

The Federal Government's Position on the 1885 Resistance

The following is a summary of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's speech before the House of Commons July 6, 1885. The speech outlines his government's position on the Métis' and First Nations' grievances which led to the outbreak of the 1885 Resistance. In English, the speech is available in its entirety at www.collectionscanada.ca/primeministers/h4-4090-e.html. In French, at: www.collectionscanada.ca/primeministers/h4-4090-f.html.

Regarding the Métis' desire to have title to their lands, which was the main cause of the 1885 Resistance, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald claimed that the Métis of the North-West Territories were not on the same economic or social level as those in Manitoba, and that they had no more of a right to the land than non-Aboriginal settlers. Therefore, he did not see why the Métis, whose land claims were dealt with on an individual basis, should receive special status. The federal government's official policy (in *The Dominion Lands Act, 1872, S.32*) stated that any man (or head of a family) who was 18 or older could receive 160 acres (19.7 hectares) of free land if he lived on it and cultivated it for three consecutive years. If he chose to buy more, he could have 160 more acres by pre-emption (the right to purchase the land before it was made available to the public). Moreover, the Prime Minister also believed that the Métis had an advantage over non-Aboriginal settlers because they knew the country, were born and raised there, and were well accustomed to its conditions and climate. This should have made it easier for them to acquire and hold onto the land.

Macdonald argued further that when the opposition Liberals were in power (1874-78), they did not respond to any of the Métis' petitions because they believed that the petitioners did not possess a legitimate claim. Then when the Conservatives regained power, they said the very opposite and agitated the Métis into thinking that they had a legitimate grievance. Macdonald added that the Métis, from 1878-84, were just as happy as they were in 1873-78, because nothing had changed and they were not deprived of their land. The Prime Minister further maintained that the Métis, because of their nomadic lifestyle, likely would have sold any land Scrip that they received to speculators for a very low price. (The federal government used Scrip certificates, either in land or monetary denominations, to extinguish the Métis' Aboriginal title to the land).

When Macdonald's government took power in November of 1878, he said that Conservatives attempted to address Métis grievances. He then mentioned that the Métis wrote to Archbishop Taché and to other members of the Church's hierarchy, and then to Manitoba's Lieutenant Governor, David Laird, in order to gain advice regarding their lack of legal title to their lands. Laird advised the federal government against granting further Scrip to the Métis. However, Archbishop Taché offered a compromise solution – the creation of Métis reserves. In the Archbishop's plan, the 1,200 Métis families of the North-West Territories would be put into 12 reserves in which 100 families would live on a 12-square mile (19 Kilometres) reserve. According to Taché's plan, only those Métis men, women and children living in the North-West Territories prior to January 1, 1879 would receive two

Scrip certificates for 80 acres (9.87 hectares) each, which could then be traded for land on a particular reserve. The archbishop also indicated that these Métis reserve lands could not be sold, mortgaged or taxed until at least three generations or their representatives had lived on the land. In turn, Macdonald told the House of Commons that the Métis, like all other applicants, should possess title to the land after three consecutive years of cultivation rather than having passed through three generations. This was especially so because the provisions *The Dominion Lands Act* offered 160 acres (19.7 hectares) of land in full title to all applicants – provided that they cultivate it over three consecutive years.

In the end, Macdonald told Parliament that the Resistance was fermented by non-Aboriginal land speculators, and not by the Métis or First Nations. These speculators funded Louis Riel's return to Canada from the Montana Territory. He also stated that most of the Métis who applied for Scrip had already received some in Manitoba. This included Gabriel Dumont and his brother Isadore. In one petition he said that fourteen of the seventeen Métis on the list already received land Scrip.

As for the First Nations, Macdonald said that the government did all it could to transform them into agriculturalists by supplying them with cattle, agriculture equipment, and instruction. In terms of transforming the First Nations into sedentary farmers from nomadic hunter-gatherers, Macdonald believed that that Canada had more success in a short time than the United States had had in twenty-five years. He was surprised that Canada had not lost one life, from 1870-1885, while dealing with the First Nations, whereas

in the United States, many lives were lost and millions of dollars spent “pacifying” Native Americans. Macdonald concluded that non-Aboriginal agitators, who made the First Nations forget the good things that the government had done for them, instigated the First Nations into rebelling.