

INTRODUCTION

NEWFOUNDLAND AND THE CONFEDERATION QUESTION BEFORE 1940

The forces which pulled the original members of the Canadian confederation together were hardly felt in Newfoundland which in the course of three centuries had pursued its existence quite separate from the Canadas and even from the colonies which later became the maritime provinces. Neither the need to find a viable political habitation for the French and English in Canada nor the desire to have a broad basis for defence meant much to the people of the oldest colony and the commercial policies were not attractive to Newfoundland traders. Nevertheless, at the time the other colonies were considering closer association, economic conditions in Newfoundland were poor and the people were suffering. Partly on this account the Newfoundland Government of the day accepted an invitation to send delegates to the conference on confederation which took place in Quebec City in October, 1864. The resolutions which emerged from it contained provisions for Newfoundland's entry.

These provisions never came even close to implementation. At first it seemed that they might. A committee of the Newfoundland Legislature recommended that the question of confederation be submitted to the electorate at the general election which was to be held in 1865, and the election which took place in November of that year resulted in a victory for the party which was pledged to confederation. In addition, the British Government, notably in forthright statements to the Legislature by the Governor, made abundantly clear its wish that Newfoundland join the confederation of British North American colonies that was then taking shape. Nevertheless, because of strong opposition which developed in the legislature, and outside it, especially in the Chamber of Commerce, the Government procrastinated. For a solid year the responsible government elected by the Newfoundland people failed, under pressure from the merchant class, to execute the mandate it had received at the polls. Newfoundland was not represented at the conference in London in December, 1866, at which the final terms of confederation were negotiated. In the British North America Act, framed to give legal effect to the terms, all that remained of the earlier provisions for Newfoundland was a clause outlining a procedure whereby Newfoundland could join the federation at a later date should it wish to do so, and another indicating the number of seats Newfoundlanders would fill in the Canadian Senate.

The British Government was not slow to take advantage of the first of these clauses. At the opening session of the Newfoundland Legislature in 1869, less than two years after the British North America Act had been passed, the Governor urged that action with respect to confederation be no longer delayed. The government responded by appointing a committee of the house which drew up terms for discussion with the Canadian Government. After heated debate, the Legislature decided by a very substantial majority that the proposed terms should indeed be discussed with the Canadian Government and a delegation representing the Newfoundland Government was despatched to Ottawa for this purpose.