

# MÉTIS:

## Education is the foundation for moving forward on reconciliation

*The following has been edited and condensed from a telephone interview with Margaret Froh, President of the Métis Nation of Ontario.*

I want to thank you for asking me to participate and to provide some comments. We are the representative government for Métis citizens of the Métis Nation of Ontario. The Métis Nation is recognized as the historic Métis Nation—Métis communities that were on the ground in Canada before Canada was Canada. These are Métis people that are recognized within the Constitution Act under section 35 as being rights-bearing Métis people. Métis are identified as one of the three original peoples of Canada under section 35 of the Constitution act along with Indians, our First Nations as well as Inuits.

The Métis Nation of Ontario was created in 1993 when Métis people decided to establish their own Métis government. They are part of the Métis National council. Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia are what we call governing members of the Métis National Council.

We have 29 communities across Ontario that have formed local levels of government under our Métis Nation of Ontario.

According to the 2011 census data, there's just under 90,000 self-identified Métis people on the province of Ontario. We are the second largest Métis population in Canada behind Alberta, and behind us-- Alberta would be the largest, the Ontario, then Manitoba and then Saskatchewan and British Columbia. We are the second largest self-identified provincial Métis population in Canada and within the province of Ontario we represent roughly 1/3 of Ontario's aboriginal people population based on the census data.

In 1982, when the Constitution Act was re-repatriated from Great Britain, Métis were included under Section 35, so that recognizes and affirms the existing rights of the Aboriginal people of Canada, and that includes Métis, Inuit, and Indian, what we now call First Nations.

Tom Isaac was appointed to advise the federal government on a road map to move forward with that process of reconciliation of Métis rights in Canada. He just issued that report in July. It's actually really easy reading, and it provides a good overview of the history of Métis people. It provides a good overview of Métis rights in Canada. It sets out a series of recommendations on how we can move forward in reconciling Métis rights with Canadian sovereignty.

### **CA: The Truth and Reconciliation Report makes recommendations about education.**

That final report, and those 94 calls to action: What's really clear in terms of our job moving forward as Canadians, is making sure that we are teaching real history in our classrooms. That we're being accurate when we're talking about the history, the culture, the traditions of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Education is absolutely foundational to us being able to move forward as a country on this process of reconciliation.

What does reconciliation look like? Reconciliation really is about respect, and relationships. It's about being able to ensure, again, that we're telling the real story, that we're acknowledging the past, that we are doing what we can in terms of redress. That we're also talking together about a vision for our future. Education plays just such a key. Postsecondary educational environment: I've been really pleased to see the efforts that institutions are starting to make to address it.

Métis in Ontario make up about 30% of Ontario's aboriginal peoples, along with first nations primarily. But there is a growing community of Inuit people that have come down to the Ottawa area and some other major centers in Ontario, come down from the north for a variety of reasons. Some of them are actually children that are being sent down in care, but absolutely with the nation's capital and some of the Inuit organizations we have operating there. There is a growing community of Inuit people in Ontario. They're not Section 35 rights holders in Ontario, but there is a growing community of Inuits in Ontario.

We have students that are attending institutions, colleges and universities throughout the Province. Often those Métis students are traveling far from their homes and their communities to attend postsecondary education. (But) there is not Métis-specific federal or provincial funding to attend postsecondary institutions, which is a major challenge and a major barrier for us and for our youth in particular. I can tell you that our students do encounter anti-aboriginal and anti-Métis racism within their schools and their institutions, and that oftentimes what we're seeing and what we're hearing from our students as well, is that there's very little or no Métis-specific programming and services within their institutions.

Oftentimes, when the term "aboriginal program" is used, programming and supports are usually very much First Nation focused. There's an issue of lack of recognition and lack of reflection of Métis within those programs and services that are being developed and delivered.

**CA: That likely comes into the history that is delivered in the K-12 foundation. As Truth and Reconciliation Report clearly defined is that we need programs to educate people.**

The complete absence of Métis-specific programming within institutions in Ontario is a major concern for us and is something that we're constantly working on.

We are constantly doing this work of educating, and it's something that we are doing across the board. The importance of ensuring that the public service in Ontario understands the history of Métis people. We're working with the Ministry of Education, and with advanced education to talk about the curricula and the programs that exist within the K-12 and postsecondary educational institutions.

We're focusing on curriculum development and institutional change. That really speaks, in particular, to this notion of Métis-specific inclusion. We are focusing on those advisory councils, having Métis voices present and participated and well-supported. We've been focusing as well on the area of bursaries. There is no postsecondary support provided to Métis-specific federal or provincial support provided for postsecondary Métis students.

**CA: That is surprising. I really didn't know that.**

It's not like Métis are excluded from general programs, like Ontario student loans, those types of things. We are. We do have access to those things if you are in a position to be able to access them. But there is no funding (specific for Métis students). I went to university in the early '90s. At that time, there was a bursary program that was offered through the Department of Justice for Métis and non-status Indians, and I don't even think that exists anymore. I was lucky enough to be a beneficiary of a scholarship through the Department of Justice to help me attend law school.

It astounds me every time I speak with people involved in the postsecondary education world. My last degree was a law degree, I think that our tuition was around \$4,000 for the year (when) I graduated in 1996. The tuition at that school right now is over \$30,000 a year in a 3-year degree program. Our students are coming out of those programs with higher and higher levels of debt, which as you know, really have an impact on the choices that students are able to make.

When you are graduating from university and you have \$100,000 or more in debit, it certainly impacts the choices in terms of where you are going to go work. This as a growing challenge for us to keep our graduates working within the Métis public service, working within non-profits, and other organizations within our communities.

**CA: Tuition is, a whole societal problem, and it hits indigenous groups even more.**

We've worked to establish bursary programs with colleges and universities in Ontario, and that has been really effective. We have a total endowment right now of \$4 million, and we have Métis-specific scholarship bursaries that are available through 41 different postsecondary institutions in Ontario, and we want to (make) that even bigger. We're really looking to institutions to assist through matching funds. That's a bit of a challenge.

**CA: What are the best practices in colleges that you see now?**

I like to use the term "wise practices" because I think that what works for us may not work for others. But certainly for us, one of our wise practices that I'm constantly telling people about and sharing is our Métis Nation of Ontario Infinite Reach Student Solidarity Network.

It's a peer-support program where we have senior Métis students at colleges and universities identified as Infinite Reach facilitators. They are taking a leadership role to mentor and support those Métis students coming into those institutions. They're really there to increase awareness about Métis people, our history, our culture within the schools, and to ensure that Métis students coming into postsecondary institutions have a connection. That they have some support.

Right now, we have 37 that have been trained to work with Métis students at 21 different colleges and universities across Ontario.

I was able to present sashes to all of those Infinite Reach facilitators, made a little ceremony out of it. I had a chance to talk with them, and I was saying to them, I can't even really imagine the difference that

it would have made to me as a Métis student, whether in my undergrad or in my law degree studies, to actually have somebody like an Infinite Reach facilitator within my institution, somebody that I could go to, somebody that would help me connect with Métis community, somebody that would be there to help guide a celebration or an identity of Métis people, our history, our culture, our traditions within these postsecondary institutions. Creating that network to support Métis students within institutions, I know for myself it would have changed my world.

I'm so incredibly grateful that we have an opportunity to do that now for our students because starting with the K-12 schooling, and that absence, the failing to tell the story of Métis in our history, our culture, our traditions, there's an issue of invisibility. But the history of Métis people in Canada, when we think about things like story of Louis Riel, who's perhaps the most famous Métis leader in Canadian history. He was literally hanged for the worst thing he did: trying to advance the interests of Métis people in this country.

**CA: He's the biggest intersection point for most Canadians in their educational exposure (to Métis history).**

The impact of essentially the demonization of Métis people within Canada has been really profound. The more and more that we can just have visibility and ensure that Métis are reflected in the curriculum, and to the programs and supports that are being developed, there are more and more for our young people in particular to be very proud of who they are as Métis people, and that is changing our world.

Being Métis for many Métis people was something that we suffered shame for. There's still a fair amount of shaming that's happening right now, unfortunately, in terms of the people that are denying and speaking against the recognition of Métis.

**CA: That leads into likely the need for education on two different levels. One for the Métis people, but also creation of Canadian history.**

That's a fundamental component of that process of reconciliation that we're talking about. For me anyway, these Infinite Reach facilitators are providing a hugely needed service in terms of ensuring that our Métis students (in) colleges and universities see themselves reflected: That they have a sense of a network, that they have a sense of a community within these schools. That they have the supports in place, even if the institutions themselves aren't providing them, that there are other Métis students there that are there to welcome them and greet them and make them feel a part of and included in community.

(The) Infinite Reach Student Solidarity Network that we've established under the Métis Ontario, is an incredible wise practice, and one that I think should be shared. I think that that is making huge changes in the lives of Métis students within those postsecondary institutions, and I think it's making huge impacts in terms the institutions themselves. The staff and the faculty within these institutions are now able to see more of a sense of Métis community, (from) work that those students are doing within the institutions to create educational opportunities and programs that celebrate Métis history, culture, and traditions, and language. That's helping to educate those institutions as well. I think that that Infinite Reach Student Solidarity Network is something that I think should be shared.

Another thing that we have been doing that I think is really phenomenal is the Infinite Reach March Break Camp. This is something where we bring our Infinite Reach facilitators or fellow Métis high school students from all across the Province together. We take them out onto the land. They spend an entire week just talking. They learn about postsecondary education and all the different opportunities that are out there, but it's all done in the context of sharing Métis traditional knowledge, Métis culture, and those traditions with them.

We have our knowledge holders. These are people that understand the Métis language. They're people that are experienced harvesters. They're people that understand the medicines, and all of the things that sustain us from the land and the waters, and they spend the week there with the kids, celebrating through music and song and dance and sharing all of that knowledge that they have, as well as having these Infinite Reach facilitators talk to those high school students about colleges, universities, trade. Talking about all of those educational opportunities that are out there. Really encouraging them to see themselves going forward in terms of postsecondary education.

I think that that Infinite Reach March Break Camp is a fantastic opportunity that provides an opportunity for those Métis students, but also for those more senior Infinite Reach facilitators to really build their networks, to build that sense of community, to share culture, to share knowledge, and to work with some of those traditional knowledge-holders within our communities and our elders to really drown them as they're pursuing their high school studies, and then moving on into colleges and universities from there. I think that's a really fantastic program as well. Those are things that are working very well.

We also have established some really unique educational partnerships with a number of colleges in Ontario. Through skills programming, we've been able to work with colleges to design and deliver some really unique training programs for our students.

When we've been able to approach these, in terms of a Métis-specific grounded skills, connecting skills with actual employment. In particular, we've had great luck doing this through some of these energy tours and mining industry roles. We've created these environments where we have a specific indigenous cohort in partnership with the college, and oftentimes through a directing agent with our industry partners, (and) have established the training needs for employment, and then we co-developed these programs. We have this indigenous cohort go into the program. There's really a "no one's left behind" philosophy as students move their way through that.

**CA: That's been the strength of the community colleges from the beginning, in all areas. Focusing it on the Métis is, I think, a natural step.**

It's really helped our students to connect them with the employment opportunities. Of course, our staff continue to provide ongoing support to students, or if things become too challenging from a program, a personal or financial perspective, our staff are there to assist them and support them as well.

We've got a multi-layered approach with our staff from our Métis public service, working along with peer supports like the Infinite Reach program, to really provide that wrap-around support for our students within universities.

That being said, it's not like everything is perfect because we have really significant capacity challenges in terms of that ability to do that work. Not surprising in the same way that institutions aren't necessarily developing Métis-specific programs or curricula of supports in place for students. They're also very much underfunded to do this kind of work and provide these kinds of supports.

What we're focusing on in terms of our priorities is ensuring that our youth are successfully transitioning from high school into postsecondary institutions. Again, understanding that oftentimes, that's happening far away from their home communities. But also to ensure that they're flourishing in those postsecondary environments, because we have to go much beyond simply getting students into programs. We actually need to support them while they're there to ensure that they're really successful while they're there. I think a big part of that for us is ensuring that our priority is to ensure that Métis people, our history, our culture, language, that these are included in an equitable and respectful way within postsecondary curriculum and courses, as well as supports and programs and services that are developed.

This is one of the things that we're absolutely focused on, particularly in light of the Daniels decision. One of the things that the Liberal party committed to last fall. The Trudeau government has committed to continue to actually doing that work. To take a look to see where have the gaps been in terms of access from a policy program services perspective. Where have the gaps been for Métis people?

In the context of education, taking a look at the funding and the programs, the services that have been available to other indigenous peoples to identify gaps where Métis have been excluded because of this refusal to acknowledge jurisdiction, and figuring out how do we make investments that are smart to support Métis people. When I say that they're included equitably and respectfully in postsecondary curriculum, in courses, in programs and supports, I would encourage institutions to really take some time to reflect to say, "We may have aboriginal programs and aboriginal services, but are we confident that they do reflect Métis people, our history, our culture, our traditions, our language? Are those things reflected in what we do, or when we say 'aboriginal programs and supports and curricula', are we really just talking First Nations?"

I don't want to take anything away from the importance of ensuring that. In fact, I've spent almost a decade of my life working within a first nation government. I think that's critically important. But it's also important that Métis people and Métis culture, Métis traditions, Métis language are also reflected throughout that curriculum and courses, supports and programs that are made available.

**CA: They both have to be embedded in the whole institution, rather than done as a check mark on somebody's to-do list.**

That's part of the challenge that the very wise commissioners of the T&R have issued with those calls to action – it is ensuring that this isn't just a token 'let's check a box'. That we are making meaningful change within our postsecondary institutions, and institutions within society as a whole within Canada to ensure that there is that respectful recognition of history, culture, and traditions.

For us, student success in transition is a huge priority, and we need to work with colleges and universities, campuses across Ontario to ensure that there are culturally-specific supports for Métis students. There's absolutely and increased demand for outreach into our secondary school system to support and strengthen Métis students in their transition into post-secondary education. There is

absolutely a lack of direct funding support for Métis that want to pursue post-secondary education. In terms of student success and transition, these are all critical pieces for us moving forward.

In terms of curriculum and institutional change, we really want to push for a focus on traditional knowledge. Gathering the traditional knowledge from our citizens, and creating greater connections between the research that's happening on Métis way of life and curriculum research development so that things are reflected throughout. It's so important that they're engaging with us as Métis Nation Ontario to ensure that that's being done in an appropriate way.

For example, one of the things that I think would be very helpful in figuring out strategic approaches to addressing all of these things is data.

**CA: Encouraging Métis college and university graduates to gravitate toward teaching and administration in colleges would provide the programs and support that are needed.**

Over 20 years ago or so a couple of Maori professors came and taught in one of my law classes. The Maori are the indigenous peoples of New Zealand. As a nation of people, they said, "Education is so important. We need to get our people not just into universities and colleges, but we actually need people to go as far as they can go in terms of education."

They set a goal to say that they wanted to have 500 Maori achieve their PhDs within a defined period of time. As a nation of people, they set this goal and the target, and they reached that goal under the timeline that they had established. Well over 500 PhDs that are Maori in New Zealand, and now around the world.

What's happened as a result of that is that those Maori are now heads of the universities. They are now chairs, deans of different faculties. They are leading research in New Zealand. They are within government. They are within the judiciary and the Bar and in the medical field and in research. As a result of that, that Maori perspective, that Maori language is reflected throughout all of these institutions. I think that that is just utter brilliance.

That's the kind of vision that I think we need to really be learning from as a wise practice from our Maori brothers and sisters. The more and more that we can get Métis into these institutions, not just as students, but actually as faculty, as staff, as people that are helping to design and deliver curricula, design and deliver programs and services and supports, the more and more that we'll be sharing -- our history, our culture, our traditions, our language.

**CA: There's a target. The first college president in Ontario as a Métis.**

Speaker 1:

We need to start setting these kinds of targets, and really pushing to get our people out there and into these roles. We have played such a vital role in the history of this country, and I know that we will play a vital role in the future as well, but we need to work to get our people out there.

In terms of those aboriginal education councils that exist across these institutions, there's a real need for resources to support Métis community representatives that sit on those councils at the postsecondary institution level. We want to ensure that we have Métis voices represented, but we also have Métis voices that are properly supported. There's a real need for support for those Métis people that are serving on those councils.

Then, of course, we need to know more and more in terms of identifying and developing bursaries and those types of supports for our students. It sickens me to think that there would be students that would feel that they were precluded from pursuing their dreams because of money.

The statement of prime purpose (of the Métis Nation Ontario) is the fantastic line I use as a major focus: "Guided by our spiritual values, we aspire to achieve our highest potential." That really says it all in terms of who we are as the Métis Nation of Ontario.

We want our students to be achieving in post-secondary institutions, and we want them to be happy, vibrant, active members of our communities and of Ontario society, contributing, and helping to figure out this way forward, this path forward of reconciliation.

#### **CA: Youth are our future, aren't they?**

They are also our "right now". We have amazing youth leaders. I'm one of 8 kids. My family, my parents, stressed the importance of education. Of the 8 kids in my family, every single one of us pursued postsecondary education. All of us have really known the value of education and we've embraced that.

We know the links in terms of postsecondary education and overall well-being. We absolutely see that in terms of where our citizens are. We know the links between higher education and overall income for example. The statistics that are out there in terms of Métis. We may fare better than our First Nations relative overall statistically, but we still are (below) average of all Canadians. Postsecondary education that absolutely impacts all those other indicators that speak to the kinds of jobs we have, our income, our level of health. Education is just such a foundational component to well-being and health of individuals and families and communities; this is why it's a major focus of mine.

Your publication plays such a vital role in how our postsecondary institutions in Ontario. I really, really appreciate your reaching out and giving me the opportunity to talk about the important of postsecondary education from the Métis perspective.

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