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OPINION

Defining 'Métis' will defend our community

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In early January, I applied to take a free, twice-a-week Microsoft Office course, delivered by the Métis Nation of B.C. (MNBC). But then I found out I'd been put on a wait list, with enrolment on a first-come, first-served basis.

This was a surprise to me – until I looked into the makeup of the MNBC's membership. There are around 22,000 registered Metis – and about 70,000 who are self-declared Metis. No wonder the class was full.

Word-processing classes are far from the primary privilege of being Indigenous. But it prompted me to reflect on the suspicious surge in the Métis population, an inflated numbers game being replayed across the country – and how the bureaucratic equality of registered and self-declared Métis threatens to sow divisions and dilute the community.

According to Statistics Canada, the Métis had the highest growth rate of all Indigenous groups, almost doubling between 1996 and 2006. In 2016, the Canada census counted almost 588,000 people who self-identified as Métis. Nova Scotia had growth that was too good to be true: Thirty years ago, 225 Métis lived in the province, and by 2016, there were more than 23,000.

Becoming a registered Métis citizen is a lengthy, complicated and demanding process. It requires applicants to obtain baptismal records and birth certificates from the 1800s and early 1900s, along with family trees that show the Indigenous ancestors. Self-identified Métis, on the other hand, merely have to swear a one-page affidavit declaring they are Métis. In exchange, they enjoy several MNBC benefits, including a \$20,000 forgivable business emergency loan, a \$10,000 forgivable business startup loan, and free training and supports for various employment, education and health programs.

Which brings us to the shameful suspension of MNBC president Clara Morin Dal Col, who was suspended by her fellow board members because she allegedly “breached the confidentiality and brought the reputation of Métis Nation B.C. into disrepute.” For her part, Ms. Morin Dal Col said she was suspended because she didn’t agree with her board’s desire to allow the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) to resume its place at the Métis National Council. She calls it “just plain wrong.” One year ago, the MNO was suspended because of its lax approach to membership; in 2016, Ontario had counted 120,600 self-identified Métis, a 65 per cent increase since 2006.

David Chartrand, the president of the Manitoba Métis Federation – the province long recognized as the Métis homeland – supports Ms. Morin Dal Col, writing in a Jan. 11 letter: “It is truly unfortunate there are those determined to bring our success to an end by opening the door to hundreds of thousands of individuals, who would wrongly and fraudulently claim Métis Nation citizenship. This means organizations and communities in Eastern Ontario, Quebec, or even further east, will be able to steal our identity, rob us of the fruits of our labours, and mock our Ancestors’ sacrifices.”

Those are fighting words that elevate the battle, and now lawyers are at the ready who will inevitably use funds that should be spent to assist struggling Métis. But I doubt the MNBC board will reverse that Red River cart from its Ontario destination and head west. What it will take is for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Indigenous Affairs Minister Marc Miller, bureaucrats or registered Métis to develop an accurate, workable definition of what it means to be Métis. Until then, rifts and bad feelings will persist, doing little to diminish the perception that internecine warfare and unscrupulous politicians flourish among Indigenous leadership.

It sounds trite, but I know deep in my heart that I am Métis. I also have the proof. Yet, it would be disingenuous of me not to realize that unless my son and daughter, both registered Métis, marry legitimate Métis, the family line will dissolve in a few generations, as it should. Should someone with 1/256 or 1/1,024 of Indigenous blood be able to claim Métis status? That would

be absurd, and gives a whole new meaning to “half-breed” – the epithet given to my great-great grandfather when he signed a page of Manitoba scrip in 1876, entitling him to \$160 or 160 acres of land.

Strong, true Métis communities exist in Camperville and St. Laurent in Manitoba, in Batoche and La Ronge in Saskatchewan and Paddle Prairie and Buffalo Lake in Alberta. Yet across Canada, pretenders are benefiting from federal and provincial dollars, or – as in the case of trickster writers and other artists – accessing advantages that come with Indigenous heritage. Donning a sash, doing beadwork or mouthing Michif words are not enough. If we believe that it is, then I fear for the future of my people.

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