



Confederation

In 1860, seven separate British colonies stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific in North America. Five colonies in the east: Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Canada were divided by the vast expanse of Rupert's Land and the Northwest Territory from British Columbia and Vancouver Island in the far west. Each colony had its own governor appointed from London, while the elected legislatures and ministers of the five eastern colonies were responsible for local government.

Forces for Change

Military, economic and political forces pushed colonial political leaders to propose uniting some, or even all of the colonies. As the American Civil War (1861-1865) reached its climax, the military power of the triumphant Northern Army was a clear threat. The colonists in British North America feared forcible annexation by their American neighbours. The Fenian Brotherhood attracted veterans of the Civil War. Their raid across the Niagara River and the Battle of Ridgeway (June 2, 1866) underlined the vulnerability of the separate colonies. At the same time, the British government wished the colonists to begin to organize and pay for their own defence.

Trade provided another source of friction with the United States. A "reciprocity treaty," or low tariff agreement, was signed in 1854 and brought economic prosperity to the colonies. The Americans refused to renew in 1866, disrupting commerce and forcing the British colonies look to each other as potential trading partners. For internal trade to compensate, a railway was needed to join the markets of the Maritimes and Canada. An inter-colonial railway, joining Canada and the Maritimes, would spur economic development and ease difficulties in moving troops for defence from any American threat.

In the colony of Canada there were additional strong pressures for change. Religious and cultural differences between the upper (Ontario) and lower (Quebec) colony made their single, shared government unstable. Priorities varied between the two communities and ministries found it difficult to get agreement to govern. But the Canadian colonists were also excited by the challenge of extending a union westward to include the northwest, British Columbia and Vancouver Island.

Negotiation, Compromise and Dissent

Because the eastern British North American colonies were self governing, they had a political structure to negotiate a new form of government. Discussions began with a conference at Charlottetown in 1864 intended to discuss Maritime union. A delegation from Canada joined the political leaders of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. The politicians agreed that federalism seemed a highly desirable solution both to Canada's problems and to Maritime fears of losing their governments.

In a second conference held at Québec City six weeks later, the delegates agreed that their objective was a union from Atlantic to Pacific, even if only the five eastern colonies were at first represented. The union would be federal in character, with a local government in each province. Membership of the lower house of Parliament would be allocated on the basis of population, while in the upper house (or Senate) the regions of Canada would be represented equally.

There was opposition to the terms of union proposed at Québec. The “Rouges” party in Canada East argued that the proposed union would expose French Canadians to oppression by the English majority. Newfoundland had no interest in a union that focused attention away from its Atlantic interests, and Prince Edward Island feared the loss of its sovereignty. In Nova Scotia and New Brunswick the surrender of power to a central government dominated by the Canadians at first seemed like too high a price to pay. But the American refusal to negotiate free trade with any of the colonies and the growing Fenian menace turned the tide in favour of Confederation in the two larger Maritime colonies.

The British North America Act

In November 1866, representatives of the three colonies whose legislatures had voted in favour of Confederation met in London. Final bargaining was necessary to allow for separate schools and to confirm the number of senators representing each colony. The British government, which had favoured the movement towards Confederation, prepared a bill incorporating the agreement reached by the colonies of Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The *British North America Act* was passed by the British Parliament and given royal assent on March 29, 1867. The *BNA Act* came into effect on July 1, 1867, creating the new Dominion of Canada.