

THE PLEA

Vol. 38 No. 1

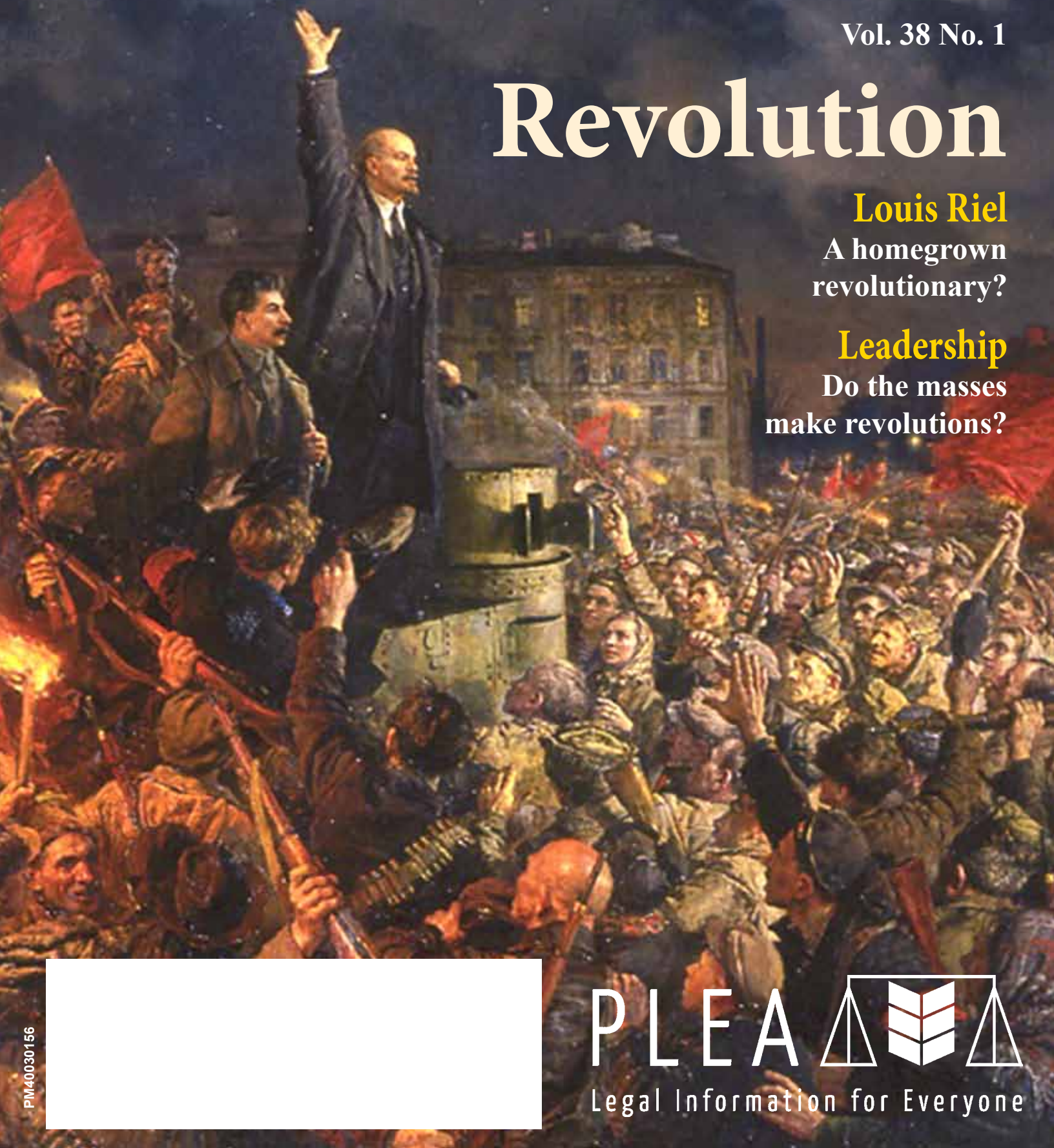
Revolution

Louis Riel

A homegrown
revolutionary?

Leadership

Do the masses
make revolutions?



PM40030156

PLEA 

Legal Information for Everyone

CONTENTS

3 What is Revolution?

When does society reach the boiling point?

6 Métis Resistance and the Revolutionary Bill of Rights

How did Canada twice find itself on the brink of revolution?

8 Revolutions: The Good and the Bad

Is there a good and bad in everything?

10 Revolution and Change

Is all-out revolution the only way to create change?

12 Sources and Resources

Don't stop learning now!

Revolutions change laws and institutions in society. Some revolutions—such as the French Revolution—have overthrown monarchies and established republics. Other revolutions—such as the Iranian Revolution—have replaced monarchies with theocracies. And other revolutions—such as the Russian Revolution—have replaced market-based societies with socialist-based societies. The list goes on. While every revolution is unique, one thing is clear: for as long as there have been governments, there have been revolutions.

But what does revolution mean? What can we learn from revolution? And is revolution the only way to achieve meaningful change? This issue of *The PLEA* explores the concept of revolution, pointing to some key revolutionary moments in history. It considers:

- how we define revolution,
- revolutionary attempts made in Canada,
- the good and bad that comes from revolution, and
- revolutionary and non-revolutionary ways to change laws and institutions in society.

Ideal for most any reader, *Revolution* is specifically designed to fulfill several requirements across Saskatchewan's social science curricula. It will also be of particular interest to people curious about laws, social change, and ideology.

What is Revolution?

When we think of revolution, we often think of systems of governments being overturned. However, revolution—even in the political sense—has not always meant political change.

What is **revolution**? There are revolutionary cell phones. Revolutionary breakfast cereals. Even improvements in pantyhose have been declared revolutionary. The word is thrown around so much, it almost has no meaning whatsoever.

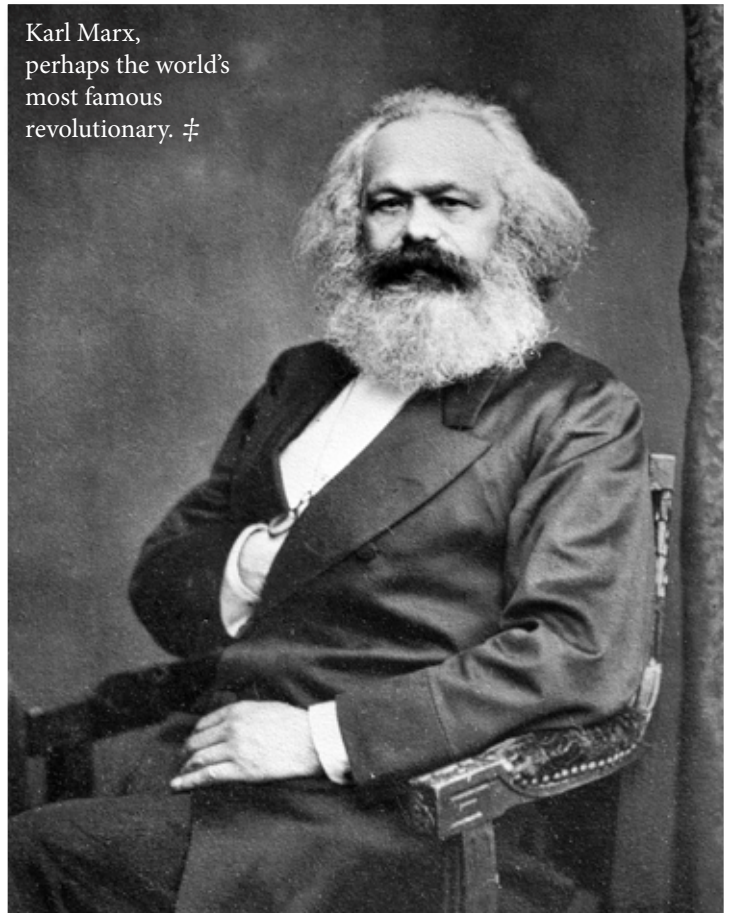
In politics and government, the word revolution is used a bit less loosely. It generally means the overturning of a government. However, even in political circles the precise meaning of revolution is still hard to nail down: it has been called an “elusive concept,” “one of the looser words,” and “ambiguous.” So to better-understand what a revolution is, we should look back at the word’s history and development.

History of the Word Revolution

The word revolution first appeared in 1393. Then, revolution only had one definition. It meant the apparent movement of the sun, moon, and planets around the earth. Shortly after, people began to apply the word revolution to other events where something returned to its original point. This led to revolution taking on the broader meaning of a completed cycle.

This definition of revolution—a completed cycle—soon found itself being applied to political events. When political events returned to where they began, it was a revolution. For example, in 1640 civil war broke out in England. King Charles I was overthrown and England

Karl Marx,
perhaps the world's
most famous
revolutionary. ‡



went from being a monarchy to being a republic. While we would call this a revolution today, at the time this was not a revolution. It only became a revolution when Charles II restored the monarchy in 1660: the political cycle had returned to where it began.

However, at the same time a new political definition of revolution was emerging: the overthrow of the existing system of government in favour of a new one. By the late 1700s, the word revolution permanently took this new meaning. Political theorist Hannah Arendt even pegs the precise moment that this happened: July 14th, 1789. On that day an angry mob stormed the Bastille, a Paris fortress and prison. When King Louis XVI asked “c’est une revolte?” he was told “non, Sire, c’est une revolution.”

A LOOK THROUGH
WORKS IN POLITICAL
STUDIES REVEALS
COUNTLESS
DEFINITIONS
OF REVOLUTION, ALL
SIMILAR BUT ALL
DIFFERING IN FINE
DETAILS.

Defining Revolution Today

Since the word revolution became synonymous with political change, political theorists have tried to perfect the word’s definition. A look through works in political studies reveals countless definitions of revolution, all similar but all differing in fine details. It is impossible to say who has come up with the best definition

of revolution. However, one recent definition stands out.

Political theorist Jack Goldstone examined hundreds of events characterised as revolutionary. In doing this, he found that revolutions share three elements:

- (a) efforts to change the political regime that draw on a competing vision (or visions) of a just order,
- (b) a notable degree of informal or formal mass mobilisation, and
- (c) efforts to force change through noninstitutionalised actions such as mass demonstrations, protests, strikes, or violence.

Goldstone condensed these findings into a definition of revolution: “an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in a society, accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilisation and noninstitutionalised actions that undermine existing authorities.”

This definition gives us an idea of what a revolution is, and tells us what needs to happen for something to be declared a revolution.

History has been witness to countless events that have fulfilled Goldstone’s definition of revolution. These events dramatically changed the course of history. For example, the American Revolution overturned the British supremacy in present-day North America. The French Revolution overturned the French monarchy and paved the way for a republic with

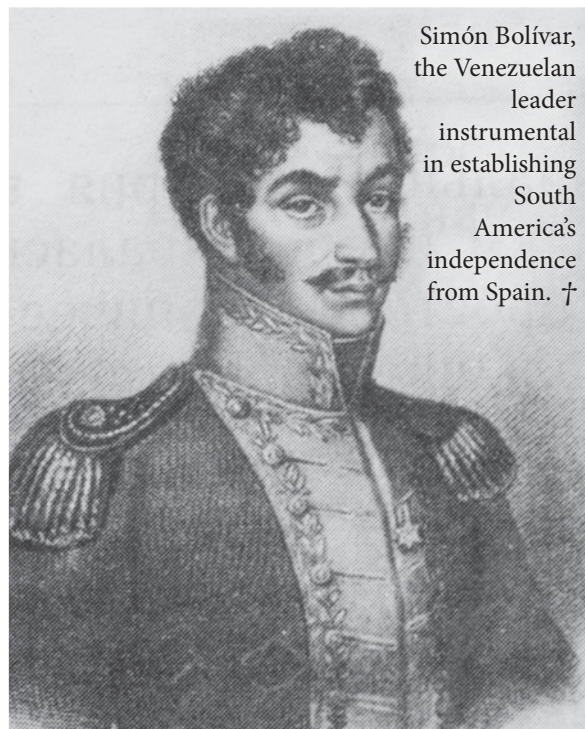
a uniform system of laws. And the Cuban Revolution overturned the American-supported Batista dictatorship and replaced it with a socialist government.

There has never been a full-scale revolution on Canadian soil that has transformed our political institutions and the justifications for political authority. However, the Métis uprisings in 1869 and 1885 did have revolutionary aspects. We will look more closely at them on pages 6 and 7.

What Causes Revolution?

Knowing what revolution is, we can now ask what causes revolution? There are many theories out there.

Relative Deprivation. One broad-reaching theory is relative deprivation. People in a society come to believe that they are being deprived of things to which they are entitled, such as money, justice,



Simón Bolívar,
the Venezuelan
leader
instrumental
in establishing
South
America’s
independence
from Spain. †

status, or rights and privileges. Often, these deprived people see others in their society who are not being deprived. This frustration makes them amenable to joining revolutionary movements.

Crisis of the State. Crisis of the state theory suggests that revolutions happen when the state is subjected to intensified outside pressures. These outside pressures could include industrial progress that alters the economic make-up of society, or repeated losses at war that weaken the state's authority. When the state is unable to effectively respond to these outside factors, it can enter a crisis period. The crisis period opens the door for revolutionary movements to take hold.

Dis-synchronisation of Values. Dis-synchronisation occurs when society's elite begin to hold values that are out-of-sync with the wider population. The elite can include politicians, bureaucrats, business

leaders, intellectuals, and mainstream media. When society becomes dis-synchronised, people become confused and disoriented about what value system is best. This leads the masses to be open to conversion to new revolutionary movements.

These are just three theories about what causes revolution. Other theories exist, and no single theory offers a definitive explanation for why revolution begins. However, it does seem clear that if the state cannot or does not adapt to meet the needs of the masses (or simply stomps out discontent), revolutionaries will have the opportunity to overturn the state and reconstruct it in their vision. 🗑️

THINK

1. Look at the three suggested causes of revolutions: relative deprivation, crisis of the state, and dis-synchronisation of values.
 - a) Do you see any or all of these problems today?
 - b) If these problems exist today, do you think that a revolution could break out in the near future? Why or why not?
2. Revolution theorist Chalmers Johnson believes that successful revolutionary forces require a “general ideological appeal that will bring the revolutionary party the support of the people.” Why is general ideological appeal key to a successful revolution?
3. Political historian Isaac Kramnick says “revolutionaries, much to the dismay of their sympathisers, have usually devoted as much time and energy debating the nature of revolution as they have in efforts to bring one about.” Why is it important to debate the nature of revolution before engaging in an actual revolution?

DEFINING IDEOLOGY

When there is a revolution, a new ideology comes in to replace the old one. As political historian Isaac Kramnick said, revolutions are “a sustained and self-conscious effort to reconstruct society along theoretical principles provided by some vision of an ideal order, an ideology. This is what revolution has meant since the late eighteenth century.”

So then what is ideology? Political theorists generally agree that every ideology is made up of three elements:

- Critique – a criticism of society as it exists
- Ideal – a vision of a better society
- Means – the method to achieve the better society

Together, these elements form an ideology. Take this simplified example: a traditional Marxist would *critique* society because workers (proletariat) are exploited by rich owners (bourgeoisie). Their *ideal* would be a society with no state and no private property, where workers—not the bourgeoisie—control the means of production. The *means* to achieve this is overthrowing the bourgeoisie and dissolving the state.

If a revolution is successful, then the laws, institutions, and very structure of society will change to conform to the new ideology.

Métis Resistance and Revolution

Canada has never experienced an all-out revolution. However, at least twice in our history we have been on the brink of revolution.

Canada's best-known resistance movements are the 1869 Red River Resistance and the 1885 North West Resistance. Both movements were put down before all-out revolutions took root.

The Red River Resistance was a reaction to the Canadian government's take-over of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company. The Métis and their allies had settlements in the area, but the government proceeded as if the land was empty. The government surveyed the land for redistribution, leading residents to fear that their land would be taken away. Unable to secure title to their land, resistors under the leadership of Louis Riel seized Fort Garry and declared a provisional government. The provisional government was able to secure land and cultural rights in the *Manitoba Act*, the law that created the province of Manitoba.

Unfortunately, Canada failed to keep many of its promises. Rights written into the *Manitoba Act* were not fully respected, residents lost land that they had rightfully settled, and Riel was not given amnesty. As a result, many Métis simply moved further west and Riel went into exile.

Riel spent his years in exile planning a takeover of the North West. He even went so far as to ask American politicians for help. His end-goal

was a new province or country that was religious in nature and loyal to the British Crown.

As Canada expanded further westward, it continued to trample the rights of Indigenous, white, and Métis people living in the North West. The people in and around St. Laurent (near Duck Lake) were particularly neglected and mistreated by the Canadian government. So they invited Riel to lead a new resistance movement. Riel first attempted political negotiations, but the Canadian government continued with its obstinance. Riel determined that the only path forward was to set up another provisional government. A Revolutionary Bill of Rights was written, and armed forces under the military leadership of Gabriel Dumont seized the church in Batoche. The goal was to take the

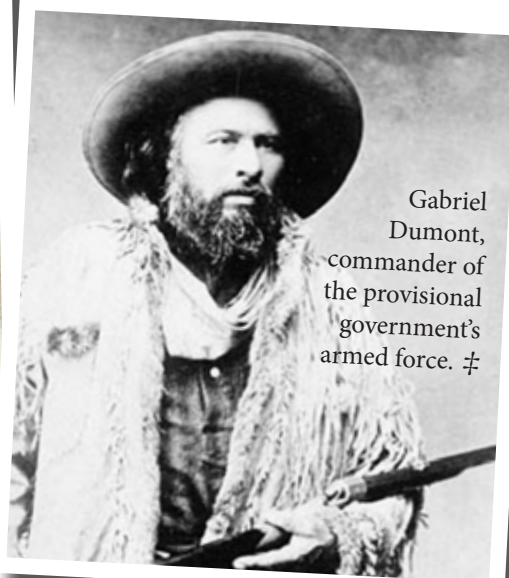
whole Saskatchewan River Valley and force the Canadian government to negotiate in good faith.

Dumont's strong military leadership sometimes conflicted with Riel's insistence that the fight be as bloodless as possible. As well, despite support from leaders such as Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear)—the Cree chief who like Riel preferred restraint over violence—the Métis were largely left to fight military battles on their own. Many Indigenous people, and almost all settlers, and even some Métis did not support the provisional government. Ultimately, the resistance was outnumbered and out-firepowered by the Canadian soldiers.

Riel surrendered on May 15th, 1885. In a trial that is still a source of controversy, Riel was found guilty of treason. He was executed on November 16th, 1885. 🇩🇪



Pitikwahanapiwiyn (Poundmaker).
"The Peacemaker" Cree chief resisted taking up arms during the North West Resistance despite attacks by Canadian soldiers. ✚



Gabriel Dumont,
commander of
the provisional
government's
armed force. ✚

THINK

1. If a revolt, uprising, or resistance movement gains critical acceptance from the great mass of people, it can become a full-scale revolution. Review the concept of revolution on pages 3, 4, and 5, and the Revolutionary Bill of Rights. Was Riel attempting a full-scale revolution?
2. Recall that successful revolutions must have a “general ideological appeal that will bring the revolutionary party the support of the people.”
 - a) Does the Revolutionary Bill of Rights have general ideological appeal?
 - b) Not everyone in the North West—including most settlers and many Indigenous people—supported the provisional government. Why do you think this is?
3. Historian Margaret MacMillan says that “We don’t like ambiguity—we want people to be either thoroughly bad or thoroughly good. We want heroes... but I think you have to look at a person’s whole record.”
 - a) Discuss this statement.
 - b) The story of Louis Riel is complex. Opinions on him vary. Look more deeply into Riel and his life’s work. How would you assess his whole record?

RIEL’S REVOLUTIONARY BILL OF RIGHTS

The North West Provisional Government’s Revolutionary Bill of Rights was likely written by William Jackson. He was a labour activist and Riel’s secretary.

1. That the half-breeds of the Northwest Territories be given grants similar to those accorded to the half-breeds of Manitoba by the Act of 1870.
2. That patents be issued to all half-breed and white settlers who have fairly earned the right of possession of their farms.
3. That provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan be forthwith organised with legislatures of their own, so that the people may be no longer subjected to the despotism of Mr. Dewdney.
4. That in these new provincial legislatures, while representation according to population shall be the supreme principle, the Métis shall have a fair and reasonable share of representation.
5. That the offices of trust throughout these provinces be given to the residents of the country, as far as practicable, and that we denounce the appointment of disreputable outsiders and repudiate their authority.
6. That this region be administered for the benefit of the actual settler, and not for the advantage of the alien speculator.
7. That better provision be made for the Indians, the parliamentary grant to be increased and lands set apart as an endowment for the establishment of hospitals and schools for the use of whites, half-breeds, and Indians, at such places as the provincial legislatures may determine.
8. That all lawful customs and usages which obtain among the Métis be respected.
9. That the Land Department of the Dominion Government be administered as far as practicable from Winnipeg, so that the settlers may not be compelled as heretofore to go to Ottawa for the settlement of questions in dispute between them and the land commissioner.
10. That the timber regulations be made more liberal, and that the settlers be treated as having rights in this country.

Louis Riel, leader of the Red River and North West Resistance. ‡



Source: Maggie Siggins, *Riel: A Life of Revolution*, p. 452.

REVOLUTION: THE

No revolution has unfolded smoothly. Good and bad things have resulted...

American Revolution

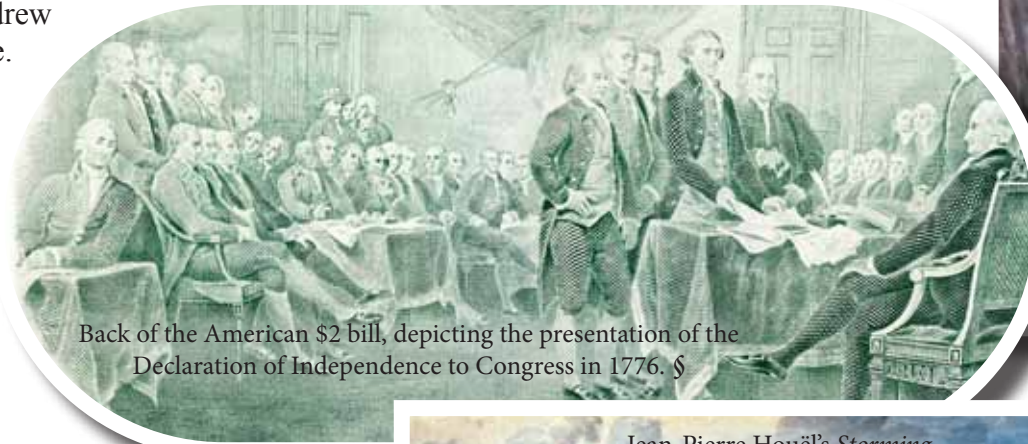
When England's parliament imposed taxes and oppressive laws on its 13 American colonies, so-called "Patriots" formed in protest. Their rallying cry was "No taxation without representation." In 1776 the colonies declared independence, which launched the American Revolutionary War between England and the rebel colonies. Battles continued until the signing of the *Treaty of Paris* in 1783, when England withdrew and granted the United States independence.

The Good

The U.S. Declaration of Independence declared that "all men are created equal." This ideal came out of the Enlightenment, the 18th century embrace of reason and science. Countless minority groups have subsequently used this ideal to help make their case for equality under American law.

The Bad

People loyal to the British were sometimes persecuted by revolutionary mobs. A favourite torture method was to pour hot tar on Loyalists, cover them in feathers, and parade them on the streets. Persecution was one reason why about 40,000 Loyalists fled to Canada.



Back of the American \$2 bill, depicting the presentation of the Declaration of Independence to Congress in 1776. §

French Revolution

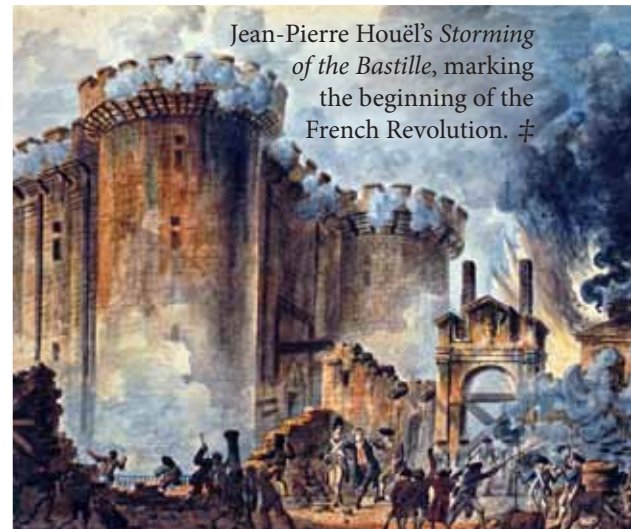
When years of overspending caught up to the French monarchy, the government raised taxes on average citizens to make up the shortfall. Despite higher taxes, many citizens were still left to starve in years of poor harvests. Citizens, tired of being exploited by the ruling class, rioted. The monarchy was overthrown, and a tumultuous power struggle ensued. The French Revolution ended with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte's dictatorship.

The Good

The French Revolution established liberty, equality, and fraternity as western values. French statesperson Dupont de l'Eure may have best-summarised how these words connect: "Any man aspires to liberty, to equality, but he cannot achieve it without the assistance of other men, without fraternity."

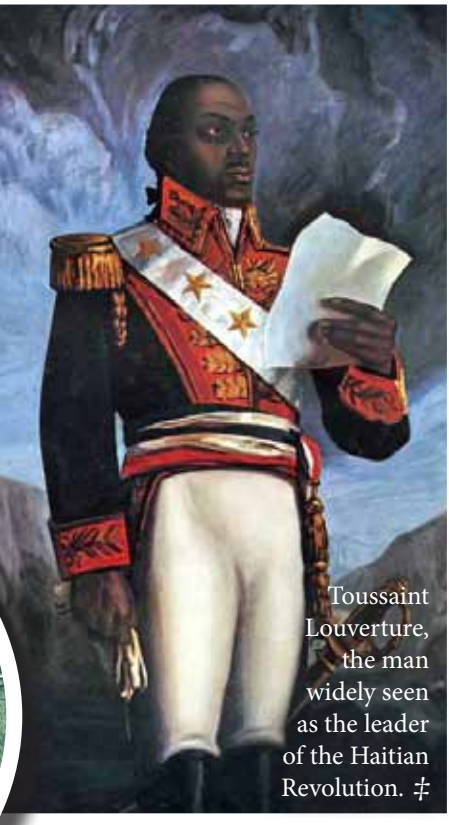
The Bad

After Louis XVI was executed, no group could hold onto power for long. Every new government would kill the politicians and supporters of the previous government. At its worst, 16,000 people were sentenced to death during the 9-month-long Reign of Terror in 1793 and 1794.



Jean-Pierre Houël's *Storming of the Bastille*, marking the beginning of the French Revolution. ‡

GOOD AND THE BAD



Toussaint Louverture, the man widely seen as the leader of the Haitian Revolution. *f*

Haitian Revolution

When Saint-Domingue's slaves realised they could overthrow their French oppressors due to sheer numbers—slaves outnumbered free people 6 to 1—revolts broke out in 1791. The conflict became a long and bloody full-scale revolution, involving not just France but also Spain and England who had interests in the Caribbean. By January 1st, 1804, Europeans were driven out. Independence was declared, and the country was given the indigenous name Haiti.

The Good

The Haitian Revolution was the first-ever slave uprising to result in an independent nation controlled by former slaves. It helped inspire slave rebellions in the United States and British colonies and helped to pave the way for the abolition of slavery.

The Bad

The initial slave insurrection revealed how human nature can sometimes be disappointing. Slave leaders—believing failure was imminent—proposed to Saint-Domingue's ruling elite that they would order their followers back to the plantations in exchange for their own personal freedom.

Cuban Revolution

When Fulgencio Batista seized power in a 1952 military coup of Cuba, a young lawyer named Fidel Castro put forth constitutional arguments to remove the dictator. Courts rejected the arguments. Seeing no alternative, Castro founded a paramilitary group in 1953 and launched an unsuccessful uprising. Following time in prison, Castro regrouped in Mexico with 80 supporters. They returned to Cuba in 1956, gained the support of locals, and won a three-year-long guerilla war.



A mural in Havana supporting the Cuban Revolution. *f*

The Good

The revolution enshrined massive social reforms into the Cuban constitution. Cuba outlaws discrimination based on race, skin colour, sex, national origin, or religion; and guarantees free access to such things as education and educational materials, sports and recreation, and health and dental care.

The Bad

Cuba's revolutionary constitution guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. However, practising these freedoms must "[keep] with the objectives of a socialist society." This caveat has created serious constraints on what can be officially said in public in Cuba.

Revolution and Change

Power concedes nothing without a demand, as the escaped slave and social reformer Frederick Douglass told us. But is all-out revolution the only way to gain power and create change?

There are many reasons why revolutions take hold. As discussed on page 4, some theorists believe that revolutions are the result of the state being too weak to maintain authority: this weakness paves the way for revolutionaries to move in and fill the power void. Other theorists believe that revolutions happen because revolutionaries are effective organisers: they convince a critical mass of people that things have to change.

Regardless of what causes revolution, revolution brings about massive societal change. As theorist Crane Brinton says, revolutionaries

**REGARDLESS OF WHAT
CAUSES REVOLUTION,
REVOLUTION BRINGS
ABOUT MASSIVE
SOCIETAL CHANGE.**

champion a “program to change things, institutions, laws, not just to convert people.”

Revolutions may be completely justified. Revolutions may also be on the right side of history. However, revolutions do not always unfold in orderly and just ways. Are there other ways to change institutions and laws without engaging in an all-out revolution?

Change in a Liberal Democracy

Canada is a liberal democracy. Liberal democracies have formal processes to change laws and institutions. There are even processes to change the constitution. Of course, changing laws and institutions—especially substantial change—is not always easy. But it is possible.

A vital, early step in creating change is to convince a critical mass of people that change is needed. The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees our right to freedom of expression and freedom of association,

within reasonable limits. In other words, so long as we are not violent or promoting hate, we are free to advocate for change and we are free to form or join groups that collectively push for that change.

Some of the tools we have include lobbying elected representatives; joining or forming a political party; creating petitions; running for public office, joining or forming public interest groups; or simply expressing your ideas in public

forums. All of these are proven methods for creating change.

If efforts convince a critical mass of people that changes to our laws or institutions need to happen, then there are procedures in place to change laws and institutions.

As one example of how to create change within our constitutional framework, consider what is probably the most dramatic change in government to ever happen in Canada: the rise of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). While the rise of the CCF was not a full-blown revolution, it achieved many dramatic changes to our laws and institutions. Many of these changes remain in place today.

The CCF can be traced back to early left-wing politics in Canada. Several radical members of Canada’s parliament and their supporters grouped together to form a new political party in 1932, the CCF. In 1933, they wrote the Regina Manifesto that outlined their ideology:

Critique: wealth and power was concentrated in the hands of a selfish few. This left the great mass of people poor and insecure.

Ideal: replacing the capitalist system with a system without class

domination and exploitation, where economic planning and genuine democratic self-government would prevail.

Means: implementing universal health care, public ownership of key industries including utilities and mass transportation, reduction of working hours, increases in social assistance, and the creation of cooperatives, to name just a few of their means to change society.

To implement these policies, the CCF presented these ideas to the people and then ran for public office. CCF members won seats in federal and provincial elections.

Finally, they formed government in Saskatchewan. With a platform inspired by the Regina Manifesto, they won 53% of the vote and 47 out of 52 seats in the 1944 provincial election.

The CCF victory was not an all-out revolution. They never replaced capitalism or overturned our entire system of government. However, the CCF changed many laws and even a few institutions. And unlike so many revolutions throughout history, dramatic change was achieved without killings, persecuting street mobs, or political prisoners. 🇺🇸

THINK

1. Recall that successful revolutions must have a “general ideological appeal that will bring the revolutionary party the support of the people.”
 - a) How is this different than what any political party must do to win an election?
 - b) Would you support a party that proposed to dismantle and rebuild our laws and institutions? Why or why not?
 - c) Is it prudent to support people who advocate dismantling our laws and institutions without knowing exactly what they propose as an alternative?
2. Many people are not looking to overthrow our entire system of government. They simply want to change particular laws or institutions.
 - a) Have you seen changes in laws or institutions? How did that change come about?
 - b) Are there laws or institutions you think need to change? How would you change them?
3. Do you think society is on the verge of revolution today? If so, revolution to what?
4. Do you agree or disagree with Crane Brinton’s claim that “the masses do not make revolutions”?

THE MASSES DO NOT MAKE REVOLUTION

Revolution theorist Crane Brinton did not believe that the great mass of people are the force that drives revolution. He said in *Anatomy of Revolution* that “the masses do not make revolutions.” Instead, Brinton believed that revolutions are coordinated by a guiding force:

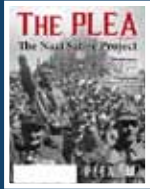
This is as true of the Bolsheviks as of the Puritans and the Jacobins. Bums, hoboos, the mob, the rabble, the riffraff, may be recruited to do the street fighting and the manor burning of revolutions, but they emphatically do not make, do not run, revolutions—not even proletarian revolutions.

What this means is that when an uprising or revolt moves from a small movement of discontented people into an outright revolution, the great mass of people who support the revolution are being coordinated by organised groups: revolutionaries. Brinton claimed that these revolutionaries have their own ideological purpose in mind, and the revolutionaries steer the masses so that they can achieve their own goals.



Sources and Resources

PLEA HAS A HOST OF RESOURCES FOR
THINKING MORE ABOUT REVOLUTION.
CHECK THEM OUT AT PLEA.ORG



The Nazi Satire Project

Learn about how revolution in 1930s Germany came from the extreme right.



Hammurabi's Code

Learn about the origin of western legal systems and how they compare to Indigenous law.



The Rule of Law

Learn about how the law forms the basis for our system of government in Canada.



Municipalities Matter

Learn about the various ways that you can create change at the local level of government.



Our Government, Our Election

Learn about government, politics, and elections in Saskatchewan.

HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE
RESOURCES THAT HELPED INFORM THIS
ISSUE OF *THE PLEA*.

Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. Penguin Books, 1990.

Brinton, Crane. *The Anatomy of Revolution*. Vintage Books, 1938, 1952, 1965.

Duncan, Mike. *Revolutions*. revolutionspodcast.com

Foster, Keith and Nelle Oosterom. "Shifting Reil-ity: The 1885 North-West Rebellion. Canada's History." February 13, 2014. www.canadashistory.ca/Explore/First-Nations,-Inuit-Metis/Shifting-Riel-ity-The-1885-North-West-Rebellion

Gurr, Ted. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton UP, 1971.

Goldstone, Jack. "Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 4, 2001, pp. 139-187.

Johnson, Chalmers. *Revolutionary Change*. Second Edition. Stanford UP, 1982.

Kramnick, Isaac. "Reflections on Revolution: Definition and Explanation in Recent Scholarship." *History and Theory*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1972, pp. 26-63.

Schwarzmantel, John. *The Age of Ideology: Political Ideologies from the American Revolution to Postmodern Times*. New York UP, 1998.

Siggins, Maggie. *Riel: A Life of Revolution*. HarperPerennial, 2003.

Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge UP, 1979.