

## Loretta Ross is one of the most significant bridge-builders in MB



the Late Chief George Barker.

The colonial impact on the role of First Nations women has had inter-generational impacts on the role of our First Nations women, diminishing women through a European patriarchal lens to a subservient position within the family, community and nation. It is a space that the First Nations women are working to conscientiously reclaim as we work to restore our leadership and governance systems. Loretta's appointment to the position of Treaty Commissioner in the Manitoba Region is evidence of this positive reclamation movement to empower Indigenous women.

Loretta naturally amplifies the role of women and all peoples within First Nations Treaty making processes in the way in which she aims to engage people in learning and understanding the Treaties. She challenges the way in which we learn by stating: "We get caught up in valuing what is written in books and the written word and we have to look beyond this form of teaching". She emphasizes the need to look to the Elders and Knowledge Keepers and taking the time to sit and listen to them. Her vision is to work with the Council of Elders, the First Nations leadership and committed partners toward establishing a Treaty Knowledge Centre that will use a relational pedagogy and experiential learning approach to help others learn about the Treaties. "You will hear about Treaties from the Elders in the oral tradition, and perhaps in your own language, all the while improving relationships with those that you learn with and from".

She believes learning about Treaties must be steeped within culture, traditions and protocols. This way of learning can be transformative. Enhanced Treaty knowledge and improved Treaty relationships can significantly improve Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples and our relationship to the land and waters. In looking back at the Treaties, we wanted our children to be safe within a changing landscape and grounded in our own ways of being and doing. We agreed that we would mutually benefit from the Treaty relationship and would have an ongoing mutual obligation to sustain this relationship. Unfortunately, there was so much left out in the written Treaty documents including First Nations' worldviews, ways of being and relating. Treaties were not about land surrender, from a First Nations' lens they were about relationships and this is an ongoing unresolved historical tension. Public education through a

Treaty education process is assisting in helping to understand the original spirit and intent of the mutually beneficial Treaty relationship. Loretta believes that "This important work is part of the broader reconciliation work that everyone needs to contribute to, so that we can work toward arriving at a place of mutual understanding. It will take every Manitoban, every Canadian to achieve this goal".

Historically the Treaty Commissioner served on behalf of the Crown, tasked with the responsibility of bringing First Nations to the table to sign on to the Treaties that would open the floodgates to new settlers who wished to expand settlement into these territories. "I don't think Canadians realize how significant the Treaties are and the toughest part of the job is clarifying and strengthening this message to impart the understanding that Treaties were made over a period of time through discussions, ceremony, and feasting celebrations", she says. She is working to change the way we teach about the Treaties, approaching institutions to assert that "teaching about Treaties is more than offering course, a chapter in a book or a unit in a history course". We must examine the pedagogy, the way we bring people into knowing about the Treaties. We can't learn everything from a book but seem to be trapped in valuing western institutional ways of learning and in doing so we devalue First Nations ways of teaching and learning.

It is my opinion that Canada can do better. Manitoba has the highest number of apprehensions in the entire world and the highest rate of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls within a specific territory. From a Treaty lens, we have not lived up to our agreements as Canadians to care for each other and for the children. As Loretta has said, "We must see that the Treaty relationship is part of our common story as Canadians. We agreed to mutually benefit from the Treaties with a mutual obligation to ensure well-being for each other and more importantly for the future generations of our children". This is each our responsibility as Canadians and as Treaty people. That is what is meant when we say we are all Treaty people. Non-Indigenous peoples must recognize the opportunities afforded to them by the Canadian Indian Treaties and live up to the Treaty promises.

We can't forget that settlers back then and newcomers now could not settle into these territories without the consent of First Nations

peoples through a Treaty-making process as outlined in the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Treaties were made between First Nations and the Crown allowing new immigrants to settle into these territories. Unfortunately, we have not learned about Treaties in our Canadian public schools leaving the average Canadian with little or no knowledge or understanding to appreciate the opportunities afforded to them from the Treaties, but Loretta aims to change that. Canada is still a young country, we only celebrated Canada 150 Anniversary in 2017. And while Manitobans look to celebrate Manitoba 150 this year, Loretta is gearing up to celebrate over 150 years of Treaty making including 150 years since Treaty #1 and #2 in 2021. Treaties afford newcomers the ability to plant roots within our territories, to prosper economically and socially to the benefit of their families and future generations. This truth must be illuminated and the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples must improve by learning about the Treaties.

With the increase in immigration, it concerns me that newcomers are that much more removed from the original intent of the Treaties as their family roots do not run as deep as families that may have been here for five, six or seven generations. Loretta's message is that "all Manitobans and Canadians have a Treaty story. We all came from somewhere; we just need to reconnect to our personal histories and find the threads that connect us to the first time we came to the First Nations ancestral lands in what is now Canada. Part of the reconciliation moving forward is to become familiar with Treaty terminology – Treaties were made with First Nations peoples and the Crown, not Aboriginal/ Indigenous peoples and the Crown. My question to people is 'Do you know your Treaty story?' It is a conversation starter. It is a reconciliation question".

But there is hope, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action 93 and 94 call upon the federal government, to revise the information kit for newcomers to Canada and its citizenship oath to include statements about the Treaties. The amendment to the Oath is meant to signal a commitment to reconciliation, and to a renewed relationship with Indigenous peoples based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership. The new language adds references to Canada's Constitution and the Aboriginal and Treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. Taking the Oath of

Citizenship is the last step before receiving Canadian citizenship. It is a solemn promise to follow the laws of Canada and to perform the new citizen's duties as a Canadian citizen. The new Oath would state:

"I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada, including the Constitution, which recognizes and affirms the Aboriginal and treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, and fulfil my duties as a Canadian citizen".

After looking online, the new citizenship Oath has not been updated on the Government's website but nonetheless it is promising and would support Loretta's effort to educate about the Treaties and celebrate the upcoming Treaty No 1 and Treaty No 2 celebration in 2021.

I look forward to supporting Loretta Ross in her efforts to renew the Treaty relationship and to support her role as a First Nations leader.

The Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba is located at 275 Hargrave in Winnipeg. They offer educational workshops, a Speaker's Bureau, along with various educational resources. The Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba began as a partnership between the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the federal government. It runs as an arm's-length organization from the political bodies. Dennis Whitebird former Grand Chief of Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and Jamie Wilson, former Deputy Minister of Manitoba Education and Training were among the first Treaty Commissioners before Loretta assumed the role in May of 2017.

This is the first in a series of articles by Rebecca Chartrand, where she will highlight some amazing Indigenous women who are sharing in the responsibility to guide our nations back to a place of well-being for our children sake and for generations yet to come.

