

## #BringSShome

by Joe Desjarlais

We all watched the news story this past week in the evening news: 'Taken by force': Foster parents lose fight to keep Métis toddler.

The crisis on the ground in community is palpable and ongoing. Hurt and fear, disappointment and utter confusion remain. The hash tag, “#bring SS home” says it all. I think of my own family and I struggle to keep my composure when I think of how the foster parents must feel. A small Métis toddler, torn from a devastated Métis foster family and supportive Métis community and sent off to Ontario to a non-Métis home, leaving behind a community in mourning, and people, officials, from all walks of life outraged, and left with deep concern and doubt.

Tamara Taggart on her twitter feed reacted, “Many say this isn't reconciliation - Foster parents lose fight to keep Métis toddler.”

Former Métis Nation of Ontario President Tony Belcourt: “The heartless Director of BC Child Welfare got her way. Baby SS was taken away from her home and is now in Ontario.”

British Columbia’s Representative for Children and Youth Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond opined in a letter: “With SS being moved and the plan not being an approved or an operationalized one, I remain concerned that child welfare practice is giving short shrift to indigenous culture” and concluded that the existing plan was an “afterthought, with other factors given more emphasis than the best interests of this child.”

BC Métis Federation leader Keith Henry: “I am so proud of so much we do right in Canada within our Aboriginal communities on so many levels but how could this happen? How can common sense not prevail?”

President Henry adds, “There is no doubt today that MCFD officials are not truthful. Worse yet we believe Métis organizations and agencies including the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC, Island Métis Children and Family Services Society and Métis Nation British Columbia, who have supported this decision, did so without any real due diligence. MCFD provides an estimated \$1 million annually to these 3 organizations per year and each of their input was to support this removal of our member from our community without any consultation to our community.”

The Province of BC, in a “knee jerk” response to the pressure incredibly stated it would give even more power to the unaccountable Métis organization that supported the government narrative of forcibly sending SS to Ontario.

The Vancouver East Liberals came out strong on the issue on social media: “The Vancouver East Liberals rarely comments or get involved in Provincial governance issues. We will not be sitting

idly and silently knowing that provincial bureaucrats are simultaneously committing perjury while ruining a child's life.”

The Federal government, however, has been silent, despite a Prime Minister that went on record on social media last April saying, “No one pretends to have all the answers to problems facing Indigenous communities. But I promise you I will never turn my back on them. We’re committed to working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders as we start to make things right for Indigenous peoples.”

They have, like their Conservative predecessors when in power, simply avoided the ‘Métis file’ when it comes to on-the-ground challenges threatening Métis people, practices and ways of being. They have not stepped up to commence negotiations and dialogue with Métis in BC in any form.

The Federal Government has been in the media of-late supporting the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) and has posed for photo-ops with the Métis National Council (MNC) and affiliates as they engage in preliminary land talks. They praise former Métis Nation BC (MNBC) leaders who presided over events precipitating the mess that has led to SS’s removal. But, where is the voice of these “well meaning” leaders now when it comes to love for Métis people and accountability to community? Where are these ‘leaders’ when it matters?

The hypocrisy and complicity is overwhelming and we all know it. How did we get here to this low point? As Métis? As a country?

The longstanding problematic Métis-Canadian relationship has once again spilled over onto mainstream evening news. Canadians don’t know what to make of this mess.

For over 30 years, since Métis entered the Constitutional fray in the early 1980s, the dominant Métis identity has been guided by a ‘system of beliefs’.<sup>i</sup> Alliances between mainstream governments and Métis leaders and Métis social, cultural or educational institutions seeking power and cultural dominance have presented the Métis narrative as an ‘organized identity’, a ‘change-averse set of institutions’<sup>ii</sup> based on “timeless” beliefs about ‘being Métis’ and “essentialist” practices that were ‘handed down fully formed in the past’<sup>iii</sup>. But a politicized identity built on these ideals has given “short shrift” to Métis culture, to accountable leadership, and to collective Métis communities/nations in all their historical fluidity and diversity.

Between the “official” cracks it has long been evident that forcing a system of beliefs on Métis-Canadian relations to ensure dependency to government, or courts that deny and limit Métis agency based on ‘a priori’ systemic beliefs and static restrictive views of history and identity have led to adverse consequences for Métis and for Canada.

The consequences have included the acrimonious ‘politics of identity,’ social media battles, exclusive rights-based ‘government recognition’ schemes and zero-sum contests for rights,

status, power, land and resources. Métis have struggled with a lack of democratic voice, human rights infringements and financial mismanagement. Government subjugation, land dispossession, suppression of freedom, usurping of customary law and the diminishment of the well-being of Métis people and communities in BC persists.

Canadians are hearing similar stories from First Nations in their attempts at reconciliation. One need only read the paper about pipelines, child welfare cases, fisheries and other flashpoints to recognize the same pattern; anger, betrayal, lack of respect, recognition and generosity.

Officially, First Nation leaders have tolerated a Métis presence in BC, apparently swayed by the exclusive and competitive 'politics of identity' and government recognition schemes. This is proving unsustainable, as there is a resurgence in Canada of kinship, self determination and shared relations within Métis communities. Events on-the-ground are proving that whether it's the ongoing negligence of indigenous child welfare in Canada or the lack of consultations for respect for rights on pipelines, both First Nations and Métis communities/nations have in common diminished freedom and compromised ways of life, what academic John Borrows refers to as "the freedom to live a good life"<sup>iv</sup> in their family and community, within indigenous constitutional traditions, where it matters.

Until now, all of this mess could somehow be dismissed or glossed over as abstract policy or arcane academic arguments: until SS.

The most vulnerable among us, a little girl whose identity has been protected by the use of the initials SS, has jolted many Canadians from their complacency and has left many wondering why government action or the silent complicity of officials or politicians has been so hostile and regressive. How could this oppression be practiced in Canada today, even in the face of a worldwide movement toward reconciliation between settler societies and indigenous nations.

There is something wrong, high handed, out of sorts with this decision, and people know it. How could a government, and by extension all Canadians, talk about reconciliation and then exhibit such a lack of compassion and humanity? How could they tear SS away from culture and community? How could Métis "employees" or "politicians" turn a blind eye to compassion and justice? How could so-called Métis leadership throw other Métis under a bus just to maintain a 'system of beliefs'?

The recklessness with which the government hurried the transition in the absence of any meaningful plan speaks about their desperate fear of losing control, of not being able to maintain their 'traditional' power and a status-quo that gave them unquestioned authority over Métis children. Why else would all levels of government ignore the United Nations declaration and take Métis people away from their culture? The Court's resistance to step in and set things right makes a mockery of the hopeful narrative of Métis right to life, integrity and security, as defined by the United Nations.

The irresponsible actions of governments, child and welfare agencies, and the courts also reflect a desperate need to stay faithful to the belief that they have the right to define what is in the best interests of Métis. Why else would they co-opt Métis organizations to rubberstamp a sham "transition plan" for SS, a "plan" that has been shown to be broken, and formed in blatant opposition to the legitimacy of the Métis community's cultural traditions and customary law? The Province's willingness to stay faithful to a philosophy that diminishes Métis freedom has opened deep hurts for real people who fear that one little life, a life that represents the future hopes and dreams of all Métis, is being set up to be destroyed.

It is almost as if the Liberal and Conservative Federal Governments have not received the news that Métis nations in Canada are self-determined and not bound by the government's manufactured history that viewed Métis as "irrational", "different", "inferior" and "dwindling away". As the example of SS has so clearly illustrated, Métis peoples can no longer stand idly by while governments continue to practice the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century idealism that Métis ways of life are "irrelevant", and the Métis nations themselves are "impediments in the way of progress".

Colonial narratives created by Canada's settler society have told us that Métis needed "to be improved, brought in to Confederation as individual Canadians." As a powerful political philosophy, turning Métis nations into individual rights bearing citizens opened the door to governments, courts, and Canadian institutions to co-opt Métis organizations and, in the process, 'freeze' Métis collective rights or deny collective rights altogether. Our subjugation, marginalization, and dispossession has led to a 21<sup>st</sup> century decision to systematically ignore the self-determined right to keep our own Métis children under our care.

A helpless child torn from the only family she knows breaks down to rubble the myth of a benevolent government looking out for the best interests of Métis peoples, and in full view of all Canadians who care to listen. As the well-being and freedom of a little child comes into focus, the deep exclusion, injustice, oppression and hypocrisy of the colonial myth is laid bare. The tragedy is that Métis communities/nations are, in the historic and contemporary sense, dynamic peoples with valid autonomous histories and cultures of their own. Had governments, agencies, and courts respected our historical difference, a different outcome could have been realized for SS, one that illustrated well that Métis nations can contribute to Canada as ongoing 'partners'.

The life of SS teaches all of us that the path forward in Canada is not in the expression of cheap platitudes, the hoarding of power, or the exercise of social control. Reconciliation lies in the willingness to make a wager on the efficacy of historical difference, a wager that sets aside conventional beliefs about the superiority and purity of Western culture and leads to Métis nations negotiating their co-existence with the rest of Canada as equals. We can be a better, more inclusive, more respectful and healthier nation if we walk with each other down an alternative pathway, a road less travelled in Canadian history, but one that always began with a healthy doubt in established certainties, like the ones that governed decisions regarding the removal of SS from her Métis community, and a willingness to find creative solutions to often

difficult and complex realities, like the kind that will be required to repatriate SS to her Métis family here in BC. Some pundits both outside and within the Métis community will say “it’s too late” or “we did all we could” or “we acted in the best interests of SS” and still others will pretend that one little girl’s future does not matter. We beg to differ.

We know that the fear, certainty, domination and coercion, that has characterized the young life and story of SS can be replaced by mutual respect, honouring of historical difference, and principles of co-existence if Canadians and indigenous nations choose to live out the narrative of reconciliation in ways that lead to well-being for all Métis people and to healing for the rest of Canada. #bringSShome

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<sup>i</sup> Brian McLaren, “The Great Spiritual Migration” 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> John Borrows, “Freedom and Indigenous Constitutionalism.” 6. Borrows talks about “he or she who owns or controls their associations.” 7

<sup>v</sup> McLaren, Ibid, 39. Brian McLaren refers to as the “gift of doubt”