

He waited for a full year while the opposition press and Liberal politicians fiercely denounced the treaty. It was painted as a sacrifice of Canada's interests in reciprocal trade, in the fisheries and in the use of trans-border rivers. Finally, on 3 May 1872, Macdonald introduced the Treaty of Washington bill into the Commons with one of the most impressive speeches of his career. It lasted, with a recess for dinner, for four and a quarter hours. In it, he took the broad view that Anglo-American harmony was vital for the security and prosperity of Canada. The Dominion must be prepared to give up some short-term objectives in her dealings with the United States for the sake of the overriding one which guaranteed peace in the North Atlantic world. The opposition for the most part was disinclined to accept this interpretation, and the bill to implement the treaty received a rough passage. In the end, after several heated late-night sittings and many divisions, it was approved by the government majority, increased by some Liberal defections, 121 to 55.

An issue with explosive potential was taken up and successfully defused in the 1872 session. This was the outcry among Roman Catholics in New Brunswick and Quebec provoked by the New Brunswick *Common Schools Act* of 1871. This measure, designed to create a more effective system of free public schools in the province, took away an informal arrangement for separate schools which had existed in New Brunswick for several decades. A great controversy touching the sensitive relationship between education, religion and the state erupted. The Dominion government was urged to disallow the New Brunswick *Common Schools Act* and restore the minority's position in the province's educational system. Macdonald was reluctant to intervene, knowing full well the danger to the fledgling federation if Ottawa were seen as imposing its will in a subject of provincial jurisdiction. In the end, he managed to persuade the supporters of separate schools in the Commons to let the courts rule on the question. In time this was done, both in New Brunswick and in London. The 1871 Act was found not to violate section 93 of the *British North America Act, 1867*, guaranteeing minority religious rights in education. New Brunswick introduced some changes in its school practices and an informal system of separate schools was re-established. Still, the issue was a testing one for the members of the 1872 Parliament.

The parliamentarians of 1872 knew they were approaching a general election. Clearly for this reason, they devoted considerable time to defects in the political process in the new Dominion and suggestions for its improvement. The Liberals were usually to be found advocating change; the Conservatives arguing for the maintenance of current practices. Blake introduced a bill to have elections held on the same day across Canada and for use of the secret ballot. It was not approved in 1872. The Liberals suggested that controverted elections should be settled by judges rather than by a parliamentary committee. The proposal was turned down in 1872, but accepted later. There were complaints about the quality of appointments to the Senate and demands that senators should not be allowed to obtain remuneration from the Crown beyond their sessional indemnities. This, too, was an idea whose time had not come in 1872. The government's *Representation Act*,¹⁷ increasing by nine seats the composition of the Commons and re-drawing constituency boundaries, was an obvious subject of contention. The opposition denounced the inequality in the sizes of existing constituencies, the fact that the classic principle of representation by population was ignored in many ridings. British Columbia, with an estimated population of 10,000, returned six members, while Alexander Mackenzie's constituency of Lambton, Ontario, with 30,000 inhabitants, elected only one member of Parliament. The "shreds and patches" of the Dominion, the opposition claimed, were over-represented simply because they normally returned supporters of the government. Macdonald and his colleagues were indignant at these accusations. The new *Representation Act* was approved in time to be used in the elections later in the year.

¹⁷ *An Act to re-adjust the Representation in the House of Commons*, S.C. 1872.