

# CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

## DEBATING THE CONFEDERATION DEBATES OF 1865

### Reconsidering the debates over Canadian confederation

#### A PRE-ORDAINED NORTHERN COUNTRY?

With the 150th anniversary of Confederation approaching, it is an appropriate time to review the processes and historical contexts that framed the formation of Canada in 1867. The Canada that took shape on July 1, 1867 looked very different from the Canada that we know today. Comprising only southern Ontario and southern Quebec and the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, this new dominion accounted for less than 10 percent of the current land mass of the country. But as the essays in this publication show,

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many politicians believed fervently in the expansion of the country. They may have embraced too readily a northern version of the “manifest destiny,” however, when they assumed that the creation of a northern country from sea to sea was preordained in the 1860s. Considerable opposition to the constitu-

tional arrangement of 1867 (enshrined in the *British North America Act*, passed by the British Parliament in 1866) existed: at the conclusion of the debates in the Canadian legislature that this collection of essays considers, politicians voted 91 to 33 in favour of Confederation in 1865. The other British colonies negotiated their entry later (British Columbia in 1871, Prince Edward Island in 1873, and Newfoundland and Labrador eventually in 1949), while title to other large tracts (the western prairies and the Arctic) was transferred with no consultation of the inhabitants. Some of the Métis

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### The Atlantic provinces and the Confederation debates of 1865

#### THE EMERGENCE OF “ATLANTIC CANADA”

The phrase “Atlantic Canada” is of relatively recent vintage, having been coined as a convenient way of referring to the four eastern provinces after Newfoundland joined Confederation in 1949.<sup>1</sup> Before 1949 no one spoke of Atlantic Canada—in the debates of 1865 these colonies were referred to as the maritime provinces, the lower provinces, or the eastern provinces. After 1949, the Maritimes plus Newfoundland became “Atlantic Canada” in bureaucratic and eventually popular parlance.

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As purely geographic shorthand, the phrase cannot be objected to (though of course Quebec is an “Atlantic province” too). Nevertheless, insofar as it suggests a common identity, a common culture, the term must be approached with caution. There are certainly some unifying

features—people from one of these provinces generally feel more at home in the others than they do in the rest of Canada. But in the 1860s and still today, the region contains geographic variety, disparate resource endowments and economies, and considerable ethno-cultural

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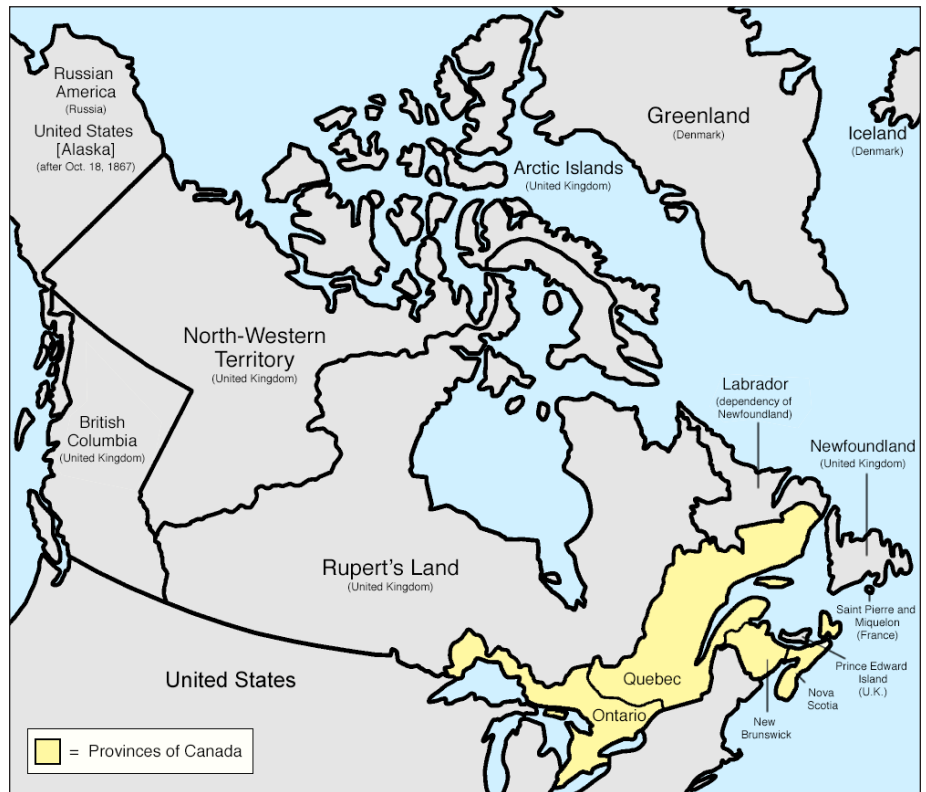
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inhabitants in the Red River region of current-day Manitoba objected to the process, and under the leadership of Louis Riel they staged a resistance that led to the entry of a small portion of southern Manitoba into Canada in 1870.

Beyond its geographical boundaries, Canada differed in many other ways from the country in 2016: it was less ethnically diverse, even though the politicians dedicated substantial efforts to bridge the chasm that was perceived to exist in the Western world at the time between Protestants and Catholics, and between English and French. The country was largely agrarian. Few Canadians lived in cities then, while the vast majority do so today. Women had a constrained political role, labour interests had little effective voice, and Indigenous peoples were defined outside of the polity, all with consequences that still require substantive attention today. Concepts and practices of democracy differed as well: to take one example from the 1867 general election, only slightly more than 5,000 voters participated in the election that returned Thomas D'Arcy McGee in the constituency of Montreal West in Canada's largest city, and the men would have voted in public for their candidate in conditions that we would fail to recognize today as democratic. In contrast, in the 2015 election, the smallest constituency in population was Nunavut, with over 18,000 voters.

## REVISITING THE DEBATES OF 1865

As one part of York University's desire to recognize the 150th anniversary of Confederation, we convened a group of scholars to examine the same published source, the debates in the legislature of the United Canadas in 1865, and explore a series of important issues that arise from reading that document. As a result, the debates serve as a prism for examining some of the suppositions and the differences of opinion between the politicians. Although the idea of confederating the British North American lands



**PROVINCES OF CANADA:** July 1, 1867 to July 15, 1870.

had been raised in different guises for many years, historians often focus on two key meetings, Charlottetown in September 1864, where delegates from “Canada” (that is, Ontario and Quebec) took over another meeting planned to discuss the confederation of the Atlantic provinces. After achieving some level of agreement, delegates from the five British colonies in eastern North America convened in Quebec City in October 1865 to propose the specific details of a constitutional arrangement that would bring all the British North American colonies together. After three weeks, the delegates had hammered out a series of resolutions to take back to their legislatures. These were practical propositions. As Christopher Moore points out, “There is no poetry in the Quebec resolutions.”<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the Quebec meeting later inspired one of the iconic images of the Confederation process, the Robert Harris painting *The Fathers of Confederation*, which Ged Martin explores in detail in this collection.

From the Quebec meeting, the propositions were then debated, with no room for further modifications, in the legislature of the United Canadas. (The United Canadas comprised Canada East or southern Quebec, and Canada West or southern Ontario. The older terms Lower and Upper Canada remained in use.) The government of the day clearly, and not surprisingly, saw this debate as being worthy of a permanent record, and it supported the publication of those debates a short while afterward. Lasting from February 3 to March 13, 1865, and totalling over 1,000 pages in printed form, these debates are available for consultation in print and online. In the 1960s, at a time when the Canadian government was celebrating the Centennial of Confederation, Professor P.B. Waite of Dalhousie University, one of the leading specialists in the politics of the period, edited a condensed version of the debates.<sup>2</sup> In this edition, he appropriately dedicated much attention to capturing the words of the leading

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figures, John A. Macdonald, attorney general for Canada West (Ontario), George-Étienne Cartier, attorney general for Canada East (Quebec), George Brown, leader of the Grit Party (a forerunner to the Liberal Party), Thomas D'Arcy McGee (Conservative politician and one of the most compelling speakers), and the (essentially titular) premier Étienne-Paschal Taché, a life member of the Legislative Council, which had a function similar to today's Senate. He also conveyed the opinions of some of the key opposition speakers—Christopher Dunkin and Antoine-Aimé Dorion, for instance. Many other members of the Legislative Assembly and Council contributed to the debates. We asked the contributors to this collection to read the Waite edition as a starting point, and some of them have chosen to privilege the longer edition of the debates. We believe that readers may benefit from reading the Waite edition, still accessible today in a second edition with a new foreword by Ged Martin. Janet Ajzenstat and her colleagues have provided a more comprehensive edition of the debates in the Canadas and elsewhere in British North America in their book *Canada's Founding Debates*.<sup>3</sup>

This publication of *Canada Watch* shows the variety of readings that the same document may inspire, depending upon one's focus and interests. The group of scholars assembled here,

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largely from York University, but also including scholars from other universities, chose a wide variety of topics. Some selected issues that were central to the discussions (the Atlantic colonies, definitions of democracy, religious minorities, French Canadians, and taxation). Others examined issues that were important in the context of the period and some of which would become central to subsequent understandings of the country, but which the politicians of the day may have discussed only obliquely (agrarianism, the environment, labour, Indigenous peoples, historical consciousness, rights, and gender). We have attempted to read the document both for what the politicians expressed and for what they did not feel the need to express. We have also tried to examine the debates in a longer time frame—the starting point of the project was to ask contributors the following question:

“From the vantage point of 2016, how can we read the Confederation debates in 1865 in the Canadian legislature from the perspective of the chosen topic?” The reader will readily see that many divergent readings of the same document are possible.

We would like to acknowledge the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and the Vice-President for Research and Innovation at York University for their support for this project, and of course all the contributors. Laura Taman, coordinator of the Centre, has overseen the publication process. We hope that this publication will help readers understand better the context of the central Canadian debate over the terms of Confederation and to reflect on the successes and the failures of the politicians who agreed to the constitutional arrangement of 1867. 

### NOTES

1. Christopher Moore, *1867: How the Fathers Made a Deal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), 129.
2. P.B. Waite, ed., *The Confederation Debates in the Province of Canada, 1865*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006). Note that all page references to this version of the debates in subsequent essays are indicated in brackets within the text.
3. Janet Ajzenstat et al., eds., *Canada's Founding Debates* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

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diversity: Acadians; African Canadians (Nova Scotia had the largest black community in Canada before the immigration boom of the 1960s); Mi'kmaq, Wulstukwiuk, Innu, and Inuit peoples; and the increasingly multicultural populations in the region's larger cities.

Most Canadians who live west of New Brunswick are not obliged to think of the Atlantic provinces of Canada very often. Today, their political weight is

fairly light. The Atlantic provinces hold approximately 6 percent of the Canadian population and their MPs fill 9 percent of the seats in the House of Commons.<sup>2</sup> The four provinces together represent only 32 seats out of the 338 in the newly enlarged House of Commons.

The situation was quite different in the 1860s, when both the population and the geography of the eastern colonies appealed to Upper and Lower

Canadians as reasons for entering into a larger union with them. The combined populations of the eastern provinces were much more important relative to the Canadas than they are today, and both the size and the character of that population were attractive. The relative populations of the colonies were as follows according to the 1861 census, except for Newfoundland, where figures from the 1869 census have been used: