

Macdonald administration, or “antis,” those inclined to resist the blandishments of Confederation. Newly created Manitoba was in essence a pocket borough devoted to the railway policies of the government.

A Cabinet of 14, headed by Macdonald as Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Attorney General, oversaw the formation of government policy. On the opposition benches, there was little cohesion. Ontario Reformers, or Liberals, who had fallen away from the 1867 coalition, sat under the tacit leadership of Ontario Grits such as Alexander Mackenzie and Edward Blake. Quebec *rouges*, or liberals bent on the separation of church and state, led by Antoine-Aimé Dorion aligned for tactical purposes with the Ontario Liberals but shared little else with them except a disdain for the government. On any particular issue, especially if it had a strong local flavour, members might break ranks and vote along expedient lines. These were “the shaky fellows,” “loose fish” or “waiters on Providence” who made the politics of Canada’s early Parliament volatile and unpredictable. For instance, the 1867 election had sent 18 “anti-confederate” members of Parliament to Ottawa from Nova Scotia. Over time, Macdonald had wooed them – especially their leader, Joseph Howe – into sympathy with, but not always automatic devotion to, the government’s cause.

In a political culture still rooted in open voting, powerful lingering local attachments and only the flimsiest sense of loyalty to the federal fact, it was a veritable miracle that Canada functioned at all as a political entity. Principle was often trumped by expediency. On many issues and days, only the application of generous dabs of patronage and the consummate personal skills of Macdonald and his senior acolytes, especially Cartier from Quebec, held the nation together.¹⁷ Thus the House convened in the snowy Ottawa mid-winter of 1871. In his Speech from the Throne, the Governor General, Lord Lisgar, set what was to be the overriding theme of the session: fortifying and expanding the young Dominion. The year 1870 had witnessed a number of rude shocks administered to the fledgling nation. The first check to Confederation had come from the West where the Riel Rebellion in the winter of 1869–1870 had stymied Ottawa’s hope of a smooth assertion of federal power over the former territory of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Native and Metis resistance took the form of a provisional government created under the leadership of Montreal-educated Louis Riel in defiance of commissioners sent from Ottawa to take possession of the Red River. Bloodshed ensued. In March 1870, the provisional government executed an obstreperous Ontario land surveyor, and Orangeman, named Thomas Scott. The crisis struck at the heart of the delicate Anglo–French accord that underlay Macdonald’s administration of the nation. Ontario Protestant expansionism collided directly with French, Catholic particularism. Deft clerical diplomacy, the despatch of a militia expedition to the Red River, and the promise of a federal amnesty to Riel and his confreres cooled the situation. Manitoba thus entered Confederation in July 1870, not as a territory, but as a fully fledged province, one entitled to send four members of Parliament to Ottawa. Riel fled into exile. Despite Lord Lisgar’s roseate observation that Manitoba was “entering steadily upon a career of peace and prosperity,” the new province would generate an undertow of anxiety throughout the 1871 session.

If Manitoba required a healing touch, Lisgar also reminded the reconvened Parliament that other challenges of consolidating the union could not be put off. A railway from Central Canada to the Maritime provinces – a Charter right promised in 1867 – had to be surveyed and construction begun. Legislation to promote a “liberal land policy” had to be crafted to attract immigrants to

17. See: Escott M. Reid. “The Rise of National Parties in Canada,” in Hugh G. Thorburn, ed., *Party Politics in Canada*, Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1967, pp. 13–19; and Jeffery Simpson, *Spoils of Power: The Politics of Patronage*, Don Mills: Collins, 1988.