

Métis status hard to define

by Teresa Amy

OTTAWA - A Métis Circle Special Consultation convened by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples hopes to clarify issues of concern of Métis people.

The special consultation to be held April 5 and April 6 in Ottawa will deal with various issues including recognition of Métis, Métis women and community decision making, Métis self government, and aboriginal and treaty rights of Métis.

"One of our purpose for the round table is to define Métis," said Don Kelly, media relations officer for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People. "Presently there are many different interpretations of Métis."

Coming forward with a definition of Métis is a sensitive topic, Kelly said. He added that people get offended when they are asked to define who and what they are.

"If you are a Mohawk, you don't ask what is a Mohawk? Many Métis say we are what we are, we know who we are in our hearts, why should we put it on paper?"

Kelly said finding a definition for Métis will be a problem because by defining people can get excluded. Kelly added that by not putting barriers on membership "anyone can claim status."

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People has not put forth their own definition of Métis, said Kelly, but a document given to the commission by the Métis National Council

gave some criteria for membership with their organization.

"The criteria included proven ancestry," said Kelly. "The Métis consider themselves descendants of Sioux, Cree and Ojibwa natives and French, English and Irish settlers in the Red River area."

The Métis are recognized in the Constitution Act, 1982, as one of the three Aboriginal Peoples of Canada who possess Aboriginal and Treaty rights, but neither the federal nor most provincial governments have acknowledged this fact.

One problem concerning Métis status, said Kelly, is unlike aboriginal Canadians who have been registered so people can trace their ancestry there has been very little in the way of registration for Métis.

"The government has never taken registration for Métis," Kelly said. "People who think they are Métis will have to trace their family tree to find out if they are or not."

Kelly said there is a possibility of creating a central registry system so people can find out who Métis people are, where they are and be able to get a population figure on their numbers.

Kelly said that many people are not aware of Eastern Métis who's heritage is unique from the Western Métis.

"This is a new area for the Commission," he said. "Some of the Commissioners weren't aware there were Métis in the eastern areas of the country."