

President's Message – April 4

Let's talk frankly. The unprecedented and unanimous resignations of all non-government members of Manitoba Hydro's board last week were not about a negotiated agreement with the Manitoba Metis Federation ("MMF"). They were because Premier Pallister has failed—and continues to fail—all Manitobans.

Once again, the Premier has resorted to dishonesty and deflection to attempt to divide Manitobans. Like his "race war" comments against all Indigenous peoples last year, the Métis are now the focus of his coded messaging and contempt. He has called Riel's people—the proud founders of this great province—a "special interest group." These comments are offensive and unbecoming of a Manitoba Premier. We do not believe his comments reflect the nature of Manitobans or that of even his party.

Manitobans deserve to know the truth about the agreement we reached with Manitoba Hydro back in July 2017. It comes out of a difficult history where Métis were historically ignored and excluded from the reconciliation efforts being advanced with First Nations. This history was based on incorrect assumptions that we do not have rights or traditional lands in our own right. These assumptions led to many public disputes in regulatory processes because the MMF was not engaged by Manitoba Hydro or meaningfully consulted by the Crown.

In a series of successful court challenges over the last 15 years, the premise that Manitoba Métis do not have constitutionally protected rights or claims has been repeatedly dispelled. The Supreme Court of Canada has also confirmed that the Crown has a constitutional duty to consult and accommodate Métis rights and claims. This is now the law of the land. Anyone who wants to lead this province must respect these judicial decisions.

These legal developments, along with leadership on the part of Manitoba Hydro and the Manitoba Government, led to the Kwaysh-kin-na-mihk la paazh Agreement being signed with MMF in 2014. This agreement, which means "turning the page" in our Michif language, set out to build a new "forward-looking, productive and non-adversarial working relationship" and only required the Manitoba Government's involvement if the MMF and Manitoba Hydro were unable to reach the committed to "negotiated agreements."

With the Manitoba Government's full knowledge and periodic participation over 3 years, the MMF and Manitoba Hydro engaged in discussions and ultimately negotiations based on our 2014 agreement. We identified and quantified outstanding impacts from Bipole III as well as mutually agreeable ways to deal with future projects, including the Manitoba-Minnesota transmission line. Our negotiations were informed by identifying impacts and losses to Métis rights and land use, previous agreements with First Nations as well as existing compensation models used to compensate land owners, trappers and other groups.

These negotiations resulted in our July 2017 agreement—an arrangement expressly contemplated under the 2014 agreement—and that directly addresses Manitoba Hydro's need to manage its risks associated with project development. Finally, after years of effort, we achieved a settlement that "turned the page." Since July, we have relied on and implemented our agreement.

Our July 2017 agreement does not give away Métis rights in any way. And it does not limit the ability of the MMF to participate in regulatory hearings on future transmission projects. Instead, it creates an orderly process and certainty for the MMF and Manitoba Hydro on how to work together and minimize impacts on Métis rights going forward.

In keeping with subsection 17(2) of the Crown Corporations Governance and Accountability Act, the Pallister government has known about our agreement for over eight months. It is a falsehood to say that the government only became aware last week or that this was the cause of last week's upheaval at Manitoba Hydro.

It is also deceptive and incorrect to characterize the funding associated with this agreement as a "persuasion" payment. Based on direction from the courts and parties wanting to manage their risks in relation to resource developments, these types of agreements exist in every province and territory. There are thousands of these types of agreements in place between governments, industry and Indigenous groups. They advance collaboration and reconciliation on resource development across Canada.

Instead of commending Manitoba Hydro's leadership on our agreement that is a completely legal, reasonable and industry-acceptable agreement that provides direct benefits to Manitoba Hydro, ratepayers, and, most importantly to Métis citizens, the Premier chose to use us as a scapegoat for his own failings.

Instead of educating people on Indigenous rights or trying to bring Manitobans together to protect our natural resources and promote our economy, the Premier chose intolerance, division and misinformation about our people, our rights and our place in this province.

Instead of respecting our agreement and receiving the significant benefits of the certainty provided under it, the Premier wants to engage in misleading, rhetorical and ultimately ill-informed commentary that will create considerable uncertainty and additional costs for Manitoba Hydro and ratepayers.

Governments have a constitutional obligation to act honourably in their dealings with Indigenous peoples and the MMF will ensure that our agreement, lawfully made, is fully implemented. The antics of the Premier over the past week are disturbing and fly in the face of the honour of the Crown, good governance as well as sound public policy and fiscal decision-making.

Let's be clear: this is not a fight we were looking for, however, in the face of intolerance and disgraceful Crown behaviour, we are left with no choice but to protect our people, our rights and our legally binding agreements in order to make Manitoba a better place for all of us. We will ensure this Premier doesn't set reconciliation in this province back for yet another generation.

Meeqwetch,