



A federal state is one that brings together a number of different political communities with a common government for common purposes and separate "state" or "provincial" or "cantonal" governments for the particular purposes of each community. The United States of America, Canada, Australia and Switzerland are all federal states. Federalism combines unity with diversity. It provides, as Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister said, "a general government and legislature for general purposes with local governments and legislatures for local purposes."

The word "confederation" is sometimes used to mean a league of independent states, like the United States from 1776 to 1789. But for the Fathers of Confederation, the term emphatically did not mean that. French-speaking and English-speaking alike, they said plainly and repeatedly that they were founding "a new nation," "a new political nationality," "a powerful nation, to take its place among the nations of the world," "a single great power."

They were very insistent on maintaining the identity, the special culture and the special institutions of each of the federating provinces or colonies. Predominantly French-speaking and Roman Catholic, Canada East (Quebec) wanted to be free of the horrendous threat that an English-speaking and mainly Protestant majority would erode or destroy its rights to its language, its French-type civil law and its distinctively religious system of education. Overwhelmingly English-speaking and mainly Protestant, Canada West (Ontario) was still smarting from the fact that Canada East members in the legislature of the united Province of Canada had thrust upon it a system of Roman Catholic separate schools that most of the Canada West members had voted against and wanted to be free of what some of its leaders called "French domination." For their part, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had no intention of being annexed or absorbed by the Province of Canada, of which they knew almost nothing and whose political instability and incessant "French-English" strife they distrusted.

On the other hand, all felt the necessity of union for protection against the threat of American invasion or American economic strangulation (for six months of the year, the Province of Canada was completely cut off from Britain, its main source of manufactured goods, except through American ports), and for economic growth and development. So the Fathers of Confederation were equally insistent on a real federation, a real "Union," as they repeatedly called it, not a league of states or of sovereign or semi-independent provinces.