CPSA Paper — Breaking Bad: Indigenous Unity Within Colonialism and the Breakup of the Indian and Métis Conference

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Indigenous politics have commonly been framed around state actors on the one hand and the settler-state on the other. There are good reasons for this; Indigenous struggles ranging from the Métis military conflicts of the late 19th century to government legislation, court cases and recently #IdleNoMore have involved two primary agonists: the expanding and entrenching settler-state, and Indigenous peoples. Studying these interactions has illuminated the central aim of the settler-colonial project, namely to eliminate Indigenous peoples from their territories while consolidating settler claims to land.[1] However there are also reasons for scholars of Canadian politics and Indigenous studies to focus on *inter*-Indigenous politics to understand the nuanced ways settler colonialism shapes relationships between Indigenous peoples.

This paper will argue that examining intra-Indigenous politics sheds light on the way settler-colonialism sows disunity and mistrust between Indigenous peoples and in turn encourages inter-Indigenous competition in a zero-sum framework. The resulting fractious and balkanized politics forestalls pan-Indigenous unity by making settler designed Indigenous difference seem insurmountable to Indigenous actors. Métis scholar Howard Adams devoted his life to explaining Native politics in a colonial context making him an appropriate thinker to address this topic. This paper will apply Howard Adams' insights on the colonizer's divide and rule tactics to the breakup of the Indian and Métis Conference in Manitoba in 1967.[2] This split led to the creation of the Manitoba Métis Federation and the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood. While other factors were influential in the breakup (class, diverse histories, rural-urban split), space restrictions require this paper to focus on jurisdiction and divide and rule tactics.

Introduction to the Indian and Métis Conference

Starting in the 1950s an increasing number of Indigenous people moved into Winnipeg and other cities from their rural and remote communities. Jim Silver (2006) has pointed out that though this shift was gradual it became more emphasized by the late 1960s and early 1970s. Silver notes the 1951 census recorded 210 Indigenous individuals living in Winnipeg, by 1961 that number had increased to 1082 and by 1971 there were 4940. On its face the increase from 1951 to 1961 is over 400%. Though these figures may not be comparable, if the shift was as large as it appears to be one would expect to see a response from civil society to the change in the urban demographic landscape. This is exactly what happened in the early and mid-1950s.

The precursor to the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, The Welfare Council of Greater Winnipeg (WCGW) was made up of individuals committed to improving the lot of the poor and disadvantaged. In response to the emerging so-called "urban Indian problem" the WCGW sponsored a conference in 1954 chaired by W.L. Morton on Indian integration into the city. The conference was held in order "[t]o [c]onsider . . . the problems of the Indians and Métis in Manitoba [and] [i]n [o]rder to . . . achieve their integration into the economic and social life of the Province [sic]." (WCGW, 1954, p.1). This gave rise to the Indian and Métis Conference which would meet annually until 1969.

The Indian and Métis Conference was a conference in two senses. First, it was a gathering of people to discuss a range of topics and network over the period of

[1] For more on defining a settler colonial state please see (Veracini, 2010, Wolfe, 2006).
[2] Adams work is empirically supported and transportable outside his Native Saskatchewan.

several days. Second, it was a permanent political body that advocated on behalf of Indigenous peoples between gatherings. The conference was open to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, passing resolutions to "help" Indigenous people adjust to life in Winnipeg.[3]

The secondary literature on the conference is sparse. Two books written in the aftermath of the breakup were penned by former employees of the agencies that grew out of the conference. James Burke (1976) wrote *Paper Tomahawks: From red tape to red power* using his experiences as an employee with the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood to inform his analysis. Stanley Fulham (1981) was the executive director of the MMF and wrote *In Search of a Future* (with new editions in 1972, 76,81). Sheila Jones-Morrison (1995) mentions the break-up of the conference in her work *Rotten to the Core: The politics of the Manitoba Métis Federation*. These works treat the conference with passing interest, barely scratching the surface of the organization. The conference seems to have eluded concerted investigation from researchers.

Beyond the scattered references in the secondary literature, the information for this paper comes from newspaper reports, agendas and minutes of the conference planning committee meetings, the conference newsletters and "Conference Proceedings." The organizers of each annual gathering collected minutes of the meetings and breakout sessions and published yearly proceedings in a single document. It is not clear who the recorders are so one is forced to see the conference through the eyes of unidentified recorders and editors.

Howard Adams and (dis)Unity of the Colonized

During the charged era of the 1960s Adams completed his PhD and in 1966 was hired to teach in the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education (Laliberté, 2007). Adams' interest in colonial divide and rule tactics was not purely academic, he was both an observer and participant in the development of Indigenous political organizations in Saskatchewan. These experiences anchored his intellectual interventions on the struggle of the colonized. Of particular interest to this paper was Adams' involvement in the bitter inter-Métis tussle between the Métis Society of Saskatchewan and the Métis Association of Saskatchewan between 1965 and 1967 (Pitsula, 1997).[4] At issue was the degree to which the Métis movement would allow itself to be funded by the government. The Métis Association resisted funding while the Métis Society of Saskatchewan embraced it. By the spring of 1967 the two organizations united under the name Métis Society of Saskatchewan and the MSS "requested a substantial increase in provincial government funding from $500 to $31,000, but the province responded with a grant of only $1000 . . . [t]he Métis Society continued lobbying for more funds, noting that the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians was receiving $65,000 compared to the Métis's $1000" (Pitsula, 1997, p. 222).

Adams would have been present for both the unification of the groups and the application for funding where First Nations were used as leverage to extract more resources from the government. When Adams published *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native point of view* in 1975 he had Indigenous unity squarely in his sights. Towards the

[3] This included Métis, non-status and reserve communities.
[4] Indigenous activists will remember that Métis activist and organizer Malcolm Norris was a founding member of the Métis Association of Saskatchewan. Norris was also a mentor for Adams.

end of his book he speaks directly to the connection he sees between Indigenous unity and the project of colonialism:

> "Divide and rule" is a basic method of oppressive action that is as old as imperialism itself. Since the colonizer subordinates and dominates the rank-and-file natives, it is necessary to keep them divided in order to remain in power. The oppressor cannot permit himself the luxury of tolerating the unification of indigenous people, which would undoubtedly cause a serious threat to the status-quo rule. Accordingly, oppressors prevent any method and any action by which the oppressed could be awakened to the need for unity. . . . This is done by various means, from repressive methods of police action to forms of cultural imperialism and community action programs. The colonizer manipulates the people by giving them the impression that they are being helped, e.g., community development programs, free education, etc. (Adams, 1975, p. 178; Adams, 1989, p. 154).

Government funding for local projects was particularly galling to Adams. He argued that they served to focus individuals on their sliver of oppression rather than on colonialism as a process that oppresses all Indigenous people(s).

Adams frames the 1960s as a cradle for the development of what he would describe in 1984 as bureaucratic authoritarianism and the political deactivization of Indigenous peoples (Adams, 1984, p. 32). Adams' application of this concept gives shape to the idea that "[w]hen colonized people organize themselves for political action, the response of the bureaucratic authoritarian state usually incorporates both manipulation and co-optation" (Adams, 1984, p.32). Through direct grants government actors are able to exert control over Indigenous leaders and the policy stance of Indigenous organizations (Adams, 1975). The deployment of this control divides Indigenous peoples. While not directly mentioned, I believe Adams is drawing on his experience with the infighting mentioned above. His interventions both make sense of, and are nuanced by, the breakup of the Indian and Métis Conference in 1967.

The idea of a dedicated Indigenous provincial political organization in Manitoba had been considered for some time when the conference broke-up in 1967. Stemming from the predominantly non-Indigenous conference planning committee, there was a sense as early as 1959 that an independent Indigenous provincial political organization would be better positioned to advocate on Indigenous issues. While the Indian Brotherhood had been formed in 1935, by 1967 it had become latent, not electing a board of directors the prior six years.

In September of 1962 the idea of a provincial Indigenous organization had found its way onto the agenda of the planning committee. The September 18th meeting of the committee contained an agenda item titled "[p]roposal to form a provincial organization" (Indian and Métis Conference Committee, September 28, 1962). By January of 1963 a letter was mailed to delegates registered for the upcoming February conference stating, "it is suggested that a provincial organization be set up with local committees throughout the whole of Manitoba. These committees would discuss their own problems, make their own plans and when they need its co-operation would call

upon the provincial organization" (Bastin, Bastin to Friends of Indian Origin, 1963). The 1963 conference allotted 20 minutes to this topic and it appears that it was carried over to the 1964 conference. Through a number of false starts the question of a dedicated Indigenous provincial organization was on the agenda at every annual conference between 1963 and 1967.

The question "who would be included" complicated the desire to form a new Indigenous organization. Would it represent all Indigenous people(s) in Manitoba? Or should it deal primarily with the struggle of treaty First Nations? Many Métis felt that the conference did not address their concerns and consequently they had to fight to get noticed over treaty First Nations. At the heart of this issue was the relationship between Métis and First Nations people. In 1959 Mrs. McIver of Norway House Métis community complained "that non-treaty people were worse off than the Treaty Indian for there were no constructive plans to help them educationally or otherwise. . . . In the past the two peoples used to trade together but now regulations forbade it. What was the difference, she asked?" (WCGW, 1959, p.11). Edward Campbell, a Métis delegate to the conference was quoted complaining that the conference "was weighted in favour of Indians and . . . he could find no official to explain his community's problems. 'I'm not blaming the Indian chiefs,' he said. 'I just couldn't find any government man to speak for the Métis or listen to our problems.'" (Help yourselves indian message, 1963, February 9, p.59). In 1964 Métis delegates met separately and called for better organizing of Métis communities that abut reserves in part to strengthen their voice at the annual conferences (WCGW, 1964, p. 44).

In order for these gatherings to be useful for both Métis and treaty delegates the conference had to untangle the Métis from the First Nations because different jurisdictions demanded it. Unity was often seen to be a good unto itself, but from the perspective of policy and practice it was out of reach. For example at the 1960 conference a resolution on local administration read "BE IT RESOLVED that this conference urge all communities represented to set up community planning committees, preferably made up of both treaty and non-treaty people, *but failing that*, with separate committees for treaty Indians and others, and that these committees carry out such activities as: [training, resource assessments, industry assessments, and getting grants from government to finance "community improvement projects"]" (WCGW, 1960, Appendix p. 3.emphasis added) . Accommodating different jurisdictions meant that the conferences would divide breakout sessions and resolutions by treaty and Métis and/or non-treaty.

However there were sites of resistance to this division. It was announced at the 1964 conference a joint Métis and treaty First Nation committee had been formed in Churchill. Chief Nelson Scribe of Norway House said "he felt that if Indians and Métis in his area formed an association together, they could have a stronger voice in working with the federal and provincial governments" (WCGW, 1964, p. 7,10). Indeed wherever these moments of Indigenous unity came up they were singled out and applauded by keynote speakers, conference organizers and delegates. In 1966 Chief A.E. Thompson, representing the latent but soon-to-be-reformed Indian Brotherhood, called for the conference to pay closer attention to the condition of the Métis because "we must never forget that they are Indians too" (WCGW, 1966, p. 6).

These calls were quickly forgotten when at a 1967 communications conference organized by the WCGW the Métis were confronted by the desire of treaty First Nations to form a provincial political organization without them.[5] Burke (1971) argues that the Métis were taken by surprise by this move and the media accounts at the time support this claim. Tom Eagle, the Métis coordinator of the gathering, gave a pre-meeting press conference where he said "a lack of communications [sic] is one of the basic problems facing Indians in Manitoba today. 'As long as this exists, there is misunderstanding and doubt'" (Louttit, 1967, October 13, p. 22). None of the agenda items raised the possibility that treaty First Nations were about to splinter off on their own. After the impending breakup became clear Eagle had the awkward task of explaining to the media how at the communications conference nobody had communicated to him that the treaty First Nations wanted their own organization without the Métis.

The deliberations on the split covered in the Winnipeg Free Press indicate that, though surprised by the move, the Métis appreciated the rationale behind the split. The Métis responded that "administration by different levels of government will force such a move" (Louttit, 1967, October 16, p. 1). The treaty First Nations voted to form an organization open only to treaty peoples. They elected to reorganize the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood and elect new leadership. This gives empirical weight to Adams' assertion that when Indigenous peoples formed political organizations in the 1960s, "some . . . were old organizations revived under different leaders" (Adams, 1975, p.181). The Métis passed a resolution indicating a desire to form their own organization. Both groups promised to be closer than they were before.

Bonita Lawrence has engaged extensively with the question of the Indigenous jurisdictional divide. She argues that:

> [B]oth Indian and Métis identities have been shaped to a phenomenal extent by the racism inherent in the Indian Act. In this sense, to view these groups as the products of entirely different histories and the bearers of entirely different destinies belies the common origins of all Native people in the West, as members of different Indigenous nations who faced colonization pressure in different ways or who were classified in different ways by colonial legislation. Focusing solely on contemporary differences between treaty Indians and the Métis, without any exploration of what both groups have in common (as well as the diversity *within* each group masked by such colonial terms as *Indian* and *Métis*), at this point seems to conform too closely to the logic of the Indian Act (Lawrence, 2004, p.96, emphasis original) .

Lawrence's point here seems to be applicable to the breakup of the Indian and Métis Conference. Attempting to ameliorate what Taiaiake Alfred (2005) would identify as the effects of settler-colonialism (poverty, sickness, homelessness) by adhering to the rigid distinctions in the Indian Act gives those distinctions legitimacy, keeping the Indigenous people of this place divided. Adams states "in spite of checkered isolation and a slight

[5] This was a conference that took place in addition to the general conference.

diversity in the details of policy, Natives as a race and class have unity as colonized people" (Adams, 1999, p. 5). What needs to be added to Adams point is that unity is undermined by the rationalization of the "slight diversity in the details of policy" he identifies.

Although the new organizations were spending significant amounts of time talking about their organizational structures in the aftermath of the communications conference, not everyone was pleased about the split. In particular the Native youth movement's leader expressed that "the young people are concerned about the splitting of the Indian and Métis and that they look to the day when all may speak as Indian people regardless of government jurisdiction. When we unite . . . we will have something accomplished" (WCGW, 1969, p.3). This comment captures the essence of the split. Spurred by a jurisdictional divide which J.R. Miller describes as "developed in Ottawa in pursuit of bureaucratic convenience and economy" (1988, p. 18-19) , the Indigenous peoples in Manitoba fractured despite facing the same settler-colonial threat.

Adams argues a major weakness of the oppressed is that they come to "believe that the oppressor is omnipotent, and the system [against which they struggle] is invincible" (1975 p. 179). This weakness is exploited by the colonizer to divide Indigenous peoples thereby perpetuating the settler-state. Instances where unity is supported, like the conference's Native youth movement, seems to both confirm and nuance Adams point. By couching his intervention in class conflict Adams creates the impression of imposing structures that should be readily identifiable. While he is right to make the point, the actual operation of his argument is subtler and thus more insidious. The invincibility of the system seems to take the form of a normalized reality. In the case of unity advocates at the conference, jurisdictional restrictions take on a legitimacy and permanence of their own such that thinking outside of those confines evokes a feeling that one is flirting with the absurd. Thus even in cases where one might find Indigenous people open to unity, the jurisdictional framework isolates these individuals as appearing out of touch with the reality of the situation.

Adams analysis also helps bring the relationship between Indigenous organizations and state funding into focus. The conference received nominal funding from the provincial and federal government before 1967. The WCGW paid for an administrative secretary and office supplies but initial figures put government contributions to the cost of running the conference between five and eight percent. By 1967 one can see greater dialogue between the new organizations and the government on the topic of money. Burke believes that part of the impetus behind the breakup was the federal government's desire to deal only with treaty First Nations and a promise of grant money was made to incentivize the split.[6] When Chief Walter Dieter from the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians addressed the treaty First Nations at the 1967 general conference he explained the system of unconditional federal grants that funded his organization. At that same meeting, treaty First Nation delegates expressed "unanimous agreement on the need to re-organize the Brotherhood in order to give Indians a chance for individual protest" (WCGW, 1967, p. 1) . For the Métis, the first resolution out of the communications conference from the yet to be created Métis organization called for a

[6] Please see Leslie Pal's work on state funding of non-governmental service and advocacy groups in the 1960s (Pal, 1993) .

provincial "grant to administer the organization we are about to form" (Metis, indians split: Unanimous: Two groups but one goal.1967, October 17, p. 1) . This is not to say there is causal motive to the reorganization of the MIB or creation of the MMF, rather it is to point out that the two ideas (government funding and organizations) are spoken of together and were regularly in the presence of one another.

Adams would have been concerned about the way this association serves the project of disunity amongst Indigenous peoples. Consider two illustrative examples. First, in 1970 the MMF signed a local bush-clearing contract with the provincial government. Consistent with what Adams calls the "emphasis on a local view of problems" mentioned above, these contracts were temporary and locality specific. In addition the Métis publicly expressed anger that while the government had consulted the MIB on the program, the MMF had only been invited in to witness the signing of the deal (Schreyer hints at metis fund.1970, January 17, p. 49). Second, in a spectacular display of division the MMF vowed to challenge the MIB's right to take over a vacated Canadian forces base north of Brandon Manitoba from the federal crown. The issue would again flare up when the MMF discovered the MIB was denying Métis people access to the training programs planned for the site (Cuthand calls for talks.1970, April 10, p. 2; Remark angers metis. 1970, November 6, p. 1,2,9). In each case state resources undercut one organization in favour of the other creating clearly delineated winners and losers while sowing division and resentment between Indigenous peoples.

The two organizations did work together on some projects, however bad blood developed between them as they competed for resources. Burke states it was known that the two organizations were vying for control of the Indigenous politics agenda and mistrusted each other. By 1978 the MMF was receiving $220,000 in core and program grants from the provincial government ($130,000 core and $90,000 program). $30,000 of the core grant had been secured explicitly because the MMF had not been receiving the same amount as the MIB (Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, 1978).

Final Words

Adams' intervention on the challenges of Indigenous unity plays out robustly in the breakup of the Indian and Métis Conference. Despite pronouncements that the two groups would remain close, the distinct political organizations became competitors and, in Burke's view, mistrustful of each other. Forming what Adams would have identified as a unified front oriented towards liberation of the colonized became an impossibility after the two Indigenous groups organized along settler-state imposed and funded lines.

This paper takes as its primary focus the relationships between Indigenous peoples. While the settler-state is never far from the analysis, focusing on the relationship between Indigenous peoples highlights political relations which are otherwise masked by binaristic politics of settler-state and Indigenous conflict. Using an inter-Indigenous analysis brings to the fore complex relationships wherein settler-colonialism sows disunity and mistrust between Indigenous peoples. The competition for resources in this framework incites division as one Indigenous people tries to maximize their resources at the expense of their kin. A politic organized around state imposed and funded logics stifles options for Indigenous unity even where there is support for inter-Indigenous cooperation.

Adams' interventions on colonialism have not always been well received by scholars. His work has been described derisively in many quarters as politically motivated and less than accurate. This paper has shown that his interventions germinated in the lived conflicts of his people and possess transportable insights. When Adams wrote in 1977 that "[a] typical colonizer promotes the idea among the colonized that they are alone in their social and geographical situation, to create the notion that they are alone in any potential struggle against the colonizer," he was speaking from a body of experience playing out in his life as well as the lives of other Indigenous peoples (p. 50).

A pathway to Indigenous activism, be it state-centric, through Indigenous nations, or urban centric must confront the ways we as Indigenous peoples are kept from each other in order to cement the settler-state's claim to our territories. To ignore this is to give our oppressors exactly what they want.

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