failed to act honourably in carrying out the promises it made to the Métis.

As part of his campaign for “real change,” Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised a new relationship with the Métis, pledging to advance meaningful reconciliation on a nation-to-nation basis. As he works toward this new deal, it is worth taking a moment to look back and ask: what would Louis Riel want from such a deal?

Riel had a simple vision of Métis-Canada relations. This vision was grounded in the respect of rights. In 1869, Riel's people drafted a list of rights they sought to have respected in their new relationship with Canada. This list included the right of the people to elect their own legislature, their full and fair representation in the Canadian Parliament and the recognition of both English and French in the legislature and the courts.

What was Canada's response?

Seeking to remove the biggest obstacle to its westward expansion, Canada agreed to many of the demands made by Riel's people. In particular, the state agreed to protect their linguistic and religious rights and to give them control of land so that they could constitute their own government in the newly created province of Manitoba. A few months later, Canada sent 12,000 troops to the Red River.

Putting the pursuit of power over rights, Canada forced Riel and many of his people to flee.

A decade later, Riel came out of exile and joined his people in the South Saskatchewan settlements where he once again called on Canada to uphold its promises. Unamenable to political discussion and compromise, Canada instead sent military troops and went to war against the Métis. Defeated in the 1885 Battle of Batoche, the Métis came to be known as “Canada's forgotten people.”

In recent decades, the Métis have resurfaced on Canada's political agenda. In 1982, they were recognized as one of the three groups of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada's constitution. Their right to self-government is also recognized in federal policy. Yet, Riel's vision of a self-governing Métis people within Canada remains unfulfilled.

The Métis fall outside of the policy frameworks that have been established by the Canadian state to deal with First Nations and the Inuit. Instead of negotiating policy solutions with the federal government, the Métis are forced to stand before the court to assert their rights. While they have made advances in having their rights recognized on a case-by-case basis through the courts, the Métis are ultimately seeking a political solution with Canada. Today, as in 1870, they remain committed to Riel's vision of a self-governing Métis people within the Canadian state.

A few weeks ago, Métis leaders stood before the Supreme Court of Canada to ask the federal government to take responsibility for dealing with the Métis people. By asking to be recognized as "Indians" under the Constitution Act of 1867, they are asking the federal government to assume a leadership role and build a political foundation for Métis-Canada relations. Without this assertion of responsibility, the Métis will continue to be subject to a game of jurisdictional football between the provinces and the federal government and will be forced to look to the courts to mediate their relationship with the state.

On the campaign trail, Trudeau promised a political path to "real change." He committed to negotiate the settlement of Métis land claims and self-government — the rights that are at the heart of Riel's vision of Métis-Canada relations.

As Canadians commemorate the death of Louis Riel, a father of Confederation, Prime Minister Trudeau has the chance to make history.

All he has to do is what past governments have found impossible: keep his promise. Riel's people depend on it.

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