



## Canada becomes a nation

The confederation of the British North American colonies into the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867, was the result of fortuitous circumstances, visionary leadership, political compromise, economic realities, cultural imperatives and external pressures. The move to confederate did not gain momentum until the 1860s when it became a serious consideration. The US civil war provided much of the impetus but not all of it. The 1840 Act of Union combined Upper and Lower Canada into a single colony, the Province of Canada and was divided into Canada East (Lower Canada) and Canada West (Upper Canada). Canada East was dissatisfied with the arrangement and wanted its own government to better serve and protect the French Canadian majority. The Maritime colonies of Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were being pressured by the British Colonial office to amalgamate into one big colony with one legislature, a cost-saving measure eliminating three smaller colonial legislatures.

These pragmatic considerations connected with a greater vision of a Canadian nation that would someday stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans (*a mari usque ad mare*—Canada's national motto). Led by Sir John A. Macdonald, his French-Canadian colleague—George Étienne Cartier—and George Brown, these “Fathers of Confederation” provided the determination, imagination, dedication and political skill necessary to make confederation a reality.

The move to confederation started gathering steam when the British Parliament adopted the key recommendations contained in Durham's Report in the Act of Union of 1840. Upper and Lower Canada were combined into a single colony—“The Province of Canada” with a single legislature that combined the two districts of Canada East (Lower Canada) and Canada West (Upper Canada) with the intention of assimilated French-Canadians into English Canadian culture. The system of

**A mari usque ad mare** is the Canadian national motto. The phrase comes from the Latin Psalm 72:8, which reads “Et dominabitur a mari usque ad mare, et a flumine usque ad terminos terrae” (King James Bible: “He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth”).

### Sir John A. Macdonald (1815–1891)

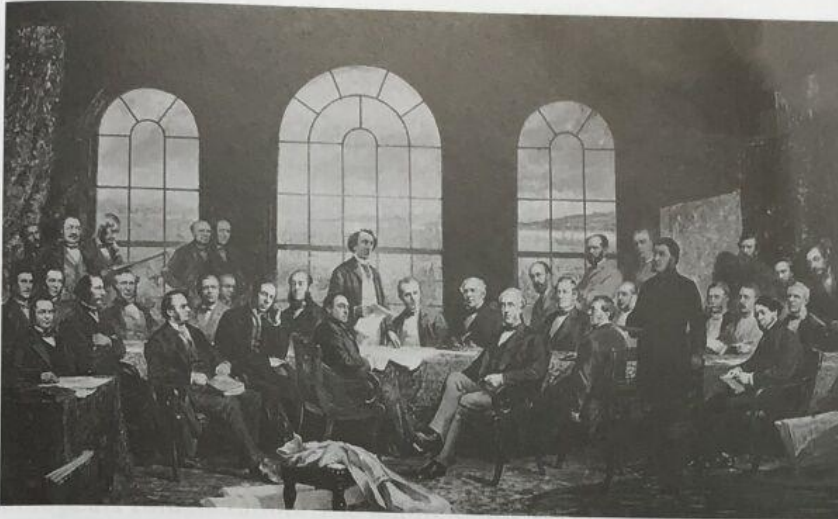
Sir John A. Macdonald is known as “The Father of Canada”. A brilliant and charismatic politician, Macdonald's “National Dream” was to unite the colonies and create a nation from sea to sea. Born in 1815, in Glasgow, Scotland, he emigrated to Canada in 1820, where he began training for a legal career at 15. He was called to the bar in 1836. He was conservative in outlook but willing to fight for liberal principles. In 1843, he entered city politics, the provincial assembly from 1844. He held several cabinet posts, and was premier of Canada, virtually uninterrupted, from 1856–64. With George Brown, the leader of the Clear Grits (the forerunners to the Liberal Party of Canada) and George-Étienne Cartier (leader of the Parti Bleu, the Conservative Party in Canada East), Macdonald formed the Great Coalition in 1864. Together these three men brought about confederation. Macdonald became Canada's first prime minister in 1867–73 and 1878–91. He lived long enough to witness his dream of a sea-to-sea nation become reality.



### George Étienne Cartier (1814–1873)

George Étienne Cartier was a lawyer, railway promoter, politician and a key Father of Confederation. He fought with the Patriotes in 1837, escaped to US and was pardoned in 1838. He ran for office in 1848 and was instrumental in forging the coalition between the Macdonald's Conservative Party and the French-Canadian Parti Bleu, leading to confederation. He was Macdonald's trusted confidant and ally, successfully negotiating the purchase of Rupert's Land (Western Canada). His death in 1873 was a deep blow to the Conservative Party.





*The Fathers of Confederation in 1864, Charlottetown Conference* painted by Robert Harris in 1884. The man standing rear centre is Sir John A. Macdonald.

government that spawned the rebellions went unchanged until 1849 when the British granted the colonies “responsible government” and ended the control of the appointed legislative council. Government was not the only thing that was changing in British North America. The two decades after the rebellions was a time of rapid growth and economic development that paved the way for nationhood. By the 1860s, the population was 3.5 million. The Reciprocity (free trade) Treaty of 1855 with the United States ushered in a period of rapid economic growth and prosperity and, as a result, the relationship with Britain changed from dependence to self-assurance. Despite the benefits of the Reciprocity Treaty, British North Americans did not trust the United States. The War of 1812 remained the touchstone for Canadian suspicions, along with the later issues raised by the civil war, Mexican War and annexation of its defeated territories, as well as claims of Manifest Destiny, support for slavery, and the potential infection of republican ideals only served further to confirm these doubts. At the same time, British colonial policy changed. Determined to cut the costs of its empire and end preferential trade agreements that benefited the colonies the British encouraged British North America to confederate. British relations with the United States were tense. They had supported the south in the war and decided that a way to ease tensions was to withdraw the British garrison in Canada and leave the Canadians to defend themselves. Yet none of these reasons were singularly compelling enough to bring about confederation. That required a convergence of the events and personalities, fears and passions, politics and policies. And that is exactly what happened at three important conferences held between 1864 and 1867.

### **The Charlottetown Conference, September 1864**

The Charlottetown Conference was held in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, on September 19, 1864. The initial momentum came from the British Colonial office. They wanted Nova Scotia,

New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island to unite to reduce costs by amalgamating three legislatures into one. The response from these colonies was apathetic, particularly in Nova Scotia—a colony that was fiercely independent and economically prosperous. The three legislatures passed separate resolutions to have a conference on the subject but nothing was done. Then Macdonald announced that the Canadas would be interested in attending and shocked everyone by proposing they consider a larger union. After overcoming their initial reaction, the Maritime colonies agreed to meet with representatives from the Canadas. The location of Charlottetown (capital of Prince Edward Island) helped to ensure the host's participation in the proceedings. The conference was a success. Maritime union was dropped, replaced by an outline for a larger union. A second conference was scheduled to work out the details for Quebec City in October.

### **The Quebec Conference, October 1864**

The Quebec Conference was held on October 10 to 27, 1864. Thirty-three delegates arrived in Quebec City including two delegates from Newfoundland. The delegates were prepared, in some cases eager, to develop a detailed plan for confederation. Voting would be by delegation with one vote per colony, except the Canadas which received two votes. After two weeks of intense discussions, negotiations and compromise, the Conference adopted the “72 resolutions” which became the basis for confederation. The major stumbling block had been the composition of the federal parliament. Prince Edward Island opposed representation by population fearing its interests would be drowned out by the larger provinces. Compromise was reached by adoption of a bi-cameral parliament. The House of Commons would be popularly elected based on population. The Senate would represent the provinces. Senators would be selected by the Governor-General. The number of Senate seats per province proved a sticking point but eventually a formula was approved.

Further discussions included the agreement to split the Canadas, preserving a French-speaking province (Quebec) that would be able to guarantee French Language, culture and religion. The Catholic Church approved the plan on the eve of confederation. Nova Scotia and New Brunswick reluctantly signed-on but Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland did not join confederation until 1873 and 1949 respectively. Despite the fact that 65 percent of Nova Scotians opposed union, Sir Charles Tupper, Premier of Nova Scotia carried the day, outflanking his opponents by signing the resolutions without asking permission. He received critical support from the British Colonial Secretary, Edward Cardwell.

### **The final push**

Incidents during the US civil war, notably the St. Alban's raid when Confederate soldiers robbed the St. Alban Vermont bank and escaped via Canada; Secretary of State William Seward's claim “that this whole continent, shall be, sooner or later, within the magic circle of the American union”; the cancellation of the Reciprocity Treaty and

the purchase of Alaska; confirmed suspicions that the United States coveted Canada. Then, in 1866, these fears came true, with the Fenian raids.

In the Maritimes the anti-confederationists, led by Nova Scotia newspaper editor Joseph Howe whose slogan was “Confederation—botheration” captured the essence of popular opinion in Nova Scotians. In 1866, the Fenian Brotherhood, invaded Canada and all that changed. The Brotherhood was a para-military organization of Irishmen dedicated to freeing Ireland from British rule. Their strategy was to conquer British North America and trade it for Ireland. Its rank and file was filled with civil war veterans. Several thousand crossed the border into Canada West and New Brunswick. Major battles were fought along the borders before the Brotherhood was defeated. The raids helped convince many Maritimers and other Canadians as well, to support confederation. The failure of the US government to stop the raiders raised questions of collusion and fed Canadian annexation phobia. The Fenians tried again in 1870 and 1871 without success.

### The London Conference, December 1866

The Canadians arrived in London armed with the 72 resolutions in December 1866. Deliberations lasted until February 1867. The resolutions formed the basis of the “British North America Act” which was signed into law by Queen Victoria in late April to take effect on July 1, 1867. The Dominion of Canada was born, comprising four provinces: Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

The Act gave Canada a federal system of government and outlined the division of powers between the national government and provincial legislatures. The structure was federal, like the United States, but the form of government was parliamentary, like Britain. There was no serious talk of adopting the US congressional model. Residual power was given to the national government to avoid a Canadian version of the US civil war that was fought over states’ rights. Provincial governments were comprised of a single elected legislative house without a senate. Quebec was granted special status Canada would have two official languages—French and English. Queen Victoria selected Ottawa for the capital. Sir John A. Macdonald became the first Prime Minister of Canada, and set to work to build a transcontinental railroad to create his vision of a nation stretching from sea to sea.

Unlike its southern neighbour who required two attempts to create its’ constitution, Canadians negotiated the powers and structures of federal government first and then were granted self-government in the British North America Act. It would be another 70 years before Canada became entirely free of Britain.

*We are the Fenian Brotherhood,  
skilled in the arts of war,  
And we’re going to fight for  
Ireland, the land we adore, Many  
battles we have won, along  
with the boys in blue, And we’ll  
go and capture Canada, for we’ve  
nothing else to do.*

Fenian soldier’s song

### Discussion point

Should the US government have stopped the Fenian’s from raiding Canada? Should the British have stopped Confederate soldiers from raiding Maine via New Brunswick (the St. Albans raid) during the US civil war?

## Activity

### Cartoon analysis

#### Source A



Britannia: "Is it possible My Dear, that you have ever given your Cousin Jonathan any encouragement?"

Miss Canada: "Encouragement! Certainly not, Mama. I have told him we can NEVER be United?"

#### Questions

- 1 Who does Mrs. Britannia represent and why and from what is she protecting Miss Canada?
- 2 What response is the cartoonist attempting to evoke from readers in his portrayal of the characters? In your answer reference the characterization of Cousin Jonathan, Mrs Britannia and Miss Canada.

#### Source B



"The way brother Jonathan will astonish the natives." Annexation Comes in by the Rail, While Liberty Flies off in the Smoke, published in *Punch Magazine*, 1849.

#### Questions

- 1 Why does the cartoonist fear the "American Eagle"?
- 2 What recent events could have fueled the fears of annexation?
- 3 What is the origins, purpose and value of the source? What are its limitations?

#### Source C



Little Ben Holmes: "And Some naughty Children attempt to pawn their Mother's Pocket-Handkerchief but are Arrested by Policeman Who was stationed around the corner." Published in *Punch Magazine*.

#### Questions

- 1 Who do the naughty Children represent and why are they naughty?
- 2 Cousin Jonathan and Brother Jonathan were the forerunners of Uncle Sam (see sign above door)? Why did British North America depict, characterize and caricature the United States this way?