# 1840-1867: FROM UNION TO CONFEDERATION

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1840-1867

Political

Aftermath of the Rebellions

In the wake of the Upper- and Lower-Canadian rebellions of 1837 and 1838, British North America’s political structures underwent a thorough re-evaluation. The Upper-Canadian rebels, led by William Lyon Mackenzie, demanded the abolition of the Family Compact and a break with the British Empire. During the years leading up to the rebellion, Mackenzie, in his *Colonial Advocate*, promoted American democratic ideals and assailed the hierarchical nature of Upper Canadian society. Although the causes were not exactly the same, the Lower-Canadian rebels were also frustrated with the political oligarchy that controlled their province. Fuelled by a frustrated middle class and an agricultural crisis, the Lower Canadian rebellions were greater in scale and more violently repressed.

Lord Durham

Sent by the British government to report on the state of the rebellious colonies, Lord Durham arrived in British North America as governor-in-chief and Lord High Commissioner. “I expected,” he later admitted in his report, “to find a contest between a government and a people.” Instead, he “found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state.” Spending most of his time in Lower Canada, Durham

1 The Family Compact was the name given to the group of individuals who came to dominate Upper Canadian politics in the wake of the War of 1812. The group, seen by the Reformers as an oligarchy, held conservative attitudes and vehemently defended both British traditions and their own privileged economic and political positions.
reserved his harshest criticisms for French-Canadian society: since French Canadians had no culture and no history, it was imperative to create a political structure that would accelerate their inevitable assimilation. In response to Durham’s insulting commentary on his culture, François-Xavier Garneau set out to write a detailed history of French Canada.²

Special Council

In Quebec, the Special Council governed without an electoral mandate in the period between the rebellions and the Act of Union, from 1838 to 1841. Though it only governed the province for a short time, the Council had a far-reaching impact. Its most significant reforms were the creation of new institutions for the urban working classes, its introduction of free tenure in Montreal, and its recognition and reaffirmation of the social role of the Roman Catholic church. The Council permitted new male and female religious orders to enter Lower Canada, and existing religious communities were allowed to expand. Also of great significance were the period’s increasing legal restrictions on the rights of women. In 1841, for example, with the Registry Ordinance Act, a woman’s dower rights were made to depend on her husband’s proper registration of his property, having the effect of restricting married women’s property rights.

² Histoire du Canada depuis sa découverte jusqu’à nos jours (published from 1845 to 1848).

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Act of Union

Acting on some of Durham’s recommendations but ignoring others, the British government united Upper and Lower Canada under a single legislature. The two Canadas, renamed Canada East and Canada West, would be represented by forty-two seats each. Because Canada East had a larger population, it was underrepresented in the new system: Canada West’s 450,000 inhabitants had the same number of representatives as Lower Canada’s population of 650,000. Adding insult to injury, English was designated as the sole language of both the legislature and the government and, because the public debts of the two colonies were combined, Lower Canada was obliged to share responsibility for the much greater Upper Canadian debt.

Responsible Government

By the 1840s, the four Atlantic colonies (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island) and the United Province of the Canadas had all been granted assemblies with elected representatives, but formal power remained in the hands of an unelected élite. The principles of responsible government, through which the elected members of the assembly would have ultimate governing control, was demanded by some and fiercely opposed by others. To its opponents, such as Governor Sir Charles Metcalfe, responsible government was merely a way for Canadian political leaders to reward supporters through patronage.

Despite dissenting voices, in 1848 Nova Scotia became the first colony to achieve responsible government in the British Empire, something which all the other Atlantic colonies had achieved by 1855.
In the United Canadas, support for responsible government slowly grew throughout the 1840s under the leadership of Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, and was granted with their election victory of 1848. Not everyone, however, was content with the state of affairs in the Canadas at the end of the 1840s. To Montreal merchants, already angered by the prospect of financial ruin because of the shaky economy, the new government’s drafting of the Rebellions Losses Bill provoked outrage.

**Burning of the Legislature**

By compensating citizens for property damaged during the rebellions a decade earlier, the government was, in the eyes of the merchants, admitting the legitimacy of the uprising. Descending on the new Parliament building on 25 April 1849, Montreal’s anglophone conservatives burnt the building to the ground.

**Economic**

While politicians were busy fighting for responsible government, the economy was continuing its transition from pre-industrial to industrial capitalism. Strong transportation links were central to the development of capitalism and, by the 1840s, both canals and railways were being built at an unprecedented rate.

**Railway Construction**

Railways, providing access to far more resources and expanded markets, permitted year-round transportation that was not at the mercy of unpredictable weather. The two most significant railway companies to emerge were the Intercolonial Railway, linking Montreal...
with the Maritimes, and the Grand Trunk Railway, extending from Sarnia through Montreal to Portland, Maine. Backed by British capital and technological expertise, railway construction became key to Canadian politics and, from 1852-1867, over 3200 kilometres of track were laid (Conrad and Finkel 370).

**Canal Construction and Irish Immigration**

In addition to railways, canals on both the St. Lawrence and Niagara rivers were being constructed, and the massive arrival of Irish Catholics fleeing their famine-ridden homeland became an important source of unskilled labour. William Hamilton Merritt’s exploitation of Irish labour in the construction of Ontario’s Welland Canal, for example, brought him both economic and political power. Often maintaining old world rivalries, Irish labourers lived in shantytowns along the canal and formed a close-knit working-class community. Responding to their experience of economic exploitation, the Irish became known for the violence that often erupted against both employers and among themselves. With their arrival in 1845-46, cholera broke out and became a serious problem that threatened to devastate Quebec’s population. In Quebec City, riots erupted as workers attacked a hospital containing cholera victims (Young and Dickinson 174).

3 It should be noted, however, that large numbers of Irish immigrants also landed in the Maritimes. The violent clashes between the largely Roman Catholic Irish immigrants and their Protestant neighbours were not an uncommon occurrence in the nineteenth century. Saint John, NB, for example, was a city known for the violent nature of its religious riots.
Towards Confederation

As transportation links were being built and as the economy was developing, the British North American colonies began looking to the possibility of political union. Confederation was not a new idea; talk of union had been proposed by a British staff officer in 1783, and had been re-articulated throughout much of the following century by British officials and colonials alike. The political structures established by the Act of Union in 1840 had proved inadequate for the smooth governing of the province. Designed to ensure an English-speaking majority in the assembly by providing equal representation for Canada East and Canada West, by the 1860s, the union no longer favoured English-Canadian interests. In the period following the Act of Union, Canada West’s population rose dramatically, more than doubling by 1851. By 1861, Canada West had 1,396,091 inhabitants compared with Canada East’s population of 1,111,566 and Canada West reformers began demanding “rep by pop”\(^4\) to redress its new disadvantage.

George Brown

The divergent interests of the parties in the legislature accentuated the conflicts, and the Province of Canada became increasingly difficult to govern. In 1864, the coalition government resigned due to its inability to find a governing formula, and many

\(^4\) The principle of “rep by pop,” or representation by population, meant that a province’s number of seats in the legislature corresponded to the size of its population.

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politicians began looking for alternative constitutional solutions. George Brown, leader of the Reform Party and owner of Toronto’s \textit{Globe}, changed tack and supported Confederation, expressing an ardent belief that the acquisition of the northwest would create new opportunities. Approaching his long-term political rivals Macdonald and Cartier, Brown proposed a “Great Coalition” of Reformers, Tories, and \textit{Bleus}, who would work collectively to promote Confederation; Antoine-Aimé Dorion, leader of the \textit{Rouges} from Canada East, was left out of the coalition and became the obvious leader of the opposition movement.

\textbf{Opposition to Union}

In Ontario, with the two major parties forming a common front, public opinion was generally favourable to union. The Toronto business élite had, since the 1850s, been setting its sights on the economic benefits of expansion. In Quebec, however, a myriad of dissenting voices emerged to challenge Confederation. The most influential of these voices was Dorion, who denounced the sweeping powers being allotted to the federal government. Both in the assembly and in newspapers, the \textit{Rouges} argued that Confederation would not solve Canada’s problems. Confederation, they charged, was designed to benefit the big railway companies and was fundamentally anti-democratic in nature. At the very least, they argued, an election on the issue should have been called. Fearing the implications for the French-Canadian nation, the \textit{Rouges} reminded voters that, under Confederation, the federal government gained far greater powers of taxation, controlled criminal law, and, perhaps most dangerously, gained the power to disallow provincial legislation.
External Causes for Union

Internationally, the 1860s saw the establishment of many states. For Canadians, who were kept informed of international developments by their newspapers, organizing “states was in the air” (Trofimenkoff 101). New Brunswick and Nova Scotia had talked for a long time about re-uniting their colony, which had been separated in 1784, and the British Colonial Office began encouraging talk of a maritime union of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. When the Province of Canada announced its intention to enter negotiations, the Charlottetown Conference of 1864 was organized. The American Civil War was raging to the south, and the possibility of the Union Army turning its military might towards British North America at the end of the war was a frightening prospect. The United States’ repeal of reciprocity\(^5\) in 1866 and its purchase of Alaska in 1867 further demonstrated the threatening nature of its foreign policy. Fenian raids\(^6\) in New Brunswick and Canada West, moreover, reinforced arguments for a centrally organized defence. Great Britain, eager to rid itself of colonial defence expenditures, also actively encouraged union.

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\(^5\) The Reciprocity Treaty with the United States (signed by Lord Elgin on behalf of Great Britain and its British North American colonies), in effect from 1854 to 1866, ensured the free trade of primary resources between British North America and the U.S. When British North American resources were in high demand during the American Civil War of the 1860s, Canada enjoyed high profits.

\(^6\) Fenians were Irish Americans who advocated Ireland’s independence. In their attempt to pressure the British government to liberate Ireland, the Fenians attacked Britain’s North American colonies.
Internal Causes for Union

British North American politicians saw potential benefits in domestic trade centred on an east-west axis. In the period leading up to Confederation, the Province of Canada mainly traded with the United States and Great Britain, a pattern reinforced by trade agreements and railroads. Because of their dependence on external trade, however, the colonies suffered when economic difficulties plagued both Britain and the United States after 1857. Both the Canadian government and the Grand Trunk railway struggled financially, and political and economic leaders such as Alexander Galt and George-Étienne Cartier saw expansion as the solution to their economic hardship. Confederation, they believed, while distributing the debt among a larger population, would provide new and more stable markets. International business interests, such as the Baring Brothers Bank, stated that they would only finance increased railway expansion if the British North American colonies were united. For Quebec and Ontario manufacturers, Confederation would, in addition to creating new markets, impose import duties that would help protect their industries from outside competition. For advocates of Confederation in the Atlantic Region, and Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in particular, union would ensure greater economic growth through secure markets and better railway links.
Suggestions for Further Reading

The principle general textbooks in Canadian history, a good place to begin further research, are Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel’s *History of the Canadian Peoples: Beginnings to 1867* vol. 1 and 2, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Addison Wesley Longman, 2002); a detailed general history written by a number of senior scholars can be found in Craig Brown ed., *The Illustrated History of Canada* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1997); for a good narrative account, see Desmond Morton, *A Short History of Canada* 5th ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001); for an examination of Ontario’s history in the post-Confederation period, see Joseph Schull, *Ontario Since 1867* (Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1978); Edgar-André Montigny and Lori Chambers, *Ontario Since Confederation: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); the authoritative texts for the post-Confederation period in Quebec history are Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and, for the second volume, François Ricard, *Histoire du Québec contemporain* tome I et tome II (Montreal: Boréal, 1989); for a socio-economic look at Quebec’s past, see John A. Dickinson and Brian Young, *A Short History of Quebec* 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000); for an examination of Quebec's social history in the context of ideology and women’s experience, see Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, *The Dream of Nation: A Social and Intellectual History of Quebec* (Toronto: Gage Publishing Limited, 1983); for an excellent survey of the history of Canadian Native peoples, see Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada’s First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997); for general works on Canadian women, see *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996); Clio Collective, *Quebec Women: A History* trans. Roger Gannon and Rosalind Gill (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1987); for a survey of immigration in Canadian history, see Gerald Tulchinsky, *Immigration in Canada: Historical Perspectives* (Toronto: Copp Clark Longman Ltd., 1994); the most important scholarly journals in Canadian history are the *Canadian Historical Review*, and the *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française*; for detailed biographical studies, see the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

For a look at the reasons and causes of the Lower Canada Rebellions, see Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower

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For works focusing on the effects of Irish immigration, see Don Akenson, The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1984); for some of the darker history, see Geoffrey Bilson, A Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Scott See, Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Ruth Bleasdale, “Class Conflict on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840s,” Labour / Le Travail (Vol. 7, 1981); for an examination of religion in Quebec, see Serge Gagnon et Louise Lebel-Gagnon, “Le milieu d’origine du clergé québécois 1775-1840: mythes et réalités” Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française (Vol. 73, No. 3, décembre 1983).


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