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the beginning of the seventeenth century until the middle of the eighteenth century, the French settled along the Atlantic coast and the banks of the St Lawrence River. At the time of the military conquest by Britain in 1760, New France was inhabited by a people that was developing rapidly, by a community that, though still small (60,000), had already achieved a remarkable level of organization. This society shared a vast territory in the eastern part of what is today Canada with the native Amerindian population, which was sparsely settled on the land. Thus it was from a French colony that modern Canada grew, and the French-speaking population was to remain the majority group until the mid-nineteenth century, when immigrants arriving directly from the British Isles or driven north by the American Revolution tipped the demographic balance in favour of the English-speaking group. This numerical superiority was to increase steadily right up to the present time because immigration from French-speaking countries dried up almost completely, and also because, in the last century, most non-British immigrants adopted the language of the new English-speaking majority. These immigrants now make up one-third of the Canadian population.

Military conquests, as we all know, cause more problems than they solve. From 1760 to 1867, the history of Canada was to be marked by almost continuous political disagreement between the two founding peoples of the country, the French Canadians and the English Canadians. Fortunately, despite a short armed rebellion in 1837, this confrontation did not hinder the country's development. But, by the end of the nineteenth century, it had become clear that Canada was caught in an impasse. Growth would soon come to a halt unless the scattered colonies of which it was formed were grouped together into a coherent whole and unless a new political structure was set up to ensure its unity.

And so the Canadian Confederation was born. It originally consisted of four provinces – today there are ten. Bringing them together was to prove difficult, even though the plans were executed under the authority of the mother country, Britain, which was at that time all-powerful. Some of the English provinces – Prince Edward Island in the east, for example – at first refused to join the others. In French-speaking Quebec strong opposition was expressed at the time, but only by a minority. Whereas most of the English provinces saw this undertaking chiefly as an opportunity to turn the young, scattered colonies into a large and prosperous country, the French were attracted mainly by the federal formula that gave them at last a provincial government of their own and at the same time assured them of very considerable participation in the government of the country as a whole due to their numerical strength. However, the decisive argument in favour of Confederation may well have been something quite different. The French and English Canadians both felt the urgent need to create a political entity that would be large enough and strong enough to resist the pull of the United States. The young giant was already manifesting its power, which before long surpassed that of all other countries. On two occasions Canada had been invaded by the Americans; peace had been made and friendly relations had been restored, but Canadians did not forget. They were witness to the extraordinary vitality of their great neighbour and they knew that their weakness would eventually lead to annexation – unless a new system brought a similar energy

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