

Brady was the recognized director of strategy, and the proposal to support the Liberal Party was shelved.

Government indifference was not the only enemy to raise its head in the last weeks of 1933. For the first time the Catholic clergy was indicating opposition to the Metis association. Norris turned to Dion with the problem—an article in the press “emanating from Bishop O’Leary’s palace” warning Catholics about “radicals.” Norris wrote:

Good God, Joe, if it is radical to tell the truth about the conditions prevailing among our people. . . then I am, you are, we are all *Reds*. . . I dread the open opposition of the clergy, Joe. They are too influential. Will you therefore write to Bishop O’Leary stating you have seen this article and are greatly concerned lest the Metis Association be considered as being Red. We can quite easily be adjudged as such, if in order to achieve our objectives it is necessary to proclaim our dissatisfaction with present administration, outlining its evils.²⁰

Norris could count on Dion to help neutralize the Church’s opposition, for, while Dion was deeply religious and respectful of the clergy, he was moved even more by the just cause of the Metis. For Dion, there was no contradiction in his devotion to the Church and his support for a strong, even militant, Metis movement, though he often needed prompting. Norris did not hesitate to use militant rhetoric with his Catholic colleague. In December 1933 he replied to a letter from Dion:

. . . we have now arrived at the stage where we must commence the use of aggression. . . You lament that we have no Riels. Joe, we have plenty of Riels and it only requires a little fanning of a spark that would become a flame. . . I love a good fight and I’m not afraid to meet any Damned White Man that ever drew breath. . . this is only the beginning, Joe.²¹

Norris was not alone in working hard to influence Joe Dion. The Church, aware of Dion’s influence, hoped to use his religious devotion to divide the executive. About this time Dion received a letter from a Grouard Metis, Willie Hamelin, sarcastically suggesting that Dion had lost his devotion to God, “who seems to be entirely abandoned in your thoughts.”²² Tomkins later informed Dion that Hamelin was a “simpleton” who had worked at the mission all his life and was put up to his letter by the local priest. Tomkins promised to handle the situation without creating any “ill feeling.”²³ As long as Joe Dion supported the movement and stuck to the principle of separation of

religion and politics, the Metis organization could weather almost any attempt by the clergy to undermine the association.

Despite the setbacks the Metis association was not idle. It was busy planning a third general convention for January 1934 and gathering data on the conditions of the Metis people for the commission of enquiry it still expected. One of the results of this activity, pursued vigorously by Pete Tomkins, was that many Metis were now receiving medical care for the first time and many of those who previously had been refused relief were being placed on the rolls.

Tomkins' medical care strategy was to obtain testimonials from sources which the government would have difficulty ignoring. He was successful, and by the end of 1933 he had collected six testimonials from doctors and Indian agents in the Grouard area. Grouard suffered by far the worst health conditions. Dr. Paulson from High Prairie reported that TB and venereal disease were so rampant that it was impossible to maintain health without "special aid." The Grouard district, he stated, "acts as a focus of infection for the whole [north] country."²⁴ Another doctor estimated that fully 50 percent of the Metis in the area were afflicted with venereal disease and practically all of them were destitute and unable to pay for treatment.²⁵

On January 11-12 the association held its third general conference, referred to as the Third Annual Convention. The meeting was routine in that it reiterated Metis concerns and confirmed their trust in their executive. The only change in the executive saw Pete Tomkins elected as third vice-president, officially recognizing his position as an executive member. From the resolutions passed "recommendations were submitted to the Federal and Provincial authorities on the subject of Land Grants, Social Conditions, Natural Resources, Registered Trap Lines, North West Territories Ordinances, Education and Health."²⁶ Association membership stood at 1,200 with 41 locals representing Metis from every part of the province. It was to be the high point of the organization,* for from this convention forward, political activity of Alberta Metis was confined largely to the executive.

While the association was at its high point in organizational strength, its fortunes with the provincial government were at a new low. The Metis leaders' belief that their organizational strength would force the government's hand, was to be shaken in the spring of 1934.

Two issues concerned the Metis as the legislative session opened its February sittings in Edmonton: the land issue and the more immediate

*Little is known about the specific role of women in the association. While few women held elected positions within the organization, there was a Women's Metis Association headed by a Mrs. Petrie. Unfortunately, there seems to be no documentation of the role of the women's organization. It is suggested by present-day leaders that its most intensive activity paralleled that of the main organization, from 1932 through 1934.

question of the impending registration of trap lines. The executive expected that its representations opposing registration would be effective. Also, despite the government's procrastination, they expected it would announce a commission of enquiry. The resolution passed during the last session had committed the government to concrete recommendations within ten days of the opening of the 1934 session.

The association was disappointed on both counts. Whether through incompetence or deliberate subterfuge (as Brady believed), the government failed to follow the resolution passed in the last session. The government claimed to have mistakenly adhered to an earlier version of the resolution which committed it only to further investigation. There was no announcement of a Royal Commission, and it was clear that the cabinet had not seriously considered the matter.²⁷

Despite strong protests from opposition members, the Metis leaders were denied the opportunity to present their opposition to registered trap lines. The Metis' case was to have been put before the legislative agriculture committee, but both the premier and the chairman of the committee adamantly refused to hear the Metis leaders. Norris and Brady waited several weeks in Edmonton before Norris was forced to leave for his prospecting job at Lesser Slave Lake and Brady was obliged to return home.²⁸

The executive was clearly surprised by the government's stalling tactics. Brady admitted being "downhearted temporarily." The events also revealed in Brady a lingering faith in the political system and parliamentary traditions. He was disgusted as much by the government's tactics as by its inaction. In a letter to Dion, Brady expressed his outrage:

It is painfully evident that the government sidestepped the matter in a most dishonorable manner adopting duplicity and fraud to circumvent the legitimate ordinance of the Supreme Authority of the Province. . . we know now that they are not fighting in the manner of Western men, fair and in the open, but adopting tactics that are unBritish, dishonorable and not worthy of the traditions of the great Laurier and MacDonald. . .²⁹

It seems that on some occasions the liberal traditions instilled in Brady by his father still outweighed the Marxism that he was beginning to absorb. In any case the matter called for analysis and not emotion, and Brady wrote to Joe Dion describing the situation:

It is also evident that the present government with the imminent approach of a general election will attempt to use our question

as a vote catcher among our more credulous brethren. I have heard unofficially, through an impartial source, that the government have already made moves in that direction in some of our western districts. . . They are also warning our Metis about their Secretary, and telling them not to support the Association as the Secretary does not speak Cree and anyway I will lead all our *Neestows** into trouble. . . [These are] the disruptive tactics of the people who are determined to overcome us and who realize that the first step is to disunite the Executive.³⁰

This was the first indication that the government had identified Brady as someone to be discredited. Their hostility was almost certainly based on Brady's involvement with the CCF and the Communist Party. Dion, too, was the object of divisive tactics. The Indian Affairs Department was encouraging him to re-establish his treaty rights. If he did so, they promised to make him Chief of his old band, and give him a large farm as well. They assured Dion that he would not have to work at all. Dion revealed these offers in a letter to Brady and indicated that he had rejected them out of hand. He signed his letter, "Vive les Metis."³¹

The government's red-baiting tactics and outright hostility worried Brady, and in April he told Dion that he was prepared to resign if the membership demanded it. But whatever Dion may have felt about Brady's political convictions, he could not support Brady's resignation. Dion had already responded, in February, to a previous hint of resignation given by Brady. When Brady suggested he might resign "once the people had their way paved," Dion chastised him, asking rhetorically "Who could possibly fill your and Norris' boots?"³² That hint of resignation, made when the association expected imminent government action, was withdrawn when Brady realized the fight was not over. Similarly, his second offer was unnecessary; neither the rank and file nor Dion had any desire to see their secretary leave his post. With the question of resignation disposed of, Brady stated his intention to act: "For the present I can see nothing to do but work out our tactics in accordance with the situation."³³

Brady's general tactic of petitioning the government had not changed. Brady believed the government had "sidestepped the issue" because it feared the association and was simply delaying. A new motion had been passed in the spring legislature committing the government to an impartial commission. It was to the government's delaying tactics, not the issue itself, that Brady had to respond. The

*The Cree word *neestow* is, literally translated, "brother-in-law," but Indian men could properly use the term to refer to other Indian men even if unrelated. Norris and Brady regularly used the term to refer to Indian and Metis in the sense of "native brothers."

government had to be pressed to act sooner rather than later.

Brady now decided to use the constitutional option in order to force the government's hand. The association had already replied to a government question on jurisdiction, taking the position that the province was solely responsible for the Metis.³⁴ In early May Brady moved to have the courts back up that position and thus remove the province's only excuse for delay. He sought the advice of the Conservative Davies regarding the feasibility of forcing the province to refer the question of jurisdiction to the Appellate Division for a ruling. Davies advised, in an ingratiating letter, that there was no way to force the government to take the matter to court.³⁵ The Metis' only recourse would be to further petition the government to take such court action. While Davies advised that this could succeed, Brady apparently decided it would be a wasted effort. As long as the question of Dominion/provincial jurisdiction remained open, the province could continue the delay. It could hardly be expected to settle the matter to its own possible disadvantage. Just as surely the Dominion government had nothing to gain from initiating court action as its political interests lay in maintaining the status quo.

In attempting to counteract the government's delaying tactics, Brady significantly chose legal rather than political means. Even when the option of forcing a court decision on jurisdiction was eliminated, Brady did not consider using the association's political clout. The association, after fourteen months of intensive organizing, was at its peak of influence and membership. It was recognized as the voice of the Metis, generally respected by all the political parties and the press, and had 41 locals representing virtually all of Alberta.

Certainly direct political actions—demonstrations, marches and protests which directly confronted the authorities—were commonplace in the 1930s. Workers and farmers had long since legitimized such actions, if not in the eyes of the police and governments, certainly in the eyes of the public. The political atmosphere and the strength of the association moved Norris to revolutionary eloquence in his "call to action" letter to Dion. However, while Norris' fighting rhetoric was useful as an inspiration to flagging troops, the reality, as Jim Brady knew, was quite different.

Brady does not reveal in his writings any consideration of militant tactics. That he never mentioned it as a possibility suggests that Brady felt direct action simply too risky or not viable at all. Although progress had been made in the political education of the Metis and unity on the land issue had been achieved, the unity was fragile, and it would have been severely tested by any demand for concerted, militant political action. While advanced elements of the Metis might be prepared for such action, the majority were not. In Brady's words: "Sixty years of

clerical tutelage had [left them in a state of] ignorance and passivity."³⁶ It also left them politically cautious, suspicious of political ideas. The Church, its power threatened by the influence of the association, was certain to seize any political advantage it could. The politicians, to this point kept at arm's length from the rank and file, would also seek advantage if the question of militant action came up. However determined Brady was to hasten the government's action, he was evidently not prepared to take the risks militant action entailed. For if such action did fail, the delicate political balance on which the association's influence and credibility rested would be upset.

The "big four" had assured the Metis that if they would support the association, if they could overcome their petty differences and maintain unity, they would win. The Metis people had delivered on both requests. But victory was still not in sight, the land issue was still up in the air. Worst of all, there was apparently nothing they could do. The government, according to its own political priorities, would decide on the timing of the issue. The Metis would simply have to wait.

The association had other, everyday tasks to address: questions of relief, better health care and education. But ultimately these issues, too, were tied to the land issue. The association, its locals in particular, had to be kept on ice. At the same time it could not be allowed to fade or see its membership decline. The organization was not strong enough to directly confront the government, but its strength would be necessary to deal with the government when the time came. Unity and numbers had to be maintained to ensure the organization's status as the sole voice of the Metis.

The task of maintaining the organization fell on Jim Brady. Norris was in the north prospecting and would not be back until late fall. Joe Dion, while nominally president, had grown accustomed to deferring to Brady and Norris in association affairs and Pete Tomkins, perhaps the most competent organizer, was kept busy with the day-to-day tasks of assisting the destitute Metis of the Grouard area.

Brady had other responsibilities as well. With the commission almost a certainty sometime before the 1935 election, Brady turned to devising tactics for the commission hearings. He began an intensive study of Metis history, in particular the history of the Metis land claims. With the assistance of Conservative MP Davies, Brady documented the history of Metis petitions and representations made to the Canadian government before the armed conflicts of 1869 and 1885. With his father's help he documented the history of the St. Paul Half Breed Reserve. To complete the history of the Metis' pursuit of land tenure, Brady documented the scandalous history of Metis scrip.³⁷ Reflecting the large numbers of ex-treaty Indians in the movement, he also studied the annual reports of the Indian Affairs Branch.

Besides satisfying Brady's thirst for history, his research served several purposes. The least urgent of these was meeting one of the explicit aims of the association, the writing of a correct interpretation of Metis history. And with an eye to the possible entry of the federal government into the present struggle, the association had to be prepared to fight a battle based on interpretations of past government action. But foremost in Brady's mind was the likelihood of a purely provincial Royal Commission.

The province would not be subject to legal arguments about past injustices, but Brady was well aware of the conventional wisdom which presented the Metis as a people "unfit" or "unsuited" to agriculture. Citing examples of alleged "failures" in Metis attempts at agriculture, historians and other settler ideologues held to the cultural explanation of the Metis dilemma. Their failure to adapt to the "new society" was, by this self-serving hypothesis, due to a "clash of cultures," a clash that the Metis lost. Brady's conclusions, based on his research and his direct knowledge of the St. Paul experience, were quite different. Not only did he have strong evidence that the Metis were successful at agricultural pursuits, he argued that the alleged "failures" were more economic than cultural, and that present Metis conditions could be traced clearly to government inaction and the vagaries of the capitalist system. Brady believed that if he could not prove his point the chances of Metis self-determination on the future settlements would be slim.

Brady did not restrict himself to the tactical questions facing the Metis and their struggle for land. For the first time he began developing a broader strategy for dealing with the economic problems facing the Metis. In the summer and fall of 1934 he was involved in the creation of the Independent Fish Pool and also organized the Lac La Biche Co-operative Fish Producers.³⁸ It was the beginning of a long association between Brady and native producers' co-ops. It is likely that Brady's experience with the provincial government sparked his interest in the economic organization of native people. The arbitrary and unprincipled delay of the Metis question by the province must have alerted Brady to the dangers of relying strictly on the state for solutions. His efforts in organizing the co-op also reflected his return to his political education, a process that he had been forced to cut back due to the demands of the association. References to socialist politics which are absent in Brady's Journal in 1933 reappear in 1934:

Bill Burford, ex-chairman of the Minnesota Socialist Party instructs my first class in economics—Jan Lakeman, Communist leader. . . Alistair MacLeod, ex-Western Federation of Miners and Scottish trade unionist—I learn of socialist strategy and tactics. . .

Much of the change in Brady's activities was facilitated by the Brady family's move from the insular, French-dominated community of St. Paul to the more cosmopolitan town of Lac La Biche, north of Edmonton. The largest community north of Edmonton, Lac La Biche served as commercial centre for the many small ethnic communities that surrounded it, and drew from them its Finnish, Ukrainian, French and Italian populace. This rich European mixture was in turn dominated by the large Indian and Metis population. While St. Paul was primarily an agricultural community, and the native people, long since dispossessed, served as part of the laboring class, Lac La Biche had relatively little arable land, and its economy was dominated by the primary industries—logging, trapping and, primarily, fishing—that existed throughout the north. The Indian and Metis of the area were generally much better off than their cousins in more southern centres like St. Paul. Politically, the mix in Lac La Biche was as rich as its ethnic mix. Where St. Paul was almost exclusively Liberal, Lac La Biche was the battleground for the whole spectrum of political ideologies, from communism to fascism.

The hectic pace of 1933 and early 1934 had not altered Brady's preference for solitude. When the family took up residence on a small farm on the edge of Lac La Biche, Brady quickly retreated to a small shack about a hundred yards from the family household. Often days would go by without the family so much as catching a glimpse of their reclusive kin.

The family's move and the hiatus in the association's activity seem to have drawn Brady out of his exclusive involvement in native political affairs and into the broader political world of white society. In 1934 Brady and others—among them a number of Ukrainian radicals—organized the Lac La Biche local of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation,* the newly formed CCF Party.³⁹ Brady also became involved at this time with the Communist Party (CP), a development, considering the CP's hostility to the CCF, which made Brady an unusual political animal.

Norris' life contrasted dramatically with that of his reclusive colleague. Norris now had a family of five children ranging in age from

*The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, founded in 1932 out of the Progressive Party and Independent Labor Parties, was the final and lasting expression of social democracy in Canada. Founded by a wide variety of socialists, Marxists and social democrats the CCF drew most heavily for its ideological foundation from the Laborite and Fabian philosophies although Marxism was not rejected, especially as an analytical tool. As with most other third parties the CCF had strong indigenous elements added to it which made it relevant to the conditions which spawned it: a strong anti-monopoly sentiment; a commitment to radical democratic methods; a strong focus on social reform. The CCF's focus on the needs of farmers accounted largely for its success as the third party in Canadian politics in the thirties and forties.

two to twelve. Norris' view of the family and of women was traditional, and he kept his personal and his political life separate. Despite his pride in his Indian ancestry, he made little or no attempt to impart this pride to his children.⁴⁰

Throughout the thirties Norris continued to study geology at the University of Alberta. He also trained himself in trigonometry, the use of survey instruments and drafting, which he used while prospecting. With few exceptions—1933 being one of them—Norris was in the field with mining companies from mid-May to mid-September and often would remain for part of the winter months.⁴¹ In 1934 he remained in far-northern Saskatchewan, on the Camsell River, until December.

Norris seems to have restricted his political activity to the Metis question and, more specifically, to the pursuit of the provincial government for solutions to the Metis crisis. He remained interested in socialist politics and kept closely informed on political issues at all levels. But this involvement was confined, with perhaps minor exceptions, to mere observation. His apparent lack of involvement in the CCF or any other socialist politics is hardly surprising, however, given the responsibilities he assumed and the time he was away in the bush.

Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris were in a paradoxical situation. They were modern revolutionaries, adherents to an industrial socialist ideology, an ideology they had learned as members of such a society. All around them their socialist colleagues were locked in struggle with an advanced capitalist system which was in crisis. Yet they found themselves fighting not a socialist struggle but a nationalist one. They had more in common with socialists in the third world, fighting colonialism, than they did with Canadian socialists. While those struggling for socialism in Canada fought out of self-interest and shared a common vision, Norris and Brady shared little with the impoverished and brutalized Metis for whom the movement toiled. They were motivated not so much by socialist solidarity as by compassion. Brady wrote to Tomkins about his observations during a field trip:

No hope, no inspiration—poor beaten creatures that drift with the tide. Living epitaphs of dead souls. I thought of and seen [sic] destitute working mothers and famished children and I thought too of the bloodstained gold of Canada's rulers and where could one find more eloquent witnesses that criminals are enthroned in positions of power in Canada today.

I thought too of our own people, our unfortunate ones, woefully unequipped, fearing the rocks of life. Too many with life meaningless and empty, drifting on the remorseless tide of life that stirs the deep of the vast forces that toy with puny

humanity... Today it seems almost a denial of life. I have seen it so much.⁴²

In late 1934 Norris found the burden of leadership a heavy one, and he revealed to Brady, albeit indirectly, that he had little in common with the destitute Metis. Guilt helped keep him active: "When one considers the number of unfortunate souls involved it is extremely difficult to throw up the sponge in despair, without feeling a little guilty, like forsaking helpless children."⁴³

Norris also was showing signs of political fatigue. He wrote to Brady:

Jimmy, this has gone far enough... [When] we get together again, I, little Malcolm, will in very forceful terms call for immediate and wholehearted support of all the Association members to be complied [with] within thirty days... notice or James Brady and Malcolm Norris will both tender resignations and tell them to go to it. I have already written Pete informing him that it will be impossible for me to devote as much time to the Association as before, for [the] reason that to do so will mean making sacrifices, such as depriving myself of time I would devote to study to better myself in my present avocation.⁴⁴

Brady, too, must have expressed to Malcolm his dissatisfaction, for much of Norris' communication was aimed at urging his comrade to "stay by the guns" until they could make different "arrangements" for the winter.⁴⁵ It is most likely that Brady was in dire financial straits, for Norris suggested that the association must begin to pay the secretary-treasurer a salary of \$75 a month. Whatever Brady's reservations or complaints might have been, he did maintain his vigilance over the affairs of the association. He continued to communicate with the councillors, kept tabs on the government and compiled data for eventual presentation to the elusive Royal Commission. Brady, for most purposes, was the Metis association.

The continued government delay, whether by accident or design, was eroding the morale of the executive, and any sustained problems within the leadership would have inevitably meant the rapid decline of the Metis association. By the late fall of 1934 the association was facing serious problems.

Dion had written to Brady expressing despair over the government's inaction. He had stopped writing to the government and hoped that a change in government might bring some results—assuming a Liberal victory. He was further disappointed in the association's local councillors, who were evidently not holding up their end; he compared the Metis to the "short-winded race horse who goes like hell for a little

while."⁴⁶ Even one of the local priests who had been supportive now seemed "indifferent." The Metis themselves, impatient with the lack of progress, had been giving their old mentor and helper "a lot of abuse."

Fortunately, the provincial government was also in disarray. Under sustained pressure from destitute farmers and workers, which all governments of the day were facing, the UFA was struggling for its life, desperately trying to avoid the defeat that its counterparts in Saskatchewan and Ontario had just experienced. On top of the normal political crises of a party that had lost touch with its constituency, the UFA also suffered the trauma of scandal. Premier Brownlee had been charged with the seduction of his personal secretary. He was tried in July 1934, found guilty and resigned immediately, leaving behind a demoralized and ineffective cabinet.

The government could not delay action on the Metis question much longer. With a crucial election in the coming year it was politically expedient to neutralize at least one of its political embarrassments. The appointment of a commission of enquiry would accomplish that objective. The new premier was R.G. Reid, the minister of lands and mines and the cabinet member closest to the Metis question. In that same month, on July 17, the cabinet voted to establish a Royal Commission to study the Metis question.⁴⁷ But the actual appointment was delayed. The province was still determined to bring the federal government into the commission and, more importantly, into the financing of its ultimate recommendations. The province intended "to ask the Dominion Government to be represented by one appointee on a Commission of three."⁴⁸

Premier Reid sent a senior minister, G. Hoadley, to Ottawa to present the province's case. Reid's advice to Hoadley reveals something of how perverse and desperate the UFA's politics had become in the face of crisis:

I would suggest that one submission that might be effectively made to the authorities at Ottawa is that the difficulty was fomented, if not caused, by the action of Mr. Percy Davies, Federal [and government] Member for Athabasca.⁴⁹

Clearly the premier and his government viewed the "difficulty" as being a purely political one, to be dealt with in order to avoid political embarrassment. Reid fully appreciated the cost to the province of dealing with the problem and seems to have seriously hoped that the Dominion government could be persuaded to contribute, at least, to the final bill.

It was the hope of a desperate man and a desperate government, for there was no reason for Reid, inveterate politician that he was, to

believe that politicians in Ottawa would agree to accept responsibility when they were not obliged to. Ottawa's reply was what anyone familiar with constitutional matters might have predicted. Hoadley reported to Premier Reid on September 7 that the Dominion government considered the Metis question to be a wholly provincial matter "as all Half-breeds are citizens and do not come under the Department of Indian Affairs or any other Federal Department."⁵⁰

The province could have taken the matter to court, but such an action was a political luxury the UFA could ill afford. The question of jurisdiction was a political question, not a legal one, and in this instance time was all important. And time was running out. Dominion involvement in the commission was politically useful only if secured before the 1935 provincial election. But court action might take years. If the Royal Commission was to have any political value at all, it would have to be appointed immediately.

6

The Ewing Commission: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Half-Breed Population of Alberta

ON DECEMBER 12, 1934 the provincial cabinet passed an Order in Council appointing a three-man commission to:

Make enquiry into the condition of the Half-breed population of Alberta, keeping particularly in mind the health, education, relief and general welfare of such population.¹

The commissioners were Alfred Freeman Ewing, judge of the Supreme Court of Alberta, chairman, Edward Ainsley Braithewaite, doctor, and James McCrie Douglas, "gentleman." In keeping with the distribution of political power, all three were white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The *Edmonton Journal* reported that the "problem...is certainly to be viewed by them sympathetically."²

From another perspective they could be seen as defenders of the status quo and dedicated spokesmen of pioneer capitalist society. Judge Ewing joined the North West Territories Bar in 1902 and became King's Council in 1913. After two unsuccessful election campaigns as a Conservative, he had been elected to the Alberta Legislature in 1913. Dr. Braithewaite had intimate connections with Metis history, having served in the North West Mounted Police as an acting hospital sergeant during the North West Rebellion. He was a specialist in public health and was appointed provincial coroner in 1895, a post he held until the 1940s. Douglas was a politician who had grown up among the Red River Metis. He had been prominent in Edmonton civic politics and had served as an MP in Ottawa, first as a Liberal and later as a Conservative. He was at the time a stipendiary magistrate for the Northwest Territories, a position from which he was given leave by the Dominion government—perhaps the only contribution Ottawa made to solving the Metis question.³

The association executive, which had been inactive for months,

lurched into high gear. The commission's investigation was slated to begin on February 25 with public hearings in Edmonton. Documented evidence and written submissions were also accepted and the commission planned to make visits to Metis settlements after the hearings.

The commission's hearing shifted the political battleground. The UFA government, the Metis' adversary for two years, had withdrawn from the field. Its new adversary would be more difficult to deal with. The Metis executive now faced three men who had nothing to gain by pleasing or appearing to please the Metis people. The commissioners shared the racial prejudices of the politicians but, unlike the politicians, their prejudices were not moderated by political considerations.

The Metis now had to convince the three men of the justice of the Metis struggle for self-determination. The new battle again brought Brady—Metis strategist and historian—to the forefront. Norris—the master of political organizing—handed over complete authority to his Metis colleague: "I am keen for a good fight and ready to throw my shoulder with you in any manner you have decided or will decide."⁴

Brady was ready. Assuming that the commission, like the government, was prepared to grant land to the Metis, Brady's approach was determined by his long-held fear that the scheme would be a cheap relief program. The enemy was the conventional belief which held the Metis to be hopeless indigents, irresponsible and incapable of governing their own affairs. Brady's weapons were the association's demonstration of Metis unity and determination, and Metis history in general. That history, which Brady had been studying for months, showed that Metis indigency was based on a history of economic exploitation and could therefore be reversed.

The preamble to the association's written submission to the commission, written by Brady and Norris, revealed the two men's Marxist perspective on Metis history:

We will undertake to show the depths of poverty to which the Metis people have been reduced since the surrender of Rupert's Land. We will set out the economic and social measures demanded of the Government to bring economic improvement and security to the Metis population. It will then be shown that the measures require the completion of our unification with the Canadian nation and that in the alternative we face disaster and ruin...

The history of the Metis of Western Canada is really the history of their attempts to defend their constitutional rights against the encroachment of nascent monopoly capital. It is incorrect to place them as bewildered victims who did not know

how to protect themselves against the vicious features which marked the penetration of the white man into the Western prairies.

We are on much firmer ground when we refer to the glorious tradition of the Metis in fighting for a democratic opening of the West than in representing them as an utterly primitive people incapable of protecting themselves. After all, they fought for a long time and they fought very well, first against the Hudson's Bay Company in the old days and then in the two North West rebellions. . . . What has happened, of course, is that they were crushed and the present misery is the result of that shameful episode of the forward march of capitalism on the prairies. Incidentally, the picture of the Metis as a sort of savage people has been deliberately presented by the conquerors in order to falsify issues and attempt to present some kind of justification for the treacherous way in which these original pioneers were treated. Constitutional "principles" in the abstract have no significance in our struggle. In one instance the popular forces will be found using provincial rights against the reactionary control of the central government powers. In recent times we have witnessed the conflict of the Western provinces with the Dominion government. In other instances, reforms initiated by the central government will be opposed by the sectionalism of provincial groups. This has been a general phenomenon since confederation. We must establish the fact, at the outset, that the relation of social forces will determine the constitutional issue of any problem at any given historical time. . . .

The Metis problem is basically related to the general problem of the economic and social needs of the Canadian people. The hardship, poverty and suffering of the great majority of the Metis people in a country of great natural resources is forcing to the forefront of our administrative affairs the issue of government measures to cope effectively with the economic and social problems of the people as a whole. It is becoming more evident that such measures as are needed and demanded by the Metis population are impossible within the present framework of provincial administration. Hence the issue of changes in the administrative structure required to deal with the problem has arisen. Certain aspects of the Metis problem have a definite relation to the constitutional structure of our central government. The establishment of the Alberta Metis Commission represented the first serious effort of provincial governments to grapple with this historic problem. Its establishment is a significant step forward. . . .

In seeking a solution we must re-examine the Metis question

in the light of the economic and social developments of the last seventy years. The government will give ready recognition to the point of view that any constructive change of policy must proceed from the needs of the people. The Alberta Metis Association shares this belief in common with all constructive thinking people. It is this attitude and the conclusions which must be drawn from it that we wish to set forth in basic outline to you. It is our hope that it may commend itself to your judgement and influence your deliberations to the end that it will become the embodiment of the progressive aspirations of the Metis population in their struggle for rehabilitation.⁵

Brady knew that a reinterpretation of Canadian and Metis history would not suffice to persuade the commissioners that "relief" was an inadequate solution to the problem. The enquiry's frame of reference and the government's objective was focussed narrowly on the present. In order to promote self-determination Brady would have to draw the historical argument further and illustrate that there was a continuity between the "glorious tradition of the Metis in fighting for the democratic opening of the west"⁶ and the present Metis population.

Brady would argue that the Metis population consisted of two classes: the "nomadic" Metis, who lived the traditional life of hunting, fishing and trapping, and the "progressive" or "Red River" Metis, who were educated and who represented, as workers, successful farmers and entrepreneurs, the Metis elite. The nomadic Metis were the destitute, malnourished, uneducated Metis who constituted the "half-breed problem."^{*} The "progressive" Metis were, in Brady's conception, the source of political salvation for their less fortunate cousins. They were the descendents of the old nationalist leadership of the Metis from the Red River, South Saskatchewan and St. Paul des Metis. Brady argued that they were proof of the Metis' ability to become productive citizens.

Brady was the sole author of this dual-class analysis of Metis society and it is likely that he coached other executive members in preparation for the hearings. The executive and its allies used this classification

^{*}Brady's description of two broad classes of Metis did not fit the orthodox Marxist view of class. It was an analysis which recognized implicitly the colonial reality of many Metis and a continuing national liberation movement. An individual's class position was based on how they related to the mainstream society. Thus Brady does not talk about a Metis working class as such—the working class Metis were included in the category of "progressive" just as farmers and small businessmen were. All these economic classes were part of the Canadian mainstream and were therefore "progressive." The nomadic Metis—a large proportion of whom were actually ex-treaty Indians—were outside the mainstream. As described earlier some Metis were on the borderline—entering one or the other of these two classes depending on economic conditions. Brady describes this class analysis in "Politics in the Metis Association," October, 1942, Brady Papers.

whenever the subject arose during the hearings.

The alliance between the deprived nomadic Metis and the progressive land-owning Metis—despite its inherent contradictions—was a reality without which the Metis association would never have been built. The line of secondary, local leadership which held the association together consisted of that very class of land-owning “Red River” Metis. Their understanding of political developments, their education and their ability to engage in sustained political action was crucial to the organization in its most active years. Without them the “big four,” for all their remarkable talents, would never have succeeded. Brady pinned his long-term hopes for Metis liberation, whatever the outcome of the hearings, on the alliance between the nomads and progressives.

Once he had established the capacity of the Metis to govern themselves by virtue of this alliance, Brady’s final step was to establish that the moral authority of that alliance was vested in the Metis association. The settlements would provide the economic base for self-determination; the association would direct the process of self-determination. In Brady’s scheme it was critical that the association’s political authority as the united voice of the Metis be extended to the settlements once they were established. The cheap relief scheme which Brady feared would inevitably be characterized by paternalism. The settlements would, under such a conception, be run by a government agent comparable to an Indian agent. To challenge this paternalistic plan, Brady intended to propose the Metis association as the sole political authority on the settlements. Political autonomy was an objective which Brady had identified in the earliest stages of his involvement in the Metis struggle. Each settlement would be a separate local of the association, with delegates elected to the central body. The executive committee would be the single voice of the Metis, on and off the settlements. Only the association would deal with the government, and the local Metis councils would administer the settlements and hire the necessary staff.⁷

Brady spent the months leading up to the hearings preparing the case in support of this vision. He assembled the arguments, the documented evidence and arranged for witnesses to support the association on all of the various issues which would be raised.

Brady showed up late for the hearings, missing the first day because the commission’s promised transportation expenses did not arrive in time. The commissioners, informed that Brady and his documentation were crucial to the Metis’ case, adjourned until February 28 to give Brady time to get to Edmonton and the association time to prepare its case.

Despite its early adjournment, the single day of discussion on February 25 set the tone of the hearings. The discussion quickly



Brady took this photo at a demonstration at Two Hills, Alberta, on August 5, 1934

Malcolm and Celina Norris and family, June 1933. The children, left to right, are Malcolm Jr., Ethel, Pauline, Russell and Willy





The Metis Association of Alberta's Executive Council and friends, March 1935. Back row, 1 to r: Joseph Dechene, MLA; Felix Callihoo; L.A. Giroux, MLA; Pete Tomkins, Jr. Front row, 1 to r: Jim Brady; Rev. Fahler; Joe Dion; Bishop Guy; Malcolm Norris; Peter Tomkins, Sr.

French Metis working on a logging project at the Keg River Metis colony, 1943. Brady is second from right.



focussed on defining just who the commission was investigating; the chairman wanted a working definition of "half-breeds." It was soon agreed that non-treaty Indians were within the commission's terms of reference. The early Metis petitions had explicitly mentioned the non-treaty Indian and both Bishop Guy, an ally of the association, and Joe Dion confirmed the place of the Indian in the deliberations. Dion emphasized that: "The most destitute amongst the Metis today are the direct descendants of Indians who left treaty in favour of scrip. . ."⁸

But Ewing was less interested in an historical definition of "half-breed" than he was in a social definition. Norris, chosen by the executive to present the Metis' case, contributed the following:

. . .if he has one drop of Indian blood in his veins and has not been assimilated into the social fabric of our civilization he is a Metis.

On February 28 the discussion picked up where it had left off. Ewing paraphrased Norris:

Ewing: Would you say the definition "anyone having Indian blood in their veins and living the normal life of a half-breed" comes within the definition of "half-breed"?

Norris: Yes. . .

Ewing: You see, you must include "living the life of a half-breed" . . .there are a large number of men in Edmonton occupying responsible positions, who are not intended to be included in this investigation.⁹

Norris hesitated to agree with the definition: "For the purposes of this investigation it is rather difficult to give a definition. . ." But the initiative was lost, the issue settled. The "working definition" was arrived at. It was not history which defined a "half-breed," not politics nor even biology. You weren't a Metis because you could trace your origins to the Red River or the South Saskatchewan. You had to have Indian blood, but you were a "half-breed" only if you lived outside the dominant society, if you lived the "life of a half-breed." Because you lived a certain kind of life—the traditional life of hunting, fishing and trapping, a poor life, characterized by illness and ignorance—you were a "half-breed." Why were people condemned to live such a life? Because they were "half-breeds." There was no escape from this nether world. The cause was also the consequence.

This working definition would be used by Ewing and the other commissioners in their deliberations. It was a pathological model.¹⁰ The "half-breed" was a problem to be dealt with as one would deal with an

illness and the questions of the commissioners reflected this attitude. The conditions were described, remedies put forward and the viability of those remedies debated. The Metis leaders soon discovered there was no room for any reference to history, self-determination or political autonomy.

There is no evidence to suggest that the Metis executive discussed the matter of "definition" before the hearings. Brady, who, of all the Metis executive, might have been expected to object to the working definition, did not. Perhaps they decided to let it pass, thinking that the time was not ripe to challenge the commissioners' perceptions or perhaps they were simply caught up in the contradictions of the Metis world itself. For, indeed, Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady were not "half-breeds" in this sense. They had, in Norris' words, "been assimilated into the social fabric of *our* civilization"¹¹ (my emphasis). It is possible that by virtue of their "civilized" status Norris and his colleagues had unconsciously acquiesced to a definition of the Metis as indigent. Norris and Brady were living proof of the existence of the "Red River" class of Metis, yet the gulf which separated them from their less-fortunate cousins was so great that even they found it difficult to maintain the position that there was an authentic connection between themselves and the nomadic population.

The acceptance of the working definition was a serious defeat—whether or not Norris and Brady saw it this way at the time—and it was just the first of several, similar defeats. Throughout the first two days of the hearings, Norris and Brady attempted to build their case for Metis self-determination. Ewing would have none of it. He repeatedly refused to allow any detailed discussion of historical evidence and objected strenuously each time reference was made to what he termed "past injustices." In response to Norris, Ewing stated:

I do not see much good in raking up any mistakes that were made (or at least what some people may think were mistakes) years ago. If you want to go into the history of the whole situation . . . that is one matter; to say that their condition is such that at the moment the state must act upon those conditions is another matter . . .¹²

At another point Norris questioned Jim Brady and asked him to describe the association's history. When Brady referred to past governments' "lack of foresight," Ewing again took strong exception. It was becoming clear that the association would not be allowed to put forward their case for Metis self-determination and political autonomy in the future settlement areas. They could not even get past the first stage of their argument, namely, establishing the historical roots of the

Metis' dilemma.

Ewing apparently interpreted the association's arguments as an effort to establish a legal or moral claim against the government and indirectly "blame" white society for the present state of the Metis people. Yet the source of this interpretation was more likely his own guilt, for the association did not even allude to a legal claim, and the moral claim was already recognized by the appointment of the commission itself.

The commissioners' perception of the "problem" seemed invulnerable to any challenge. The commissioners believed the destitute Metis to be beyond social redemption, incapable of integration. Out of this grew the commissioners' view of the eventual solution. It would be limited in scope and inexpensive. Indeed, the Metis, as they were by definition indigent, were destined to become wards of the government. Ewing made this assumption clear throughout the hearings and even, on occasion, suggested that as wards the Metis would lose their present civil status.

The conventional beliefs which the commissioners applied to general issues were accompanied by a racist attitude towards the Metis executive. White witnesses, regardless of their positions on questions, were accorded polite and patient treatment at all times. The Metis executive members, particularly Norris, were given rude, impatient and often openly hostile treatment. On several occasions Norris was simply interrupted, his points ignored or disallowed.

There is little doubt that Ewing was particularly annoyed by Norris, whose command of English and whose oratory far outshone the commissioners'. Norris' obvious pride in his Indian ancestry was an affront to Ewing's image of his own racial superiority. Norris' fierce Metis pride met Ewing's equally determined racism head on. In different circumstances Norris would have been the clear winner. In the context of the hearings Norris was bound to lose. There was no political struggle, for Ewing had all the power: the power to determine what was admissible evidence and what was not.

The commissioners' hostility went beyond racial prejudice. Early in the hearings they tried to undermine the credibility of the association. Both Douglas and Ewing badgered Norris over the percentage of the Metis population represented by the association and about possible opposition to it. Throughout Norris' efforts to answer their questions, he was interrupted and ridiculed. Norris claimed half the Metis population for the association, stating, with justification, that it would be 90 per cent if they had the resources to organize more extensively. His attempt to honestly deal with the question of opposition, by suggesting that many Metis preferred to disguise their ancestry, was ignored.

The commissioners' abuse disturbed the executive, and it must have

led them to believe that their oral testimony was doing more harm than good. At the end of the second day's testimony Norris stated the association's desire to present a written brief rather than to continue giving oral testimony. From that point on the Metis executive and their lawyer restricted themselves to questioning other witnesses and interjecting only when they felt it necessary.

The prejudices of Judge Ewing and his two colleagues severely hampered Brady's presentation. But the three commissioners were not the only enemy of Metis liberation. The day-to-day conditions of the Metis and the shaky alliance between the progressive Metis and the nomads acted like an enemy within, which made it difficult for Brady and Norris to build a case for political autonomy.

It was clear to anyone who cared to see that Norris, Brady and the other Metis leaders were not part of the Metis movement out of material self-interest. They were not wealthy, but they were educated, healthy and commanded a place in the "civilized" world. The social distance between Brady and Norris and the "half-breeds" they were fighting for was so great that, try as they might to build their case for Metis self-determination, the two men sometimes seemed unable to avoid damaging it. Their comments seemed to confirm the view that the Metis were hopeless indigents. At one point Norris admitted that the older Metis were "hopeless. . . insofar as being able to teach them."¹³ Further, Norris stated, it was impossible, at this point, for the Metis to "deal with the white man on terms of equality in matters of business, land and finance."¹⁴ Brady seemed to contradict the whole thrust of his own argument when he answered Commissioner Douglas' question as to whether the Metis would have been better off as wards of the government. "Yes," said Brady, "I think we [the Metis] would have been immeasurably better off."¹⁵

The comments and questions of the commissioners revealed the "relief problem" approach which Norris and Brady feared. Yet the Metis executive was obliged to give testimony which supported that approach. Throughout the hearings the executive pressed vigorously to have the conditions of the Metis recognized for what they were—desperate and degrading. Whenever Metis conditions were downplayed, the executive intervened. The real conditions had to be established in order to assure proper measures to correct them. But by insisting on the recognition of conditions as they were, the executive made the prospect of Metis self-determination that much more remote in the minds of the commission members.

The impoverished class of Metis never appeared at the hearings and this may have contributed to the sense that the Metis were objects of discussion—not parties to negotiations. While Brady and Norris usually referred to themselves as Metis, they often referred to the Metis as

“they” or “them”—external to the enquiry, external to the society: in short, the contemporary image of the Metis held by the commissioners.

When the Metis association withdrew from its presentation of oral testimony, three other groups of witnesses took their turns at the hearings. Clergy, medical practitioners and politicians gave evidence, and each dealt primarily with concerns related to their interests.

The clergy were the first to testify and, while they commented on various topics, their overriding interest was education. All the testimony, including the clergy's, agreed that illiteracy was widespread, affecting 80 percent of Metis under 21. But there the agreement ended. The different perceptions of the Metis led to opposing views on the Metis' need and capacity for education. On this issue the commissioners and the clergy took the view that the “half-breeds” had a limited capacity for education:

Commissioner Douglas: What is your opinion regarding the value to the half-breed of giving him an education?

Bishop Breynat: I don't think he should be given too much education. Too much is bad for some of them. He needs just a little help—I think just until they are 13 or 14 years old probably.

Chairman Ewing: I agree with you there, too much would be a bad thing.

Commissioner Braithewait: Some education you mean so they understand some English?¹⁶

Bishop Guy, the association's only clerical ally, disagreed with this. But on the issue of clerical control of education the Catholic clergy spoke with a single voice.

The issue of denominational schools produced the first confrontation between the clergy and the Metis association. Next to the land question, this was the most crucial issue. Ignorance was the Metis' most pernicious enemy in the struggle for liberation. Brady, more than any of the Metis leaders, detested the Church and deplored its role in Metis education. Later, in a history of the Metis association, Brady wrote:

The entire policy of clerical “humanitarians” in Indian and Metis affairs is one of the most ignominious betrayal of the real interests of Indian and Metis education. . . . Sixty years of clerical tutelage has induced an ignorance and passivity which has deprived the native of the knowledge and understanding whereby he. . . can bring into being that better life for which the clergy so unctuously intone. . .

The Metis leaders see clearly the inevitability of the struggle to

right the wrongs under which [the Metis] suffer but the clergy see only the wrong that would be perpetrated were they forced to surrender the spiritual tyranny and terrorism which has dominated Indian and Metis education for generations.¹⁷

The association reiterated the position first taken by the St. Paul local in 1932 that education should be controlled by locally elected Metis boards under the supervision of the provincial Department of Education. Norris explicitly opposed any clerical involvement in Metis education.

The clergy, who had thus far been cautious in dealing with the association, had no hesitation in fighting the education issue. When Ewing brought up Norris' opposition to denominational schools, Bishop Breynat replied that "you cannot go by his advice anyway, that is the type of man who does not know—he is a very poor man. He would not know anything about it."¹⁸

While education was vital to the Metis' future, the immediate threat to their existence came from disease. The association had documented the conditions which, in some settlements, immobilized and threatened the entire population. The association's greatest success had been in improving medical care. Many Metis who had never seen a doctor were now receiving some medical attention. Yet it was barely a beginning.

Despite what seemed to be overwhelming evidence of the devastation of disease, the testimony produced heated exchanges. The grave condition of the Metis was confirmed not only by such non-medical sources as James Brady, Sr., Bishop Guy, Pete Tomkins and Malcolm Norris, but also by respected white physicians from the Metis areas of the north. Doctor McIntyre testified that communicable diseases were far more prevalent among the Metis than among whites, and that TB was the most prevalent, to the point that there were very few "who have not had TB in some form or other." McIntyre estimated that 90 percent of the population was infected with TB, and presented a picture of death and destruction among the Metis from a whole range of diseases, detailing deaths, cases of paralysis, blindness, etc. Metis suffering from syphilis, testified McIntyre, had little chance of surviving other diseases they might contract. Another physician, Dr. Quesnel, presented a written brief which fully supported McIntyre's assessment.

Judge Ewing, however, chose to listen to a single, reassuring voice on the health issue. Dr. Orr, a physician with the provincial Department of Health, declared that the incidence of venereal disease was only slightly higher than average and went on to downplay the previous testimony on the prevalence of TB.