

From several successive Ministers, I have heard [such] strong expressions of sympathy towards the desires of the Canadian Government in regard to preferential trade that I am almost inclined to think that such sentiments are nothing more than empty platitudes.<sup>5</sup>

Laurier shared his trade commissioner's indignation and as trade relations with the United States began to show evidence of a new vigour, he became less interested in concluding a trade agreement with Australia.

Few Australians were surprised by Laurier's change of heart; many were already convinced that "within a few years Canada [would] either be an independent republic or an integral part of the United States."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, with their broad Yankee accents and populist attitudes, Canadians seemed more American than British. Canada's efforts to reconcile these two influences on its national life increasingly led to friction with Australia over the nature of relations within the empire. The imperial outlook that fostered Canada's interest in Australia also spawned a number of proposals for some form of imperial federation. Advocates of such schemes pointed out that federation would allow the dominions an opportunity to reconcile their interests with imperial foreign and defence policy. In exchange, they would assume a small share of the financial burden associated with defending the empire.

In Australia, particularly after the South African War, this imperialist vision was embraced with considerable sympathy. Isolated by the vast Pacific Ocean--where German, French and Japanese imperialism seemed to roam unchecked--imperial federation offered Australia an opportunity to ensure that its interests were kept front and centre when British decision-makers tinkered with the disposition of the empire's naval resources. Canadians, on the other hand, were disillusioned by the Boer War and were increasingly alarmed by the notion of imperial federation. The country's significant French-Canadian minority, profoundly North American in outlook and sceptical of Britain's imperial mission, viewed the imperial connection as a trap whose only purpose was to force the self-governing dominions to assume greater responsibility for imperial defence.

By common consent, the prime ministers of Britain's self-governing dominions skirted this contentious issue at the 1902 Colonial Conference. The question, however, could not be avoided indefinitely. Frustrated by his repeated inability to persuade Britain to eject France from French possessions in the New Hebrides, the Australian prime minister, Alfred Deakin, arrived in London for the 1907 Colonial Conference determined to change the very basis on which the empire was organized. He proposed that the conference create an Imperial Council that would assume responsibility for the general shape of imperial defence and foreign policy. A secretariat would carry out agreed policy and facilitate communications between meetings. Laurier was unconvinced. Aware