

PMO condemns MP who called Louis Riel 'villain'

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WINNIPEG — The Prime Minister's Office is joining opposition politicians in condemning an Alberta Conservative MP for calling Manitoba founder and Metis leader Louis Riel a "villain" with blood on his hands who stood in the way of Confederation.

Edmonton East MP Peter Goldring made the remarks in a December pamphlet to "set the record straight" about Riel's actions in the late 1800s. In the newsletter, Goldring calls Riel a "villain" who is responsible for all those who died during the Northwest and Red River rebellions.

Although Riel is considered to be the founder of Manitoba, Goldring argues the Metis leader doesn't deserve to be seen as a Father of Confederation.

"Riel didn't 'Father' Confederation; he fought those who did," reads the brochure, originally posted on Goldring's website. It was removed on Friday.

"To unhang Louis Riel and to mount a statue to him on Parliament Hill would elevate anarchy and civil disobedience to that of democratic statesmanship."

The brochure was apparently prompted by Winnipeg New Democrat MP Pat Martin's private member's bill, introduced in November, which would have overturned Riel's treason conviction and formally recognized him as a Father of Confederation.

Goldring did not respond to calls for comment. But the Prime Minister's Office was quick to respond, condemning the brochure and its view of Riel.

"This document is absolutely not, in any way, an initiative of our government or our party," said Dimitri Soudas, a spokesman for Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in an emailed statement.

"This is a personal initiative of MP Goldring which we strongly disapprove of. Louis Riel is a historical and controversial figure. But he played an important role in the development of Canada and in the protection of the rights and culture of the Metis and Francophones in Canada."

Riel led two uprisings against the Canadian government -- the Red River Rebellion of 1869 and the Northwest Rebellion in 1885 -- as he fought to preserve the rights and culture of the Metis.

The provisional government he established in Manitoba negotiated the terms by which the province entered Confederation.

He was elected to Parliament three times but never took his seat since he lived in exile as a fugitive. He was arrested following the Northwest Rebellion in what is now Saskatchewan before being tried for high treason.

Although he was hanged as a traitor, Riel is regarded as a folk hero by many for his defence of both French-Canadian and Metis rights. In fact Manitoba just celebrated Louis Riel Day, a provincial statutory holiday held the third Monday in February.

"So many people today appear to know little of and care less for the sacrifice of those who fought against Riel and saved our country from disintegration so long ago," Goldring's brochure reads.

"It's a sad state of Canadian historical affairs when so many historically ill-informed persons busy themselves giving praise to Riel, naming new highways after him ... the villain who caused 80 to die while General Middleton and his veteran Canadian soldiers are insulted, ignored and marginalized."

David Chartrand, vice-president of the Metis National Council and head of the Manitoba Metis Federation, said those views show a complete ignorance of history. Riel not only protected the rights of the Metis but he also defended the West against raids from the United States, Chartrand said.

"I could send a Grade 6 student from Manitoba to debate with (Goldring) and they would beat him on history," Chartrand said. "It really reflects the old stigma and old politics of the past."

It's time Canada recognized the contributions of "a great hero" and formally named Riel a Father of Confederation, Chartrand said.

Martin said Goldring's view just "foments racism and hatred."

Riel was fighting for minority rights within Confederation and Canada should right that historical injustice in much the same way as it did when the federal government apologized to aboriginal residential school survivors, Martin said.

"To paint him as a traitor is to compound a historical injustice that is crying out to be remedied," Martin said. "Some redneck hillbilly in Alberta is not going to derail that project."

Winnipeg Liberal MP Anita Neville said the Conservative party should apologize to the Metis for what she calls a "smear campaign" against the founder of Manitoba.

Other historical figures like William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis Joseph Papineau also led armed rebellions to fight for responsible government but aren't singled out by the Conservatives, she said.

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