Fragmentation and Realignment: The Continuing Cycle of Métis and Non-Status Indian Political Organizations in Canada

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There have been many social and political changes affecting Canadian Aboriginal peoples and their political organizations in the last 25 years. The repatriation of the Canadian Constitution, Bill C-31, self-government negotiations, land claims and recent trends towards devolution in the federal Indian Affairs Department have effectively changed the structure of all Aboriginal political organizations in Canada. Perhaps the most far-reaching changes are found in the organizations serving Métis and non-status Indians. Once thrown together by political happenstance, the Métis and non-status Indians are now split by forces emanating from constitutional issues and a recharged Métis nationalism. These have resulted in several new organizations with specific concerns representing Métis, Bill C-31 Indians, and non-status Indian urban populations. This paper examines the changes in these organizations in terms of the political arena and the effects of current political concerns, the forces endemic to government-subsidized pressure groups; negotiation of ethno-aboriginal identities; and the perceived effectiveness of the organizations.

Pendant les dernières 25 années, il y a eu plusieurs changements sociaux et politiques touchant les peuples autochtones canadiens et leurs organisations politiques. Le rapatriement de la Constitution canadienne, la loi C-31, les négociations de l'autonomie gouvernementale, les revendications territoriales et les tendances récentes vers une délégation de pouvoirs dans le Ministère des Affaires indiennes au niveau fédéral ont effectivement changé la structure de toute organisation politique des Autochtones au Canada. Peut-être, les changements ayant le plus de portée se trouvent dans les organisations qui déservent les Métis et les Indiens non inscrits. Réunis autrefois par le hasard politique, les Métis et les Indiens non inscrits sont

*maintenant divisés par des forces émanant de questions
constitutionnelles et d'un nationalisme renouvelé des Métis.
De ces forces sont nées plusieurs nouvelles organisations ayant
des intérêts particuliers en représentant les Métis, les Indiens
de la loi C-32, et les populations urbaines d'Indiens non
inscrits. Ce document examine à fond les changements qui se
font dans ces organisations par rapport à l'arène politique et
aux effets des intérêts politiques actuels; les forces endémiques
aux groupes de pression subventionnés par l'État; la négociation
des identités ethno-aborigènes; et comment est perçue
l'efficacité des organisations.*

Introduction

Anyone attempting to chart the progress, development and functioning of
contemporary Aboriginal political organizations in Canada must be struck by
the fluidity of the structure and the volatility of the political and cultural
alliances of these organizations. The criteria for membership, name changes,
leadership changes, and structural and functional changes are common. Periods
of intense political activity are followed by years of inactivity. Government
support is followed by deliberate attempts to discredit the organizations or their
leaders by that same government. Nowhere in Aboriginal politics is this more
evident than in the Métis and non-Status Indian (MNSI) organizations,
especially in the three prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.
A wide variety of MNSI organizations exist, or have existed there: the Métis
Association of Alberta, the Federation of Métis Settlements, the Congress of
Aboriginal Peoples of Alberta, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan, the
Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan, the Manitoba
Métis Federation, the Manitoba Métis Confederacy and the Métis Nation of
Manitoba, to name but a few. On the interprovincial level, we also have the
Native Council of Canada (recently renamed the Congress of Aboriginal
Peoples) and the Métis National Council.

This paper is an attempt to delineate some of the major agents of change
operating on these prairie organizations in terms of four key areas:

- *external politics:* the political arena and the effects of current political
  concerns
- *internal politics:* the forces endemic to government-subsidized pressure
  groups
- *negotiation of ethno-Aboriginal identities*
- *perceived effectiveness* of the organizations.

There is no suggestion that these are the only factors contributing to organizational
change—in fact several other factors could be suggested—but these are some

of the most significant ones. Before we consider the effect of these agents of change, we should begin with a basic outline and history of the MNSI organizations in Canada.

History of Métis and Non-Status Indian Organizations in Western Canada

Alberta

Public perception probably has it that Canadian Aboriginal political organizations are a fairly recent phenomenon, perhaps starting sometime in the late 1970s. It is true that these organizations have gained a special prominence in last twenty years or so, but many have a much longer history than that, often going back to the 1920s or 1930s. The oldest Métis political organization on the prairies is probably the Métis Association of Alberta (MAA), or L'Association des Métisse d'Alberta et les Territoires du Nord-Ouest, as it was first called. It came into being in 1932,[1] but even this was not the earliest manifestation of Métis political organization in Alberta. The MAA was actually a federation of Métis locals from communities in northern Alberta that had been in existence for some time, some as early as the 1920s (there is some evidence of other locals operating in the late 1890s). A provisional council had already been in existence for at least a year before the inaugural meeting at which thirty-one active locals were represented (Sawchuk, 1983, p. 24).

Despite an indifferent if not hostile reception from the provincial government, the MAA had some early success. It was at least partially responsible for influencing the Ewing Commission, which recommended setting up Métis farm colonies, now called settlements (Sawchuk, 1983, p. 24; Dobbin, 1981, pp. 88–105). However, it was quickly sidelined after the province set up a system of settlement councils. The government dealt directly with these councils, refusing to recognize the MAA (or any other organization) as an umbrella group representing the Métis colonies as a whole. Hampered by a lack of funding and sporadic leadership, the MAA was not much of a force in Alberta until the late 1960s, and the infusion of government funding.

The funding came about, as it did almost simultaneously across Canada, because both the provincial and federal levels of government needed credible Aboriginal spokespersons (with a recognizable and legitimate constituency) with whom to negotiate. Until governments felt that need, no funding was ever provided. As a result of this funding the MAA was forced to broaden its base. Funding was contingent on the MAA abandoning its attempts at solely representing the voice of the colonies, and agreeing to represent all Métis within the province of Alberta.

Métis settlement residents were not much concerned with MAA politics

anyway, a situation that lasts to this day (Pocklington, 1991, pp. 101–102). A feeling on the part of settlement residents that they were being neglected by the new MAA, and, more specifically, dissatisfaction with the way the new MAA executive was handling the settlements' claim for gas and oil royalties for the colonies, eventually led to the incorporation of the Federation of Métis Settlements Association (FMSA) in 1975.

Saskatchewan

The province of Saskatchewan is the most volatile of the three western provinces in terms of organizational change over the years. The basis for this is changing ethno-aboriginal identity (or at least political alliance based on ethno-aboriginal identities). Over time, many different regional and local organizations attempted to represent the interests of Métis and non-status Indian residents. The Métis Society of Saskatchewan (MSS) set up its constitution and bylaws in 1964. Originally, it represented the Métis of southern Saskatchewan, while the Métis Association of Saskatchewan represented Métis and non-status Indians in the northern part of the province. In 1967, the two organizations amalgamated under the name MSS, and became the official Métis organization for all of Saskatchewan. In 1975, the name of the organization was changed to the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan (AMNSIS). This was in recognition of the reality that non-Status Indians faced most of the same problems that the Métis did, and that a lot of them were already members, including the president at the time, Jim Sinclair. However, in August 1988, as a result of a province-wide referendum, the members of AMNSIS voted to resuscitate the MSS, creating a Métis-only organization, leaving non-status Indians temporarily without an organization.

In September 1988, the Assembly of Aboriginal Peoples of Saskatchewan (AAPS) was incorporated. Its function was to protect the rights of the "excluded Indians" of Saskatchewan. This was not the only organization dedicated to protecting the rights of non-status Indians; the Native Council of Canada (NCC) had earlier attempted to establish a provincial branch, NCC (Saskatchewan). It attempted one in Alberta as well. The Saskatchewan organization fell by the wayside, but later was resuscitated by the reformulation of the NCC into the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP).

Manitoba

The Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) was incorporated in 1967, and has represented the Métis (and to some extent non-Status Indians) ever since. It was set up in reaction to the proposed revival of the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood (MIB), an organization that had been around in one form or the other since the early 1930s. There was some talk of the Métis being invited to join the

organization, but several Métis and non-status leaders felt their special interests would be ignored in such an organization. The MMF was formed instead (Sawchuk, 1978, pp. 46–47). In contrast to Saskatchewan, the Manitoba organization seems to have been serene. The MMF has continued to this day without name changes or significant restructuring, but looks can be deceiving. Closer examination reveals an organization racked by regional splits, intense political struggles and several breakaway organizations over the years, most notably the Manitoba Métis Confederacy (1979–84).

Interprovincial Organizations

There are at least two MNSI organizations organized at the national or at least interprovincial level. The Native Council of Canada (NCC) was formed in December 1970 when the executive of the provincial Métis and non-status Indian associations of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba met to discuss the possibility of organizing a national Métis and non-status Indian organization. Its main purpose was to establish a direct line of communication with the federal government. Its constitution was drawn up in February 1971. The NCC has had a stormy career, with the various provincial MNSI organizations alternately dropping out or rejoining over the years. The NCC's greatest problem was reconciling differences between Métis in the west and non-status Indians from the rest of Canada.

The issue was finally resolved with the formation of the Métis National Council (MNC) in 1983. This breakaway organization was a federation of the three prairie Métis organizations. The NCC eventually reformulated itself as an organization representing non-status Indians and Bill C-31 Indians, changing its name to the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) in 1993.

Let us now turn our attention to some of the factors accounting for the great number of changes in representation and political alliances of MNSI organizations in the prairies in the 1970s to 1990s.

The External Political Arena: Federal

Canadian Aboriginal political organizations are in many ways *replications* of the wider political arena. This is hardly surprising. They are utterly dependent on funding by the provincial and federal governments, and yet one of their major functions is to react to government policies. Thus they often become mirrors of current political trends and fixations. Of course, it is tautological to state that Aboriginal organizations that are part of the political structure are affected by that same political structure, but it is interesting to see *how* the part is influenced by the whole.

Anyone who doubts that the structure, function and leadership of Aboriginal

political organizations are affected by current political trends need look no farther than the repatriation of the Canadian constitution, and the proposed amendments to it, such as the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords. Status Indian, Métis and non-status Indian organizations have been as obsessed with constitutional reform as federal and provincial governments, since constitutional recognition of the inherent right of self-government for Aboriginal peoples has been an unresolved issue from repatriation to today. For example, the national status Indian organization, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), and its leader, Ovide Mercredi, have long been proponents of amending the constitution to recognize the inherent right to self-government of Aboriginal peoples. The 54.4 percent "no" vote to the Charlottetown Accord seems to have pretty well quashed the idea of that particular amendment, at least for now, especially when one considers that a large number of Aboriginal people voted against it, and the fact that current political wisdom has it that the general public is "sick and tired of constitutional reform."

The AFN would still like to pursue the matter of constitutional recognition, but it is likely that it will be forced to drop the idea and go along an alternative path to self-government, one that assumes the right is already recognized under section 35(1) of the constitution as part of "aboriginal rights."[2] The AFN is being increasingly isolated both in the press (many articles are increasingly antagonistic towards Chief Mercredi) and by the federal government. The current strategy of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) includes doing an end run around the AFN, going directly to chiefs and regional tribal associations for self-government negotiations. The AFN has criticized the framework agreement,[3] but it seems they are bucking general public opinion, government policy and the opinion of many of its own chiefs.

Métis and non-status Indian organizations have not been immune to the effects of the Charlottetown Accord either. The Manitoba Métis Federation under the leadership of Yvon Dumont was an enthusiastic supporter of the agreement. Many television and newspaper advertisements featured then-President Yvon Dumont supporting the accord. Why did the government go to such lengths to assure Métis support? The Métis (in fact Canada's total Aboriginal population) do not constitute a significant proportion of the vote. Combined, Aboriginal people make up approximately 2 to 4 percent of the total Canadian population. However, if the accord could be seen as good for Aboriginal people, righting some of the historical wrongs done, it might help generate public support for the total package, including special status for Quebec. Dumont was brought onside through the personal auspices of then-Prime Minister Mulroney and a promised package that would have the Métis' inherent right to self-government included in the constitution, recognition of the

Métis as one of the founding nations of Canada, and Métis seats in the House of Commons and Senate (Morrison, 1995, pp. 10–12). The deal included a large influx of cash for community self-government consultations. The money was to be paid over a period of two years commencing 1 April 1991. It was to be provided by the Secretary of State and the Special Joint Committee on a Renewed Canada and included $5.8 million to the MNC, of which $3.4 million was to be transferred to provincial groups like the MMF (Morrison, 1995, p. 16).

Unfortunately, after the "no" vote, the promised deal of Métis self-government and land settlements fell through. Not surprisingly, this had a profound effect on the Métis organizations, particularly the MMF. This was exacerbated when the federal government rewarded Yvon Dumont's support for the constitutional amendments with the position of Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba in December 1993. While this was a personal coup for Dumont, it had the result of effectively taking him out of the Métis political scene. The result threw the MMF into turmoil. Internal squabbles over choosing a new leader eventually resulted in a Court of Queen's Bench ruling that the MMF was unable to conduct its own affairs, and an interim board was appointed until a new election.

Even after the election, the fallout continued. One president who was recently ousted in a political coup is now starting a rival Métis provincial organization, one more unexpected result of the associations becoming caught up in the politics of constitutional reform.

The External Political Arena: Provincial

Governments not only manipulate Aboriginal political organizations by lavishing large amounts of money on them, they also influence them by threatening to *withhold* funding. In fact, this is the more common tactic, and obviously a more economic one. As mentioned above, the membership of AMNSIS voted to form a new organization representing the Métis, leaving the non-status Indians to start an organization of their own. On one level, this appears to have been strictly an internal struggle, on fairly straightforward lines: the Métis vs. non-status Indians, for either political or cultural/ethnic differences. However, another factor is the role played by the external government, in this case, the provincial Progressive Conservatives, led by Grant Devine.

Theoretically, Aboriginal political organizations should remain aloof from partisan party politics on the provincial or federal level. After all, they must deal with whichever political party is in power at the time. Any overt loyalty to the party *not* in power is likely to cause suspicion and foster an unwillingness to fund the organization on the part of the party in power. Despite this observation,

partisan politics is fairly common, as indeed the above examples of the MNC and the MMF illustrate—there, direct support of Brian Mulroney and the federal Progressive Conservatives was cultivated. An example of some of the problems this could engender on the provincial level is provided by AMNSIS.

There were long-lived tensions between the provincial Progressive Conservatives and AMNSIS. When the Tories came into power in 1982, they and AMNSIS viewed each other with suspicion. The relationship reached a climax in a dramatic confrontation on national television in March 1987, at the final constitutional talks held between Aboriginal leaders, provincial premiers and the prime minister.

Since the constitution had been repatriated in 1982, politicians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, had tried to define and enshrine the constitutional rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Several first ministers' conferences were held to define Aboriginal rights, to have the right to self-government defined and enshrined, etc. The fourth and final meeting broke up without an agreement on any of these issues. One of the major stumbling blocks was the refusal of several western premiers (specifically Grant Devine of Saskatchewan and Bill Van der Zalm of British Columbia) to agree to the recognition of self-government (at least without a definition of what it was first).

As the conference wound down, and it became obvious that nothing was going to be achieved, various leaders began to make closing remarks. In particular, Jim Sinclair of AMNSIS was extremely angry and frustrated. Rightly or wrongly, he saw the western premiers' refusal to recognize the right of self-government as pure racism, and told them so publicly. The picture of Devine sitting and listening to Sinclair's angry, frustrated attack was one of the most riveting moments of the televised conference.

It may have been riveting, but just a few weeks after Sinclair's attack, AMNSIS was told that its annual provincial budget of $750,000 was being eliminated. Many observers (including many Métis) blamed the cut on Sinclair's attack. While this may have been a contributing factor, Devine probably would have cut AMNSIS funding anyway. It wasn't a personal attack on Sinclair or AMNSIS, though it may have appeared so to many Métis in the province. Devine had been trying to shut down most of the Aboriginal political organizations in the province ever since his administration came to power. In fact, his attacks had started months earlier, against the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians. Devine drastically cut the provincial funding for their newspaper and college.

However, Sinclair's attack did reconfirm what many provincial politicians had believed for years: that these organizations were subversive and had to be eliminated. By attacking Devine and the other premiers, Sinclair simply gave them one more demonstration of how Native politics operate at their own level,

and by a separate set of rules. Unlike other groups in society that depend on government for their support, aboriginal organizations do not always believe that money buys political loyalty (although the MMF support for the Charlottetown Accord was an exception). They will take funding from the provincial or federal governments, because they usually can't operate without that funding. However, that doesn't mean they will then support the party that gave them the funding; they often regard whatever government that is in power as an adversary. A lot of provincial politicians operating under a pork barrel mentality, assuming that funding buys loyalty, have a great deal of difficulty with that attitude.

As a result, the Saskatchewan Tories regarded the Aboriginal leaders (both status and non-status Indians) as political renegades beyond their control, owing them no political allegiance. They also (somewhat inconsistently) saw AMNSIS as a radical organization with political commitments to the New Democrat Party (perhaps supported by the fact that at one time AMNSIS had hired NDP leader Roy Romanow as a consultant.) It is not surprising that Devine was uneasy about being a financial supporter of AMNSIS, especially since he could exercise no control over the organization. Therefore, it is likely that the funding cuts were only a matter of time, no matter what Sinclair said or didn't say at the constitutional conference.

Sinclair's attack provided ammunition for his opponents, who could blame him for AMNSIS's financial woes. Not many, if any, of his opponents *did* say that, probably because he was expressing some pretty popular sentiments. However, Devine's government was actively engaged in helping to dismantle AMNSIS. There were also links between the PCs and several Métis opponents of Sinclair's who were working towards the reestablishment of the MSS.

The funding cuts helped lead to Sinclair's downfall, according to some of his opponents. Those Métis who were opposed to Sinclair and the other non-status Indians in the organization could never unseat him because they couldn't control enough finances within the organization. Sinclair and his political machine would use money to bring in his people to the annual assembly at Batoche, especially from the north and other sectors where he had a lot of support. Since AMNSIS was using a delegate system, these people counted for quite a lot of votes. One long time opponent of Sinclair stated, "But in 1987 we had equal opportunity because of the fact that the province cut off Mr. Sinclair's funds, and it sort of put him on the same keel as we were."[4]

On the other hand, Sinclair's people point to evidence that the provincial Progressive Conservative government was actively supporting the anti-AMNSIS faction. When the dissident group of Métis attempted to take over AMNSIS and form the MSS, the charter for the MSS was granted in one day. To be recognized

as a legal body, any of these Aboriginal political organizations have to be registered as a corporation under the Provincial Societies Act. AMNSIS supporters claimed that, normally, two to three weeks would be considered to be a normal time to process the application; one day is unheard-of.

Collective Action: The Internal Logic of Government-Subsidized Pressure Groups

We now shift our focus from the effects of the wider political field to that of the internal workings of MNSI political organizations. However, we can not completely divorce ourselves from a consideration of external forces. It is useful to see these organizations as political arenas in which interest groups and individuals compete for control of organizational resources. These organizational resources, of course, come from the outside—the federal and provincial governments.

The internal politics of MNSI organizations are typical of many government-supported institutions. These usually involve the interaction of goals and values of power groups or individuals with (a) the external supply of resources (money and other incentives) and (b) the internal allocation of the personnel, money and facilities to accomplish tasks (Zald, 1970, p. 18). The major struggles in the association are over the control of those resources that enable members to accomplish organizational purposes, which in turn enable them to secure and enhance their own position within the organization. There are many such resources, but the most important one is money in the form of operating grants from government. Theoretically, the struggle over these resources can include both political and non-political positions within the organization (see Sawchuk, 1983), but we will only consider politically based struggles here.

In July 1979, a dissident group, the Métis Confederacy of Manitoba, broke away from the MMF. It was led by Walter Menard, vice-president of the Dauphin region. In some ways, the new group only had a limited effect, but it did manage to win the two Manitoba NCC seats in August 1979, supplanting the MMF. Menard occasionally appeared in other parts of Canada claiming to represent the Métis of Manitoba—for example, appearing at a 1981 "Western Métis Leaders Convention" in Alberta, hosted by the then-Vice-President of the MAA, who was attempting to make himself a credible candidate for the national Métis leadership.

The Métis Confederacy was officially dissolved in 1984 (Morrison, 1995, p. 65). Morrison claims it was a Conservative-allied group, in reaction to the NDP ties of the time (p. 56). This could well be true; there was a similar example of a PC-supported breakaway group in Saskatchewan around the same time. However, most people remember the Métis Confederacy as the product of a turf

war between the Dauphin region and the central office, particularly over squabbles for control of government funding. A former executive director of the MMF, who originally wrote its constitution and designed its organizational structure, remembers it this way:

> [S]tarting in '72 these people in the regions now were developing their little fortresses of their own, and wanted to, you know, "Just give us the money and don't tell us what to do," type of thing. And we started developing problems with the Dauphin region in particular. Not the only one but mainly there. And I know Walter Menard established a Confederation, a Métis Confederacy. And from my perspective and from Angus's perspective this is what it was all about. They were telling us that all they wanted to see was the head office as a post office. And we would get monies from the government and we'd just funnel it out to the regions and there would be no reporting back or accountability back to us.[5]

He went on to describe how the secretary of state wrote a letter to Angus Spence, the president of the MMF, saying that only the central office and ultimately the president rather than the regions or the locals was accountable for money the federal government provided for the Métis people of Manitoba. The central office tried to use this letter to justify its control over government funding, and circulated it to the regions. The vice presidents of several of the regions were upset over this, especially the Dauphin region, led by Walter Menard, and according to the executive director, "That was the beginning of the Métis Confederacy."

Walter Menard and the Dauphin region were not alone in this. Several other regions began demanding total control over their funding as well. The South West Region decided "that they were going to break away and set up their own little MMF" (Fulham, interview) because they wanted to account for the money themselves. A similar attempt was made by the Thompson Region in north-central Manitoba. All these regional breakaways at first attempted to deal directly with the secretary of state, demanding their funding directly, bypassing the central office. However, the secretary of state consistently refused to recognize them, and warned that it would only recognize one Métis organization per province. This is another example of how government funding is reflected in the organizations' structure. When the regions discovered that they would not be able to break away financially, they simply put more and more pressure on the central office to funnel the monies directly to them.[6]

These are not the only examples of breakaway or rival organizations in Manitoba. A former president of the MMF, who was ousted in a political coup

in 1993, is in the process of setting up his own breakaway organization, to be called the Métis Nation of Manitoba. A provisional constitution is already completed. Citing court cases that state that the MMF does not represent the Métis of Manitoba, but "only represents its own membership," this individual is following in Menard's footsteps by gaining credibility for his organization through forging a link with the national organization. Blais has already begun negotiations with Jim Sinclair, the president of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, about being recognized by CAP.[7]

Negotiating Ethno-Aboriginality

The very perceptions of who is or is not an Aboriginal, and when, and what type, changes with time and the political climate (Sawchuk, 1978, 1985 and 1992). When I first began working with Métis political organizations in the late 1960s, it was quite common for the organizations to represent both non-status Indians and Métis, and in fact subsume the two identities under one. This may seem strange to us today, since organizations like AMNSIS and NCC have split into two organizations, representing Métis and NSI separately, and attributing great distinctions between the two. Yet the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (formerly NCC) recently has begun making efforts to attract dissident Métis groups into its fold, renewing the political union between the groups. Thus, in a period of twenty-five years, individuals and organizations purporting to represent individuals have changed their identity—from Métis to non-status to status Indian and back again. Why does Aboriginal identity have such a short memory? It makes sense if Aboriginality is treated as a form of ethnicity, where ethnic identity is based on competition for resources—economic and political— from outside the ethnic groups (Barth, 1969; Sawchuk, 1978).

It is true that Aboriginality suggests something *more* than mere ethnicity; it also suggests an historical uniqueness based not only on prior occupation, but *original* occupation. This has led many Aboriginal spokespersons to reject the "ethnic" label. However, the process of ethnic identity negotiation is identical to that of contemporary Aboriginal identification in Canada. I use the term ethno-aboriginality to describe this process.

Aboriginality is no more innate or unchangeable than any other ethnic label; and Aboriginal identity as we know it in Canada today has been achieved through negotiations on both sides (Mackelm, 1993, p. 11). In the past, Aboriginal identity was pretty much determined by government legislation, with little input from Aboriginal peoples themselves (for example, original government assertions of who was or who was not "status" in the federal *Indian Act*.) Nevertheless, status Indians have tended to reify the distinction and demand control over it (rather than dispense with the designation, as one might

expect). Aboriginal peoples have begun to have much more input into the process themselves.

One example of such a negotiated identity is the inclusion of "Métis" as one of the Aboriginal peoples recognized in the Canadian constitution. This came about by direct lobbying of the MNSI organizations in the prairies, particularly Saskatchewan. Still, the process can hardly be seen as a negotiation between equals, since the power is more on the government side. And even here, the process resulted in some people losing an identity or having an unwanted identity imposed upon them, through actions by other Aboriginal peoples.

The MNSI political organizations originally were able to wrest control over their developing identities because of Canada's policies of multiculturalism. Funding for the MNSI organizations was first done through the secretary of state and the ministry's multi-cultural programs in the 1960s. Canada's nurturing of political organizations worked to reify the concepts of Métis as well as non-status Indians. By subsidizing the MNSI organizations, it bestowed a formal recognition on the groups they supposedly represented long before any such recognition was enshrined in the constitution.

Saskatchewan and the AMNSIS split again provide an example. Recall that in August 1988, as a result of a province-wide referendum, the members of AMNSIS voted to resuscitate the MSS, creating a Métis-only organization. We already considered some political reasons for the split. However, the split can also be attributed to ethno-aboriginal identities, seen in individual strategies of leadership and the attempt to secure and enhance one's position within the organization. Jim Sinclair was a powerful political force in provincial politics— the fact that he remained leader of AMNSIS from 1971 to 1988 proves that. However, he had one weakness. He *never* called himself a Métis; he called himself a non-status Indian. This gave his opponents an opening. They could say, "What is an Indian (note: *not* non-status, *not* Métis) doing running our organization?" This struck a chord with a lot of Métis, and formed the basis of an effective campaign that finally ended Sinclair's seventeen-year reign over MNSI politics in Saskatchewan.

In the summer of 1987, at the annual assembly of AMNSIS at Batoche, a motion was carried to set up a commission to look at the possibility of forming two separate political organizations: one for the Métis and one for the non-status Indians. An important consideration was how the social and educational programs AMNSIS ran, such as education or economic development, could be broken up to serve both constituencies.

The pro-Métis faction got control of the committee, and in February 1988 they carried out an inaugural meeting, adopted a constitution and declared that the Métis Society of Saskatchewan was now the official organization of

Saskatchewan; this rendered AMNSIS disbanded. Sinclair and his supporters filed for an injunction to halt the proceedings, but the Court of Queen's Bench ruled that the new MSS was a legal corporation. Sinclair appealed and the appeal court decided that a province-wide referendum should be held to determine the wishes of AMNSIS members. On 20 August 1988, the referendum was held. There was a very low turnout (which may be a significant point in itself). By a fairly low majority (53 percent), the MSS contingent won.

The split between the Métis and the non-status Indians has been coming for years. The first crack appeared when the constitution recognized the Aboriginal rights of the Métis, Inuit and Indians, but not non-status Indians. (Ironically, Sinclair was one of those responsible for having Métis mentioned in the constitution in the first place.) The exclusion may not have been intended to exclude the non-status Indians from recognition of their Aboriginal status, though this was, in large part, the effect. It was known, or at least anticipated, that the federal government would eventually pass legislation like Bill C-31 that would prevent people from losing status through marriage, and that some, anyway, would be able to regain status. The easy assumption was that a great proportion of non-status Indians would simply apply to get their status back through Bill C-31; and the rest, those who identified primarily as Métis, would join that community. Thus, the category of non-status Indian would gradually disappear. As we now realize, this did not happen. There remains a large group of non-status Indians who are not eligible to regain their status under Bill C-31, and many of these people either would not identify as Métis, or would not be accepted as Métis by the rest of the Métis population.

In many cases, they will not identify as Métis because they are stung by what they see as the racist reactions of those Métis who have been saying, "We don't want Indians in our organization." The Métis call these non-status Indians "Indians" (*not* non-status Indians); and the status Indians, on the other hand, who for the most part want nothing to do with non-status Indians regaining status, call them "Métis." Thus, the Métis are calling them "Indian," and the Indians are calling them "Métis." It has been a painful experience for many of them, no matter which way they've been trying to go.

One person explained the effect that the breakdown of AMNSIS had on his own perception of himself as a Métis. He saw the Métis' rejection of Sinclair in particular, and of non-status Indians in general, as a racist reaction against people who should (in his opinion) work together, and it has caused him to reject his own Métis identity.

> You know, I could go either way—my parents were Métis, and I used to think of myself as a Métis—but I can also get my status through C-31. I used to identify as a Métis, and was proud of being Métis.[8]

With that, he pointed to some pictures he had mounted on his recreation room wall. They were some posters from an exhibit of Métis artifacts the Glenbow museum had shown a few years ago. He'd had these beautifully framed.

> See, I used to be proud of being Métis; I had those pictures mounted. But now, after what happened, I don't care any more. I'm not going to call myself Métis any more. I'm going to apply for my status under C-31.[9]

After the referendum, the non-status Indian population of Saskatchewan was left without an effective political organization, and had no way of repudiating their exclusion from recognition as Aboriginal peoples. It was obvious that a new organization representing non-status Indians had to be formed. Sinclair was the obvious choice for leader. There *was* an organization in Saskatchewan already purporting to represent non-status and C-31 Indians: the Native Council of Canada (Saskatchewan) or NCC(S). Since the constitutional exclusion of non-status Indians (and the formation of a prairie Métis interprovincial organization), the NCC has tried to reformulate itself by representing non-status Indians only; and had attempted to set up provincial sub-groups such as NCC(A) and NCC(S). However, it did not enjoy much recognition in Saskatchewan at first, and folded after the referendum.

In September 1988, the Assembly of Aboriginal Peoples of Saskatchewan (AAPS) was incorporated. The terms of reference in its constitution indicate the dissatisfaction many Aboriginal peoples felt with the current definitions and boundaries and the intention to force continued negotiations over identity. The objective of the Assembly of Aboriginal Peoples was to protect the rights of "excluded Indians" in Saskatchewan. To quote from their submission to the secretary of state:

> Our concept of freedom and liberation is to be politically recognized as Indian people in the fullest sense of the word and know that we are full partners in the Canadian Constitution.[10]

They launched a successful appeal to the secretary of state for core funding for the fiscal year of 1 April 1989 to 31 March 1990 to get the new organization started. Their first priorities were to identify the excluded Indians of Saskatchewan in some 115 communities in Saskatchewan, and set up local organizations and community-based representatives of the provincial organization.

There is no shortage of Aboriginal people disaffected with the constitution, and they certainly need some political structures to represent their special needs. The only question is whether a single organization can represent all of them adequately. There are several *kinds* of non-status Indians, all with specific concerns of their own, and it is not clear that one organization can cover all of

them. For example, there are those non-status Indians who haven't yet regained status through C-31, but are eligible to do so. Added to them are those non-status Indians who *have* regained their status, but don't have a reserve community to go to (these are beginning to be referred to as "C-31s" in the prairies.) There is some talk of setting up special bands for such people (for example, the C-31s of Regina), and in some cases, special reserves. Other people need help in regaining band membership in an existing Indian band, plus getting land or houses within the reserves, etc.

So far, we have only two levels of organizations attempting to represent these people, organizations like AAPS on the provincial level and CAP on the national level. Which groups AAPS could have represented and which it couldn't is not clear, but it might turn out to be an academic question. The NCC reformulated itself into the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) to represent the same group nationally, and Sinclair became its leader in March 1994.

There is an ironic twist to Sinclair's becoming CAP president. CAP is currently negotiating with a fledgling Métis organization in Manitoba. Sinclair, having been repudiated by the Métis in his province with the disbanding of AMNSIS, is now being wooed by the dissident Métis of another province who wish to be represented by CAP. Apparently there is also some talk that the Federation of Métis Settlements may eventually be represented by CAP. This is yet another indication of the fluidity of the alliances and identifications possible in ethno-aboriginal politics.

Effectiveness of Organizations

The national and provincial MNSI and status political organizations that started up in the 1960s and 1970s are now in their second or third generation of leaders. They are no longer an innovative force in the Canadian political scene, but an established fixture. Not surprisingly, they have now come to be re-evaluated, both by government and their Aboriginal constituents. This started taking place as early as the 1980s. In many cases the evaluations are negative and the organizations have been found lacking. Government officials, both elected and civil service, expected representative advice, unity and clarity of opinion, and useful policy suggestions from the organizations, but were often disappointed. Instead, they found political infighting, mismanagement of funds and protracted negotiations leading nowhere. Similarly, Aboriginal constituents saw an ineffective leadership consumed with political infighting, often more concerned with personal aggrandizement than the advancement of their peoples' causes.

In many cases it is becoming obvious that the Aboriginal political organizations have failed to effectively perform the key functions of pressure groups: political communication, conferring policy legitimacy and administration

(Weaver, 1993, p. 55). Both government and Aboriginal peoples have become disenchanted with the organizations, and these negative evaluations have also contributed to the constant restructuring and reformulation of membership and organizational goals described above.

One such evaluation came early for the national status Indian organization. In 1980 the National Indian Brotherhood was replaced by the Assembly of First Nations, with supposedly a more representative and responsive structure. The NIB had been a federation of provincial status organizations, while the AFN was theoretically an assembly of chiefs of every band in Canada. However, even that structure proved almost unworkable because regional or provincial differences often led to large groups of chiefs or individual bands walking out of the AFN. Regionalism still seems to be the AFN's biggest weakness. This is what is allowing Indian and Northern Affairs Canada to bypass the AFN with the federal government's 1995 policy framework on self-government, dealing directly with smaller groups such as regional tribal councils or First Nations. Clearly, in both the government's perspective and many First Nations' perspective, the AFN is still failing in its performance of the three main functions of pressure groups: communication, legitimacy and administration.

Similar problems have plagued the NCC. Whether it attempted to represent all Métis and non-status Indian provincial organizations, or simply all non-status Indians across Canada, it could never muster total support across the country. There was a long period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, just prior to the formation of the MNC, when the MAA was the only member of the NCC from the prairie provinces; both Manitoba and Saskatchewan had pulled out. One major problem was that the Métis felt they had little in common with non-status Indians from the rest of Canada. This culminated in the formation of the Métis National Council in 1983. The NCC was forced to reformulate itself after the Métis formed the MNC. One attempt involved setting up provincial organizations like NCC (Saskatchewan). This was not a bad idea; provincial organizations have always had a better track record than national organizations, though, as we have seen, they too have regional splits. The NCC's latest reincarnation, the CAP, may be successful, and its recruiting of disaffected Métis is just one more example of the need these organizations have to continually reinvent themselves.

One trap that many provincial organizations have fallen into is to cease being a strictly political organization, and move into being a service organization—a delivery agent for government programs. The most common example of this is the many housing projects MNSI organizations deliver or have delivered over the years. On one level, these programs do lead to some measurable results: leaders will still point out housing in Métis communities that was built under programs administered by MNSI organizations. These

programs do provide some tangible benefits for constituents, in addition to providing some jobs and government funding that can sometimes be converted to other organizational goals. However, the organizations also then take the blame for shortcomings in the programs (there are often many) and effort is sidetracked from other political issues (Sawchuk, 1980).

Conclusions

The forces of external political trends, party affiliation, inherent stresses of government subsidies (leading to struggles over resources), regionalism, government-imposed definitions of Aboriginality, negotiation of Aboriginal identity and the perceived ineffectiveness of many of the organizations have combined to make the structure and membership of Métis and non-status political organizations particularly volatile. They constantly change direction, criteria for membership and objectives, and are forced to continually reinvent themselves. It should be reiterated that the four major sources for change considered in this paper are not the only issues that have affected the organizations; however, limited space and time prevents consideration of further causes here. Other aspects would include the vulnerability of leaders to financial concerns. For example, older leaders do not come from the professional classes, and when they are voted out of office they often face personal financial crises. "We're all two months from welfare," as one put it.

Given all these stresses and impetuses for change we have been able to consider, it is not surprising that MNSI organizations have changed their structures, representations and criteria for membership over the years. What is surprising is that these organizations have survived at all.

Notes

1   I am eliminating from discussion one older organization, the Union Nationale Métisse St. Joseph de Manitoba, which was in operation by 1909, because it is primarily a cultural organization, as opposed to an instrumental or political one (i.e., one that attempts to bring about a change in society that will be of benefit to its members). At any rate, it did not receive a charter until 24 March 1932 (de Trémaudan, 1982, p. xii), the same year the MAA became operational.

2   Section 35(1) of the Canadian Constitution states, "The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed."

3   "Assembly of First Nations Strongly Rejects Federal Government's Policy Framework on Self Government" (press release, Assembly of First Nations, 14 August 1995).

4   Taped interview with a senior official of the Métis Society of Saskatchewan, 22 August 1988, Regina.

5   Taped interview with a former executive director of the Manitoba Métis Federation, 17 July 1995, St. Lazare, Manitoba.

6   Ibid.

7   Interview with a former president, Manitoba Métis Federation, June 1995, St. Vital, Manitoba.

8   Taped interview, 22 August 1988, Regina.

9   Ibid.

10 Assembly of Aboriginal Peoples of Saskatchewan, submission to Secretary of State, 16 March 1989.

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