

political power) was Canada's de facto prime minister, ably captaining his party through the delicate debates over Manitoba and British Columbia.²⁶

On 27 February, Macdonald left the capital for Washington, where he was to participate in a joint commission that was to delineate Canadian–American fishing rights and a cluster of other issues straining Anglo–American relations. The fisheries issue was long standing, tangled and freighted with national sentiment. In the wake of the War of 1812, Americans had been denied use of the inshore fishery off the east coast of British North America. The Reciprocity Treaty of 1854 had opened the fishery to American fishermen, but its cessation in 1866 once again closed it. Americans who obtained a licence might fish Canadian waters, but when increasing numbers of Americans chose simply to fish the Canadian inshore with impunity, Ottawa reacted by deploying inspectors to expel them. The ensuing conflict soured the young Dominion's relations with Washington, and pulled Canada into a tripartite Anglo–Canadian–American negotiation to resolve the issue and such attendant legalities as where exactly the inshore fishery boundary ran – from headland to headland or along a shore-hugging line. Macdonald was chosen as one of the five British commissioners.

The fishery issue excited Canada's nascent sense of national identity. Macdonald's biographer Donald Creighton would later note that the Canadian Prime Minister's presence in Washington was "a slightly embarrassing novelty . . . the first time that a British North American had ever participated on terms of equality in such a general imperial negotiation."²⁷ The fishery question aroused both Canada's traditional nervous regard for the United States and a newer suspicion that Britain was prepared to sell Canada short if it served her broader imperial needs. The year 1871 would see the departure of the last British garrison troops from Canada; there was a sense that Canada was now on her own in the world. Even Macdonald's ally Alexander Galt warned the House that an adverse outcome of the Washington negotiation would place Canada in "a position of subordination and inferiority." Alexander Mackenzie counselled that Macdonald must resist the "arrogant" American demand for assured access to the Canadian inshore. Given that there were rumours that the Americans might even demand that Britain cede Canadian territory, Mackenzie went on to express his doubt that "our interests would be safe in the hands of British negotiators."

Macdonald understood the high stakes in the fishery issue. Just days before his departure for the American capital, he confronted the challenge: "If this threatening cloud were removed – if the pending controversies were settled – we might calculate upon a long term of peace with the United States, with increased trade and prosperity, upon a vista of tranquility, progress and happiness."²⁸ On 27 February, the Prime Minister departed Ottawa and would not return until early May. In the interim, the House fell silent on the fisheries issue, but the outcome of the Washington talks hung like the sword of Damocles over Parliament.

Between the spikes of intense debate over the unresolved Manitoba, British Columbia and fisheries issues, the House got on with the more mundane business of nation formation. An Act was passed "assimilating" the currency of the new Dominion; the motley monetary system that the nation had inherited from colonial times was reformed and standardized. Henceforth, all coinage in the Dominion would be minted by the federal government while larger paper

26. Later this same year, Cartier's health would deteriorate and the first signs of the Bright's Disease that would kill him in the spring of 1873 appeared. See: Alastair Sweeny. *George-Étienne Cartier: A Biography*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.

27. Donald G. Creighton. *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1955, p. 83.

28. All fisheries quotations: 16, 20 and 24 February 1871.