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# *Homeland to Hinterland: Political Transition in Manitoba, 1870 to 1879*

**GERALD FRIESEN**

In the wet spring of 1879, when water lay in the fields of the Red River Valley and farm prospects seemed bleak, the restlessness of some of the French-speaking metis of Manitoba was expressed in criticism of their political leaders. And when Joseph Royal, the most powerful French-Canadian politician in the province, returned from a lobbying trip to Ottawa, he discovered that his French group in the Legislature was disintegrating. To prevent the collapse of his faction, Royal took the opportunity provided by the instability to lead a revolt that would replace the present administration with one headed by Royal himself and be supported by a strong English-speaking contingent. The plan failed, however, largely because the Premier, John Norquay, out-manoeuvred his French-Canadian lieutenant by capitalising upon the latent anti-French sentiments amongst the many newly-settled Ontarians in Manitoba. The so-called ministerial crisis was soon smoothed over, French replacements were found for the Cabinet, and the government won a resounding mandate in the general election that followed. Norquay and the parliamentary system had weathered a brief moment of instability, one might be tempted to conclude, and the flare-up of French-English hostility which marked the crisis was simply a reflection of the sentiments that had plagued Canada for many years.

Historical works which take note of the 1879 political crisis do indeed follow this tack. In the view of W.L. Morton, for example, Joseph Royal tried to introduce federal party lines into Manitoba in order that his French bloc, about nine of twenty-four seats, could command the balance of power between Liberals and Conservatives.[1] A variation upon this interpretation suggested that Royal advocated a "double majority" principle based upon language; that is, that a majority in each linguistic group would be required for passage of legislation.[2] In any case, historians have agreed that French-English tension, originating in the declining French proportion of the provincial population, resulted in a political crisis in which the French sustained a minor reverse.

The following pages will argue that the accepted interpretation of the ministerial crisis is reasonable but incomplete. The widening gulf between French-speaking metis and French Canadians in Manitoba, the role of federal Conservatives in local politics,

1 W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto, 1957), pp. 196-7.

2 R.O. MacFarlane, "Manitoba Politics and Parties after Confederation", Canadian Historical Association *Report*, (1940), pp. 51-2. This view was first argued by Alexander Begg, *History of the North-West* (Toronto, 1894), II, pp. 342-9.

and the place of John Norquay in the struggles between old settlers and newcomers all must be considered in a thorough appraisal of the episode. But if the analysis were to end with the ministerial crisis, having illuminated only this fleeting moment in provincial political history, it too would fall short of a complete study. The political upheaval was part of a pattern that included significant changes in every aspect of society and culture in the same period. This apparently minor episode in provincial politics, therefore, illuminates an era of cultural transition in the western interior of Canada and represents another phase in the shift of political authority from old order to new.

New developments cropped up in every area of life with sufficient frequency in the late 1870s that we can perceive not just isolated changes, but a pattern of changes. Clocks, for example, were slowly replacing natural phenomena and bells in the 1860s and 1870s as measures of the passage of time or announcements of events, but only in 1878-79 did precise hours appear in advertisements for the doctor's surgery, the church service, or the auction sale.[3] Time, as E.P. Thompson has suggested, would henceforth be spent rather than passed.[4] Cash prices similarly arrived in Winnipeg newspapers in these years and, to the consternation of W.F. Luxton, *Free Press* editor, by March of 1879 the strict custom of cash sales replaced the credit system that had prevailed in Red River stores for a generation.[5] Employment and wage payment also underwent significant changes in these years. For the officers of the Hudson's Bay Company, who had shared in Company profits for the last half-century, the failure of their so-called "Factors' Revolt" in 1878-79 marked the end of their position as gentlemen and the beginning of regular wage payments which relegated them to employee status.[6] The 1878-82 boom in the Winnipeg economy fostered the establishment of a wage labour market and, by the end of this period, local newspapers published regular features on prevailing wage rates in the skilled trades.[7] Underlying these changes was the "great transformation" in concepts of land and resource-holding that saw private property replace the previous commons and open-access systems.[8] And, finally, the locus of political power and control over distribution of wealth shifted irrevocably in the era. Where no one party, native, metis or European, could be said to have dominated the fur trade, by contrast the agriculture export economy brought with it a small elite whose decisions would dictate the pace and location of economic growth and the distribution of its prizes.

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3 *Manitoba Free Press*, 20 December 1879. This assertion is based on a survey of the newspaper advertisements of the decade conducted in part by Craig Johnston, University of Manitoba.

4 E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism", *Past and Present*, XXXVIII, (1967).

5 *Manitoba Free Press*, 26 March 1879.

6 Robert Valdimar Oleson, "The Commissioned Officers of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Deed Poll in the 1870s with particular reference to the Fur Trade Party 1878-1879", (M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1978).

7 *Manitoba Free Press*, 9 November 1882; *The Commercial* (Winnipeg), 29 May 1883.

8 Irene Spry, "The Great Transformation: The Disappearance of the Commons in Western Canada", Richard Allen, ed., *Man and Nature on the Prairies* (Regina, 1976).

The competition for membership in this elite added to the intensity of the political debates in Manitoba in 1879: various business factions behind the politicians were struggling for such prizes as railway charters, bridge locations, and newspaper patronage. But, however intense was the competition, it was still only a shadow of the battle to control the great economic prizes of the North Atlantic world; by comparison, the gifts under the control of the Manitoba government, or available to the Manitoba elite, were limited. Manitoba, in passing from homeland to hinterland, would henceforth be subject to the dictates of the international industrial capitalist system. The events of 1879 merely eliminated some factions—old Red River people, as it happened—from the struggle for wealth and power.

Politics in the first half of the 1870s reflected the uneasy situation following the Riel uprising. The dominant issues in public life, land tenure, amnesty for those who led the uprising, and the establishment of law and order on a firm footing, cut across racial and religious lines and demonstrated that many citizens of old Red River, most of whom had settled there prior to 1860, retained a sense of community that had not been disrupted by the events associated with Riel's name.[9] These old settlers, chief amongst whom were the French- and English-speaking metis, were the supporters of Lieutenant-Governors Archibald and Morris. The only opposition to this coalition of the old order came from those associated with the "Canadian party" of John Christian Schultz, that is, an alliance between newly-arrived Ontarians who wished to avenge the "murder" of Thomas Scott and some long-time opponents of the Hudson's Bay Company's trading monopoly.

The first Manitoba cabinet represented the broad spectrum of moderate opinion and preserved its legitimacy by avoiding the extremes. In late 1871, when public meetings in the English parishes threatened to topple the government, Lieutenant-Governor Archibald secured the resignation of an English-Canadian cabinet member who was unable to stand up to Schultz and his Orange extremists at these stormy gatherings. The replacement, an English-speaking metis, John Norquay, took away the very issue, English Protestant representation, that the Orangemen had hoped would carry Schultz into office.[10] In 1874, Lieutenant-Governor Morris abandoned Premier H.J.H. Clarke, who had lost French support by failing to protect Riel against Ontario attacks and alienated Catholic and Protestant alike by his marital infidelity and alleged venality. Clarke was succeeded by several short-lived ministries whose very existence demonstrated that the principle of responsible government would henceforth apply in Manitoba. The eventual result was a compromise administration headed by R.A. Davis, which soon included representatives of the French- and English-speaking metis and went far to heal the wounds inflicted by the events of 1869-70. One could argue that political calm returned to Manitoba because the principle of selecting the Cabinet from the best representatives of moderate elements in society had again been adopted.[11]

9 Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis Canadien: Son Rôle dans l'histoire des provinces de l'ouest*, (Paris, 1945), pp. 1112-3, 1122.

10 See Frank A. Milligan, "The Lieutenant-Governorship in Manitoba, 1870-1882", (M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1948).

11 *Ibid*; see also Lovell Clark, "Henry J. Clarke", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XI (in press).

A constant cause of dissension in this era was electoral redistribution but, even on this issue, where the newcomers might have been expected to cause trouble, the moderates of the old order at Red River imposed their own solution. The original electoral boundaries, devised with the aid of Archbishop Taché, the Roman Catholic leader, were based on the old parishes of the settlement and gave equal representation (twelve seats) to French and English. The immigrant clamour won a redistribution in 1874 by which the French and English in the old parishes each gave up two seats to the new, largely English-speaking settlements in the outlying regions, but the metis population was still a powerful force in public affairs. When Premier Davis reconstructed his Cabinet by adding metis representatives in 1875, one of the conditions of the accession of John Norquay, by then the most prominent leader of the English-speaking metis, was that yet another redistribution should be made in order to give proper weight to the growing anglophone communities. The resultant legislation was, however, an epitome of the Davis government's compromises. For purposes of representation, the new law divided the province into three elements, the French (largely metis, but including a growing number of French Canadians), the old settlers (largely English-speaking metis, but including many Selkirk colonists), and the new settlers (largely Ontario immigrants), and gave each element eight seats. This was far from representation by population—one old settler's vote counted for three, six, and even eight votes in some of the new settlers' ridings—but the government carried the debate with its defence of the interests of old Red River. The metis had a right to special treatment, John Norquay claimed, because they had borne the burden of pioneering in the Northwest, because they had special interests as river lot settlers, and because they had shown sincere consideration for the newcomers. As in the formation of the cabinet, so the revision of electoral boundaries ensured that adaptation to the population change would not upset the careful balance maintained by the moderate leaders of the old order.[12]

Premier Davis resigned for personal reasons prior to the opening of the 1878 election campaign and was replaced by John Norquay. As an English-speaking metis, Norquay was the ideal compromise between the old and new ways of life. He had been born in Red River in 1841, was a child of the fur trade on both sides of his family, and had been educated in Anglican schools in the settlement. He had married a local metis girl, Elizabeth Setter, and had taught school, farmed, and even worked briefly in the fur trade before his election and subsequent elevation to the Cabinet, where he was recognized as a forthright spokesman of the English-speaking metis. His great size (he weighed over three hundred pounds and stood over six feet) and his mule (which wandered off on one celebrated occasion) made him the object of banter, but his intelligence and oratorical ability ensured that he would be taken seriously in the Legislature. Though the more extreme members of the English camp had distrusted him after he deserted them for a seat in the Davis Cabinet in 1875 and the Schultz forces had disliked him ever since he joined the first Cabinet in 1871—the Scot settler, Gunn, once referred to him contemptuously as "Greasy John"—Norquay was widely

12 See *ibid.*; also John L. Holmes, "Factors Affecting Politics in Manitoba: A Study of the Provincial Elections, 1870-1899", (M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1939); the debates of the Legislature on this bill were printed in the *Manitoba Free Press*: see Manitoba Legislature Library, Legislative Debates Scrapbook.

liked and generally trusted.[13] His campaign promises were staples of the decade, including drainage of low lands, arrangements for railways, and better financial terms from the federal government. While such planks were calculated to win the support of new settlers, his record alone was sufficient guarantee to most old settlers of his concern and rectitude. His new cabinet, too, struck a neat compromise: Joseph Royal and Joseph Delorme represented the French and metis respectively, lawyer, D.M. Walker, and businessman, C.P. Brown, represented the Ontarians in Winnipeg and the western part of the province, and he, the Premier, represented the long-established old settlers along the Red and Assiniboine. The new administration was designed to maintain the harmony of the Davis years and the influence of the old order.

Certainly the hold of tradition or of non-industrial social conditions was made clear by electoral practices in 1878. Though a ballot act had been passed in 1875, the alleged inexperience of the voters in a subsequent by-election had led them to promise their votes to every candidate—in exchange for a wee dram in each case, to be sure—and then, of course, to betray their pledges in the privacy of the voting booth. Norquay had then withdrawn the compulsory secret ballot in favour of an optional system which would permit candidates to determine once again whether their treats had had the proper effect. It is difficult to estimate the extent of the practice of treating, but scattered comments indicate that a barrel of whisky was an invaluable accessory on a candidate's wagon when he canvassed the countryside. At St. Andrew's meeting-house, drunken debaters doused the lamps, fired shots into the roof, and cracked a few skulls in their enthusiasm for their favourite. At Ste. Anne's, the parish priest reported that whisky fairly flowed down the trails during the contest. And editorials in *Le Métis*, an organ of the French-speaking population, admonished readers not to exchange votes for favours, thereby implying that the illegal practice was much in evidence in French ridings during the spring and summer of 1878. Nomination rules caused controversy in two metis ridings, St. Charles and Ste. Agathe, in each case because zealous returning officers rejected the papers of apparently qualified candidates and declared the victory by acclamation of their favourites. In Ste. Agathe, a predominantly French-speaking riding which included the growing English settlement of Morris, the victorious French-Canadian candidate and the returning officer then retired to the priest's house for a good night's sleep, only to be roused by angry English electors who arrested the priest and then, as the church bells sounded the alarm, fled with their partly-attired hostage in a hail of gunfire. Politics was a participant sport in this era and agreement to abide by the rules was some distance in the future. The old order could not be transformed overnight.[14]

The 1878 contest was little different from the first two general elections in that the issues were few and personalities figured prominently in the outcome. Discussion in the new English ridings usually concerned the pace of economic development and the iniquity of accommodation with the French. In the Catholic parishes, Archbishop Taché took to the field with a "mandement concernant les élections" which defended the intervention of priests in politics on the grounds that they were better educated and

13 Gerald Friesen, "John Norquay", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XI (in press).

14 This account is based on newspaper coverage of the campaign; cf. *Manitoba Free Press* and *Le Métis*, 1878.

more disinterested than the mass of voters.[15] The message of *Le Métis*, repeated countless times in the months before the vote, was that the French must remain united in the face of a hostile English population. In most parts of the province, the personal stature of the candidates and their persistent canvassing were undoubtedly the keys to victory, given that the continuing conflicts between French-Canadian and old settlers, on the one hand, and recent Ontario immigrants, on the other, would influence the initial selection of candidates. This factionalism was growing in importance, however, thus raising the possibility that significant disagreements would soon destroy the consensus upon which political stability was based.

The Norquay administration was returned with a majority similar to that of its predecessor. The new Premier could rely on a united French bloc and a handful of English votes but, because of redistribution and the growing English-speaking population, he would face an opposition which now numbered between seven and ten in a house of twenty-four. Still, this was a stable majority and the opposition presented no serious threat so long as it was held together simply by personal ambition and dislike of the French. The Assembly met briefly in early February, 1879, and then adjourned for several months in order that Norquay and Royal might deal with the real business of the session—railway policy and financial arrangements—during the seemingly annual ministerial trek to Ottawa.

The ministry began to disintegrate while its two principal architects were away. The chief reason for this failure was the growing tension between French-speaking metis and French Canadians. Although there were many instances of this tension, the case of the parish of Ste. Anne is particularly illuminating because it was there that the various elements in the subsequent ministerial crisis found their catalyst. The wet spring and endless rains had caused problems throughout the Red River Valley, just as they had in the parish of Ste. Anne des Chênes, but in that community, situated about thirty miles southeast of Winnipeg on the Seine River, the inconvenience of high water and flooded fields was made worse by bitter political divisions. At the root of the problem was the disagreement between French-speaking metis and French Canadians over such crucial matters as public appointments, land and financial policies, and political representation. The specific focus of discontent in Ste. Anne lay in the decision of J.B. Lapointe, a prominent farmer and defeated candidate in the 1878 provincial election, to contest the victory of Charles Nolin, an equally prominent metis spokesman, on the grounds that Nolin had bribed the electors. The subsequent court case brought about the ministerial crisis of 1879.

The campaign in Ste. Anne had been rough, it seems clear, and Charles Nolin had undoubtedly contributed to its seamy side. In one remarkable episode, he was said to have browbeat a reluctant voter, Joli Ducharme, in the back room of the man's shack, offering to burn a mortgage in exchange for a vote. When the conversation became heated, sufficiently so that everyone in the adjoining main room could hear the dispute, Nolin emerged briefly to insist that Ducharme's young son play the fiddle as loudly as possible for the entertainment of those present. A metis woman was accused

15 *Le Métis*, 16 May 1878.

of offering social services on Nolin's behalf. Charges of treating were legion.[16] But to enumerate the illegalities without explanation of the background would be to accept Lapointe's case and the assumption that the electoral system and, indeed, the provincial political system operated fairly and equally for all; Nolin, who was sympathetic to metis who were losing their farms and their livelihood, did not accept such assertions.

In the preceding five years, Charles Nolin had grown suspicious of Archbishop Taché and the French-Canadian politicians whom Taché had endorsed as political leaders amongst Manitoba's Roman Catholics. Nolin had some education and had made a living as a farmer and carter in Red River. When the trouble erupted in 1869, he had stayed aloof; and when asked by Taché to aid a Church-nominated representative in Ste. Anne in the first provincial election in 1870, he did so. But, perhaps because of his impatience with French-Canadian political leaders, his request to the local priest for support in the 1874 election was refused. He won the seat of Ste. Anne despite the parish priest's neutrality and the active opposition of the Hudson's Bay Company agent. From that time on, he waged a serious campaign on behalf of the metis and against French Canadians.[17]

Nolin was the most prominent French metis spokesman in the Legislature in the late 1870s. When appointed to the Davis Cabinet with Norquay in 1875, the first French-speaking metis to achieve that status, he immediately tried to get his colleagues to appoint metis rather than French Canadians to government posts; he resigned his portfolio when his appeals failed. He worked assiduously for the reduction or cancellation of Dominion relief loans, which dated from the grasshopper invasions of the mid-1870s, because he knew that these debts could drive, or be used to drive, his compatriots from their farms. When he learned that he would be opposed in the 1878 election, presumably by someone more sympathetic to the Church and the French Canadians, he said he would ally with the English, if necessary, to prevent the victory of a "Canadien".[18] Nolin believed that the politicians, French as well as English, had failed his people; it is little wonder that he distrusted the political system.

The Ste. Anne election trial was conducted in May, 1879. Nolin's numerous allies contradicted the testimony of the prosecution with monotonous if unconvincing regularity; they had been drilled on the morning of the trial by Nolin himself, it was said, and warned not to accuse each other of wrongdoing, but instead to stand united against the attacks by outsiders. Judge Betournay was not impressed by the metis testimony; indeed, he told Father Giroux, the priest, that he had never encountered

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16 The case was discussed in several numbers of *Le Métis*, January to June, 1879; see also Archives de l'Archidiocèse de Saint-Boniface, (AASB), Father Giroux to Archbishop Taché, 3 July 1879.

17 Nolin's career is discussed in George F.G. Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto, 1963); additional details are contributed by Robert Painchaud, "Les Rapports entre les Métis et les Canadiens Français au Manitoba, 1870-1884", A.S. Lussier and D.B. Sealey, eds., *The Other Natives: The Metis* (Winnipeg, 1978), II; cf. also AASB, Giroux-Taché correspondence, especially Giroux to Taché, 9 December 1874; and *Le Métis*.

18 AASB, Giroux to Taché, 29 March 1878.

anything so disgusting.[19] He found Nolin guilty, nullified his election, and removed his political rights, including his right to sit in the Legislature, for seven years. Though this latter provision was overturned on appeal, Nolin had by that time headed west, leaving the wet lands and the divided community of Ste. Anne behind him. The parish priest was relieved to see him go.[20]

If this pattern of hostility between metis and *canadien* had been an isolated phenomenon, the crisis of 1879 might never have occurred. But Ste. Anne was merely one of many parishes where farmers and winterers were at loggerheads with their political and religious leaders during the last half of the decade. In the first few years after the uprising, after Riel had been forced into exile, leadership of the metis had fallen to Archbishop Taché and his priests, on the one hand, and French-Canadian newcomers like Girard, Royal, and Dubuc on the other. At this time when conflict with the Ontarians was heated, when the fate of Riel and Lépine and the others was uncertain, when economic development was limited and the Dominion land grant to metis families yet to be distributed, the alliances between French Canadian, metis, and Church remained more or less firm. These were hard years for the metis, however, years of persecution, ridicule, and demoralisation, and Taché's counsel of patience and prohibition of retaliation had sapped their strength.

By 1874, when the Archbishop's assurances of amnesty and rapid settlement of land claims were still unfulfilled, the metis had begun to listen to the anti-French message of men like Nolin. Crop failures, loss of freighting contracts, and the diminution of animal resources further handicapped the metis and, when scrip allotments began to arrive, they sold them to speculators at such a pace that *Le Métis*, the French party's journal, began to quote weekly prices for the certificates. Taché himself, despairing of unity amongst the metis, purchased quantities of scrip in order that incoming French Canadians might be settled in homogeneous islands of faith and culture. But, in 1878, this process was still running its course and many of the metis demonstrated their dissatisfaction with Church and French leadership by seeking to elect their own representatives to the Assembly. At Rivière Salle, the metis were so forthright in their dissent that one of their own community admonished them for showing animosity toward their French-Canadian brothers; the speaker said the metis need not agitate for representatives from their own nation because the few who held public office had disgraced themselves.[21] When an Irish Catholic visited Baie St. Paul, a French metis parish, to determine his chances for election, he discovered that the metis believed they had made two French Canadians rich by sending them to the Legislature and that now it was their turn; or, as the Irish Canadian put it in a letter to Taché, they want "a black man, one of their own."[22] An electoral conflict in Ste. Agathe arose in part from similar sentiments. The metis community in Manitoba was disintegrating in the late 1870s and one symptom of its despair was this division within the ranks of the so-called "French party". Henceforth, metis and French Canadian

19 *Ibid.*, 3 July 1879.

20 *Ibid.*, 8 August 1879.

21 AASB, C. St-Pierre to Taché, 18 November 1878.

22 AASB, Frank McPhillips to Taché, 6 August 1878.

would often be divided by their attitudes to the new way of life in the province. As Joseph Dubuc, Member of Parliament, told a friend, "Toujours la vieille rancune."[23]

Charles Nolin became at once the leader and the focus of metis dissatisfaction during the early months of 1879. His failure to secure cancellation of the Dominion relief loans and his anger over the challenge to his election victory were probably at the root of his condemnation of the metis cabinet representative, Delorme, and the French leader, Royal, the two men who should have led the campaign against repayment and might have tried to manipulate the law to cancel the court case.[24] Nolin convinced three other metis assemblymen (Goulet, Bourke and Schmidt) of the merits of his grievance and probably of the need to defeat the ministry in order to replace Delorme with one of themselves. Nolin then consolidated his position in the metis community by wooing Maxime and Ambroise Lépine. Soon the three could be seen arm in arm in the villages south of Winnipeg. Next it was reported that one of the prominent Lépine brothers had travelled south to St. Joe, a metis settlement in American territory, to visit none other than Louis Riel and rumours eventually reached St. Boniface that Riel was counselling the discontented metis. Further testimony to the division between French Canadian and metis came from Riel's former Quebec classmate and deputy, Joseph Dubuc, who reported the Riel-Lépine story to a friend as if it concerned a world with which he, Dubuc, had no association. Though he doubted the reports of Riel's involvement, Dubuc did admit that it was possible because Lépine "ne raisonne pas" whereas "ce qui vient de Riel est plus que mot d'évangile."[25] Whatever its source, the plan to defeat the Norquay ministry was founded upon metis dissatisfaction with French-Canadian political leadership and was led by the ever restless, ever combative Charles Nolin.

The Legislature resumed its sitting on 27 May 1879 amidst rumours of the metis revolt and the Ste. Anne election case. But, despite Nolin's furious lobbying amongst the metis assemblymen, nothing was done to defeat the government on the first day; before the second day's session began, the French party had been thrown into turmoil. Joseph Royal, the experienced and competent leader of the French Canadians, then convened a meeting of the French-speaking members, metis as well as Canadian, to dispel the thoughts of revolt and to reassert his own influence. In the process, he apparently scoffed at the metis plan, saying that defeat of the ministry was a poor means of removing a metis Cabinet minister, and he heaped abuse upon Nolin, whom rumour depicted as a drunkard[26] and who had been discredited by Judge Betournay's decision. That Royal easily dominated the meeting was a tribute to his parliamentary ability and perhaps can be seen as a measure of the metis uncertainty in these situations. In any event, Royal quelled the mutterings and then, perhaps too confident of his powers, launched his own movement to defeat Premier Norquay.

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23 Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), J. Dubuc Papers, Dubuc to E. Tassé, 3 July 1879.

24 AASB, J. Royal to Taché, 28 May 1879; and PAM, Dubuc Papers, J. Dubuc to Tassé, 3 July 1879.

25 PAM, Dubuc Papers, J. Dubuc to Tassé, 1 June 1879.

26 AASB, Giroux to Taché, 17 January 1879.

No confident conclusion will ever be reached concerning Royal's motivation in these critical days. His presentation to the "French party", as he designated the French-speaking assembly members, was suitably generous and far-sighted, but one might also conclude that it rang hollow. For six months, he told them, he had been concerned about Norquay's failure to secure broader support among the English assemblymen and, on several occasions, had urged a cabinet shuffle in order to attain that end. The French, he warned, were in grave danger because they kept Norquay in office against the wishes of the English majority and thus might bear the brunt of racist retaliation if ever the government fell. Better by far to ally with the English majority, defeat the present ministry, and create a new coalition cabinet that truly represented the various elements in the province. This same message Royal repeated in a letter to Archbishop Taché written on the day of the French caucus, in which he explained to his mentor that the manoeuvre was essential because of growing English fanaticism: "Les orangistes se remuent, et l'agitation ne tardera pas à se faire. C'est une tempête de fanatisme qui pourrait bien tout broyer sur son passage."[27]

But should the statesmanlike utterances of this man be accepted? Royal was in his early forties when the crisis developed, the most prominent French politician in Manitoba, as he had been for most of the decade, but he was also the second minister in the provincial cabinet. He would have explained to a sympathetic listener that he deserved better. He had had exceptional promise when in the 1860s he began his Quebec career as a lawyer, a journalist, an organizer of the papal zouaves, and the biographer of Lafontaine. He had moved to Manitoba at the request of Sir George-Etienne Cartier and Archbishop Taché in order to protect French interests in the West and had proven his capacities in Assembly and cabinet. He should have been made Premier, in his own view, when Davis resigned, but the English would not hear of it. So, now, he supplied the votes which kept Norquay in office, while the three English ministers could muster only two additional English supporters. His own education, abilities, and tastes were far superior to those of Norquay, he would have argued, and these distinctions no doubt had been sharpened by their recent visit to Ottawa. Why even *Quiz*, the Winnipeg satirical journal, had poked fun at the picture of fat John Norquay crushing dainty chairs in the civilized salon of the Governor-General. And, according to gossip after mass in St. Boniface, Royal had already confided to his daughter that Norquay was Premier only temporarily and that he would soon be Manitoba's first minister. Was Royal simply doing his best to secure French interests? Or was he taking advantage of the metis plot to consolidate his hold upon the metis and to further his own ambitions? Certainly, it was suspicious that Archbishop Taché knew nothing of the plan in advance. The story of the crisis as told by Joseph Dubuc put the onus for the attempted coup directly on Royal. And Lieutenant-Governor Cauchon concluded that Royal had played his cards badly and too quickly.[28] Because Royal's allegations of English attacks upon the French are not supported by contemporary evidence, one might conclude that the French leader seized the first obvious opportunity to make himself Premier of Manitoba. The metis revolt against the French Canadians had become a revolt of the French bloc against the English-speaking metis Premier.

27 AASB, Royal to Taché, 28 May 1879.

28 AASB, Cauchon to Taché, July 1879.

The manoeuvre would succeed only if Royal won a half-dozen English supporters and, not surprisingly, it was here that the demands of the new order, Canadian as opposed to Red River loyalties, were decisive. Royal was a *bleu* in Quebec politics, a supporter of the late Sir George-Etienne Cartier, and his strategy in the Manitoba situation sounded very much like that of his former leader: a united French bloc would maintain the balance of power in a two-party system. He was betraying Norquay because the English metis leader no longer had the confidence of a majority of English-speaking Manitobans and, with the arrival of more Grits and Tories from Ontario, could not be expected to survive. Royal believed that he could control the introduction of federal party lines into Manitoba provincial politics.

Late in the morning of May 28, as soon as he made his decision to undercut Norquay, Royal dispatched a lieutenant to negotiate with a prominent English-speaking Conservative on the Opposition benches, Col. Thomas Scott, no relation to the young man executed in 1870. Though no written record survives of this alliance, it must have been founded upon an earlier understanding because it seems most daring. One might expect that Scott, a child of Irish Protestant immigrants, member of Wolseley's expedition, and now a leader of Winnipeg Orangemen, would oppose the French but, on the contrary, he stood by their side during much of the crisis. His reasons for encouraging the plot were probably mixed, but like his fellow conspirator, Royal, he was undoubtedly moved in part by personal ambition. Having left the mayoralty of Winnipeg to enter the legislature, he believed that he belonged in the provincial cabinet and that Norquay was holding him back. Even more important in his decision, however, was his loyalty to party. Scott was a strong Conservative in Dominion politics, always the friend of John A.'s friends, and had supported Manitoba Tories like John Christian Schultz and Joseph Ryan in the 1878 Dominion general election. He had been dismayed to discover that Premier Norquay, though an avowed Conservative in federal matters, supported Ryan's opponent, the "grittiest of Grits", W.F. Luxton, in that election. Norquay's stand blotted his copybook, so the alienation of the Scott forces dated at least from then. The gap widened when Norquay repaid other obligations to Luxton, editor and co-publisher of the *Free Press*, with a valuable government printing contract. It mattered not that the debts had been incurred to aid the Tories—Norquay had secured Luxton's withdrawal from the 1878 election in order to give Sir John A. Macdonald a seat in the House of Commons and wanted merely to repay Luxton's campaign expenses as he had promised—but rather that a new Conservative paper in Winnipeg, the *Times*, must and would receive preferential treatment from a truly Tory premier. The loyalties of the new order made no allowance for long-time friendship or legitimate debts, particularly if the old commitments damaged party fortunes. Thus, Royal, Scott, and *The Times* led the campaign to remove John Norquay from office and to establish the Conservative party in power in Manitoba.[29]

One of the great ironies of the crisis was that Norquay was informed of the revolt before it began. Always a gentleman, Royal told the Premier on the afternoon of May

29 This story can best be followed in the news and editorial columns of the two newspapers, *The Times* and the *Free Press*, in 1878 and 1879.

28, shortly after the French caucus and the negotiation with Scott, that the ministry would be defeated by the "French party" unless it found broader English support immediately. Royal had misjudged his target. Norquay was an able and genial politician who found it very easy to make friends with old opponents. As soon as Royal left his office, Norquay held a hurried consultation with his two English cabinet colleagues and then, by early evening, assembled all the English-speaking assembly members for an extraordinary caucus. There he condoned, if he did not initiate, a round of anti-French speeches and, with the backing of his cabinet allies and of J.W. Sifton, speaker of the House, he then offered to lead an "English" ministry which would put the French in their place. The new cabinet would be committed to curtailment or abolition of French printing of official documents, redistribution of electoral districts in favour of the English, and obligatory organization of municipalities, thereby undercutting the authority of the Roman Catholic parish. What more could the Orange extremists desire? The assemblymen agreed to be bound by the will of the majority and thus pushed even poor Thomas Scott, whose plans had yet to be heard, into endorsement of a new Norquay ministry. The premier then sent a letter to Royal demanding his resignation. By an apparent reversal of policy and exceptionally speedy manoeuvring, Norquay had taken control of events.[30]

The French caucus, meeting next morning, May 29, had lost the initiative. It is not clear whether the French knew of Norquay's coup, but they could have done little in any case. They agreed that Royal and Delorme should submit letters of resignation immediately and, by mid-afternoon, they received word that the premier had accepted Royal's departure. Thus, as a French observer said later, "Ceux qui ont commencé le mouvement s'en mordent les pouces."[31] For the next few weeks they sat chagrined, almost dazed, as events swept past them. Joseph Dubuc, writing to a friend at the beginning of this period, opened his eighteen-page explanation with the words, "Nous sommes en pleine crise de politique locale, crise imprévue, épatante, bête, mais d'une bêtise inimaginable, comme Manitoba sait en enfanter."[32] The official view of events, if one can so designate the opinion in clerical and political circles in Saint-Boniface, insisted that Orange fanatics were now in control. Father Cherrier, for example, described the English as "les lâches, les traîtres, ces hommes fanatiques et sans principes",[33] and the perceptive observer, Joseph Dubuc, thought the consequences of the French failure would be irreparable.[34] In their view, the harmony between French and English that had marked the old order had broken down before the Orangemen's fanatical attacks upon French Catholicism.

This contemporary interpretation of the ministerial crisis should be regarded with scepticism, if only because John Norquay was not an unprincipled scoundrel whose "lâche trahison"[35] doomed the French to perdition. In fact, the premier worked

30 This reconstruction of events is based upon newspaper accounts and the Dubuc, Taché, and Sir John A. Macdonald Papers, especially the following references.

31 PAM, Dubuc Papers, Dubuc to Tassé, 3 July 1879.

32 *Ibid.*, 1 June 1879.

33 AASB, Cherrier to Taché, 2 June 1879.

34 PAM, Dubuc Papers, Dubuc to Tassé, 3 July 1879.

35 AASB, Cherrier to Taché, 10 June 1879.

diligently during the first week of June to find a cabinet minister acceptable to the French caucus and created an English ministry only when these attempts failed. He renewed his efforts late in the summer and, by October, had secured French approval for the accession of Marc-Amable Girard. The redistribution bill, one of the principal measures of his new government, preserved French control in six or seven seats rather than the previous eight or nine and thus cannot be described as a huge setback. The much-discussed legislation on government printing did not end the use of French in all official documents, but rather struck a compromise whereby the statutes would be printed in French, but not the orders of the day, the debates, nor the sessional papers.[36] Lieutenant-Governor Cauchon reserved this bill for the consideration of the Governor-General-in-Council; according to Royal the reservation was anticipated by the Manitoba cabinet and "la chose ne les a pas émus le moins du monde. Ils sont enchantés de jeter cette question sur les bras du Cabinet d'Ottawa—lequel devra en savoir un gré infini à Norquay."[37] Finally, one of the most important bills of the session, concerning education, which Royal had prepared before the crisis erupted and which had been drafted by Taché himself, was passed without amendment, "telle que notre manuscrit l'avait faite", Royal explained to the Archbishop.[38] One must accept Norquay's view of events: he did not betray the French but, rather, was betrayed by them. As he told Sir John Macdonald, "I regret very much that I had to adopt such extreme measures with Royal but his treachery left me no alternative."[39] A moderate, not an Orange extremist, directed the Government in the accustomed Manitoba path of French-English compromise.

This interpretation of the ministerial crisis places Premier John Norquay in a new and unfamiliar light. His concern for compromise with the French can be reconciled with the views of earlier historians, but the agility with which he defeated the Royal-Scott combination is unexpected. Is this the Premier who ruled on Macdonald's suffrance? Is this the simple metis caught between forces he could not understand? Norquay was not, for all his weight, his love of good times, and his following amongst the English-speaking metis, a Falstaffian remnant of the old order. He was intelligent, a "capital speaker",[40] and he made the transition to the new way of life with hardly a mis-step. In his first years as premier, he accompanied several expeditions of wealthy or ambitious visitors on tours of western resources, he invested with other aspiring capitalists in coal mines and gold mines and railways and land, and in Ottawa he negotiated better terms for Manitoba with sufficient skill that he was counted a Conservative despite his conflicts with Sir John A. Macdonald. Norquay began his political career as a bridge between two ways of life, but the troubles in 1879 completed his transformation into a leader of the new Manitoba; this remarkable individual left the old order behind, for all practical purposes, and became a city-dweller, a full-time politician, and a businessman.

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36 PAM, Dubuc Papers, Joseph Dubuc, "Autobiography".

37 AASB, Royal to Taché, 1 July 1879.

38 *Ibid.*

39 PAM, Sir John A. Macdonald Papers (microfilm copy), Norquay to Macdonald, 4 June 1879.

40 *Ibid.*, Morris to Macdonald, 22 October 1877.

It is natural to assume that the two metis leaders, Nolin and Norquay, represented the different political evolution of the two metis language groups and, therefore, that the English-speaking metis adapted unhesitatingly and without protest to the new way of life. Though much remains to be done on this question, some evidence suggests to the contrary that the differences between French and English metis during the 1870s were not profound and that the two groups cooperated upon important issues. Analysis of votes in the Legislature during the Davis years of 1874 to 1878, for example, demonstrates that French and English metis combined to retain the Half-breed Land Protection Act, to defeat representation by population, to oppose road construction across river lots, and to permit continuation of the custom of running animals at large.[41] If this alliance were part of a pattern of cooperation between the two metis language groups, it would undoubtedly have remained a factor in public life until the next redistribution and election in about 1881-83. But, by forcing a premature redistribution and a new election in December, 1879, the unexpected ministerial crisis undercut metis influence at a critical time. Norquay, who represented the only remaining concentration of English metis, the strip of river lots along the Red River between Kildonan and Lake Winnipeg, clearly gave up the battle for the interests of the old order once he began to depend upon new settlers for support. Thus, the metis alliance broke down, not because of irreconcilable French-English differences, but because the metis could no longer muster sufficient votes in the Assembly.

This reinterpretation of an apparently minor episode in provincial politics has implications not only for understanding the local party system and particular individuals, but also for approaching the history of the western interior. The ministerial crisis originated in divisions between French-speaking metis and French Canadians. It was translated into a cabinet crisis by Joseph Royal and Thomas Scott, whose attempt to introduce the federal party system into the province represented yet another facet of the advance of the new order. The quick response of John Norquay resulted in the creation of another ministry and the election of a new Assembly, but also in the demise of the metis political alliance. Thus, the traditional historical view of the incident solely as a problem in French-English relations simply touches upon the surface of events. In fact, the weeks of uncertainty and instability were the product of a struggle between the metis, on the one hand, and Quebec and Ontario immigrants on the other, between the factional politics of Red River and the recently established federal party system. And, beneath the French-English tension, the ministerial crisis was yet another reflection of the broader conflict between cultures.

This paper has suggested that the political developments of the 1870s, like the changes in time measurement and the cash system, were part of a single overriding theme in the history of the western interior, the theme of cultural transition. Such a context may raise more questions than it answers, but it is a salutary reminder of Manitoba realities. The era of fur trade and cart trail and buffalo hunt did not end as suddenly as the Riel provisional government because the habits of a half-century changed very slowly. Historians sometimes have lost sight of the stages in this transition and the result has been that, aside from the apparent aberration of the 1885

41 *Manitoba Free Press*, reports on the Legislature sessions, 1874 to 1878; these clippings are filed in the Manitoba Legislative Library.

uprising, the worlds of fur trade and agriculture have been juxtaposed in their writings, but rarely intertwined. It is as if, after 1870, the two ways of life never coexisted, never struggled for supremacy, and never posed dilemmas for the individuals who were required to adapt. In the context of national political history, where 1870 represents a watershed for the western interior, the events of Manitoba's ministerial crisis can indeed be interpreted as an episode in French-English relations. But if, as has been argued here, a portion of the old order remained intact after 1870 and if the Manitoba political upheaval is placed in the context of British or European experience, the ministerial crisis may be seen as an example of a common phenomenon, the transition to an industrial capitalist culture.

Re-examination of the 1879 political episode thus provides an illustration of the power of periodization to shape the conclusions of historical research. When 1870 is assumed to be a dividing line, a certain context of political and administrative history is also accepted and, in the post-Confederation era, attention is shifted to the working of Canadian institutions which henceforth were dominant in the West. But the choice of a comparable watershed in a history which focuses upon the theme of cultural change is much more difficult. In this case, where the western interior is treated as a distinct society worthy of study in its own right, periodization has yet to be agreed upon. The best alternative, that suggested in the recent work of Irene Spry, is to designate the half-century between the 1840s and the 1890s as an epoch of transition, the transition from homeland to hinterland culture.


## Résumé

Bien que la crise ministérielle de 1879 ne constitua qu'un bref moment d'instabilité politique au Manitoba, elle mit à jour les tensions existantes dans la société de l'époque. Jusqu'à date, on y a surtout vu une manifestation de l'animosité francophone-anglophone puisqu'elle mettait aux prises le premier ministre, John Norquay, et son bras droit canadien-français, Joseph Royal. Sans nier qu'il y ait une part de vérité dans cette assertion, l'auteur propose une nouvelle interprétation des faits beaucoup plus axée sur le problème des Métis, sur la place de Norquay dans la politique manitobaine et sur la question du rôle du système fédéral des partis dans la province du Manitoba.

Cette ré-interprétation d'un épisode mineur dans la politique provinciale implique également que soit modifiée l'approche de l'histoire domestique de l'ouest canadien. Au temps où la politique nationale était à la base de la pensée historique, c'est l'aspect animosité francophone-anglophone qui était mis en lumière et 1870 apparaissait comme la plaque tournante dans l'histoire du Manitoba. Maintenant qu'on s'applique à mieux tenir compte de la dimension culturelle, la crise ministérielle apparaît comme étant issue des nombreux changements qui s'opérèrent à l'époque aux niveaux du système des salaires, de la mesure du temps, du marché du travail et du concept de propriété. Conséquemment, 1870 ne constitue plus un point tournant; il s'intègre plutôt dans une période de transition, couvrant les années 1840 à 1890, où la société d'alors cède le pas à une société capitaliste et industrielle.