

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,

BY COLIN M. COATES
AND PHILIP GIRARD

Colin M. Coates teaches Canadian studies at Glendon College and is the former director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. Philip Girard is professor of law at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University.

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 1949.¹ 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.

BY PHILIP GIRARD

Philip Girard is professor of law at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University. He has published extensively on the history of law in Canada, his best-known work being *Bora Laskin: Bringing Law to Life* (2005; reissued in paperback, 2013).

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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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*.³

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.² 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:

Quebec	1,100,000
Ontario	1,400,000
New Brunswick	250,000
Nova Scotia	330,000
Prince Edward Island	80,000
Newfoundland	150,000
TOTAL	3,310,000
Total (minus PEI and NF)	3,080,000

During the debates of 1865, it was still possible that all four Atlantic colonies would join the new nation being discussed, though it was far less likely that Newfoundland would do so. The colonies possessed a population of 810,000, nearly three-quarters of the population of Quebec, and would have represented a quarter of the population of the new Canada. Even taking just Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, which actually joined in 1867, their combined population amounted to 19 percent of the total population of the new dominion, about the same as the proportion of Canadians who live in the three prairie provinces today.

AN EXPANDING MARKET

George Brown, leader of the Clear Grit (Liberal) Party, was thrilled at the prospect of this enlarged market. With the exaggeration characteristic of political debate, he asserted that “the addition of nearly a million of people to our home consumers [swept] aside all the petty objections that are averred against the scheme” (45). Other countries sought to enlarge themselves by war or purchase, but the new union represented an opportunity to do so in a peaceful manner—and for free! Brown faced an obstacle here. As he knew, there was relatively little trade between the Canadas and their prospective partners in the 1860s: only 5 percent of the Maritimes’ exports and imports involved the Canadas. The eastern colonies had thrived on oceanic trade with Britain, the West Indies, and the eastern United States.

Nonetheless, Brown predicted, a customs union would free up the trade of all

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the players: the wares of the Canadas would be carried “unquestioned into every village of the Maritime Provinces,” while they “shall with equal freedom bring their fish, and their coal, and their West India produce to our three millions of inhabitants” (46). Indeed, some have argued that Nova Scotia coal was a key reason the Canadas were interested in a broader union. But it was not just as suppliers of raw materials that the eastern region was valuable. According to Brown, with the large numbers of ships constructed in the Atlantic provinces, the new nation would be the third-largest maritime nation in the world, after Britain and the United States (46).

Beyond their abstract identities as consumers and producers, the inhabitants of the eastern provinces were also prized by Canadian statesmen for their character, at least on the public record. (George Brown was less flattering about the delegates from the Maritimes in private.) Proponents of Confederation such as James Ferrier, a Montrealer and member of the Legislative Council of Canada, thought they were “an energetic, active, industrious people, quite equal to ourselves” (13). In Thomas D’Arcy McGee’s view, their delegates to the Quebec City talks were “as able and accomplished a body as ... any new country in the world could produce, [while] some among them would compare not unfavorably in ability and information with some of the leading commoners [i.e., members of the House of Commons] of England”

(57). Moreover, as John A. Macdonald reminded his audience, Canada West shared ties of language and the English common law with the lower provinces. Although the two regions had remained relatively unknown to one another, advocates of Confederation sought to portray the population of the Atlantic colonies as possessing shared values that would make them desirable partners in the new nation.

COSTS AND BENEFITS OF GEOGRAPHY

Geography also seemed to point the way to the new union. No nation could be great, asserted Sir Étienne-Paschal Taché, if it “had not seaports of its own open at all times of the year” (2). The St. Lawrence might carry trade to the heart of the continent, but it could do so only seven months of the year. The American Civil War revealed the need for rail access to the sea within British North America, when it became more difficult for central Canadian produce to reach the Atlantic via the US rail route to Portland, Maine. With the Americans poised to abrogate the Reciprocity Treaty in 1866, which had freed up trade between them and the British colonies for a dozen years, the arguments of those favouring union seemed even more convincing.

But geography could be a double-edged sword. With the question of defence on everyone’s mind in light of the Civil War, the creation of a national military force produced by the union of four or more colonies could seem attractive. As Joseph Rymal of South Wentworth pointed out, however, the additional population would come with a huge amount of extra real estate to defend; the strength of the new union, he warned, would be “the kind of strength which a fishing rod would obtain by fastening to it some additional joints” (120). Relative to its defence needs, even the enlarged population of the new nation would be far less than what was required. Atlantic Canada offered opportunities to the Canadas, but these came with costs.

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In order to counter these doubts, John A. Macdonald raised the “what-if” question: what if a union with the seaboard colonies did not transpire? In that case, he thought, they would “revive the original proposition for a union of the Maritime Provinces. ... [T]hey will not remain as they are now, powerless, scattered, helpless communities, they will form themselves into a power, which, though not so strong as if united with Canada, will, nevertheless, be a powerful and considerable community” (22). Macdonald did not necessarily believe his own prediction: his veiled threat of maritime independence was made primarily to draw his listeners into the pro-Confederation camp. Still, it poses an interesting counterfactual. Without the Canadas, might some or all of the four Atlantic colonies have had their own confederation? If they did, would it have survived? Might we be marking “twin” confederations in 2017?

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS LIMITED

Some thought the Atlantic colonies in the 1860s had no need of a union with the Canadas. With the “age of sail” at its height, the seaboard colonies had profited by building wooden ships in the hundreds of small coves in the region perfectly suited to this activity, and carrying produce in them all over the globe. Those most involved in this trade had the least interest in a larger union. However, others could see that with the constant movement of population westward, rail transport would become the pre-eminent mode of North American transport, a shift that would undermine the seaward-facing economy of the Atlantic provinces. If they rejected a union with the Canadas now, they might be obliged to join later on, on less advantageous terms, or might turn to the United States, where their proportional influence would be even less than in a new British North American union.


In spite of the Charlottetown meeting of 1864 at which maritime union was to be explored, the prospects of the Atlantic

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colonies joining each other were never very bright. Prince Edward Island’s interest in the Confederation project waned in 1864-65 when it was clear that the Canadas were not prepared at that time to put money up front to buy out the island’s large landlords. It is unlikely that the other Atlantic provinces would have been able or willing to float the \$800,000 loan that the young nation of Canada was able to offer the island in 1873 to end landlordism and cement its entry into Confederation. Newfoundland’s decisive rejection of Confederation in the election of 1869 suggests that it was committed to its autonomy and would not have embraced a union with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Without the two island provinces, why would the two latter provinces have joined in a federal union with each other? A customs union, short of a political union, was possible. Their principal customers were not each other, however, but clients outside the region, making such a union of limited value.

The rhetoric of the Canadians might also have given pause to some in the Atlantic provinces. George Brown’s discussion of the union sometimes sounded as if it entailed an “acquisition” of the Maritimes by the Canadas, as the United States had acquired Louisiana from France, instead of the launching of a free and equal union of four autonomous entities. In some respects, this is an accurate portrayal of the events of 1864-1867: to many in the east, Confederation seemed more like a quasi-hostile takeover than a consensual merger, though of course we do

not hear these voices in the debates in the legislature of the Canadas. The Canadas were the dominant partner, and believed they had much to gain and little to lose from the union, while the Maritimers were more dubious but had few realistic options.

Newfoundland’s decision to go it alone ultimately had disastrous consequences. It essentially went bankrupt during the Depression and had to surrender self-government in 1934 to an appointed commission of three British and three Newfoundland officials, a situation that would last until Confederation in 1949. Would the Maritimes have suffered a similar fate had they remained outside Confederation? Their economies were somewhat more diversified than Newfoundland’s, and their populations better educated. Still, it is doubtful whether maintaining their autonomy, singly or together, could have impeded significantly the strong economic forces drawing people out of the region for employment elsewhere, or stimulating the centralization of capital and industry in central Canada. In the three decades after Confederation, 40 percent of the population of the maritime provinces left the region, most headed to New England’s thriving industrial towns. (Of course, rural Quebec too experienced strong out-migration.) Confederation ultimately had both benefits and drawbacks for the maritime provinces and Newfoundland, but their relatively small populations and internal divisions left them without a lot of bargaining power in the negotiations leading up to 1867. 

NOTES

1. Newfoundland was officially renamed Newfoundland and Labrador in 2001.
2. Manitoba and Saskatchewan are also slightly overrepresented in the House of Commons relative to their populations, as are the three territories.

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