

professionals and merchants. Three *sine qua non* conditions lay embedded in British Columbia's approach to the potential union: federal assumption of the colony's debt, a generous per capita annual grant, and the connection of the Pacific to Central Canada by means of a transcontinental railway.<sup>23</sup>

On 28 March, British Columbia's address was placed in the form of a resolution before the House in Ottawa by Cartier. The government cast the prospect in terms of romantic and affordable inevitability. Cartier drew "the attention of the House to the fact that while our [American] neighbours had taken sixty years to extend their borders to the Pacific, the young Dominion would have accomplished it inside of ten years. . . . We need a seaboard on the Pacific if ever this Dominion was to be a powerful nation in the future. . . ." God and nature, Charles Tupper asserted, "had placed it in the power of this Parliament to take up this question." British Columbia, one Ontario Tory predicted, would give Canada "harbours like Venice and Amsterdam." Customs Minister Leonard Tilley warned that if the offer was not taken up "that Colony might yet be absorbed into the American Union." Finance Minister Francis Hincks rounded out the government's case by arguing that a Pacific railway might be undertaken by private enterprise aided by "a liberal land grant and liberal money subsidy." The whole commitment to British Columbia, Hincks assured the House, would only create "an annual charge of about \$100,000 upon Canada."<sup>24</sup>

The opposition Liberals demurred. In doing so, they were obliged to tread a very fine line between endorsing the higher goal of expanding the union and expressing a vigorous skepticism about the cost and practicability of linking the Pacific to the Atlantic under such hurriedly concocted terms. Richard Cartwright of Kingston suggested that the estimated cost of the Pacific railway reflected wishful thinking more than engineering reality. Alexander Mackenzie cautioned that survey work should be done before the young country was made liable for such a fiscal commitment. Even some Tories expressed their doubts. William McDougall – ever the "loose fish" – declared that he "was as anxious as any man to see this Confederation completed; but denied he was therefore bound to accept every absurd, extravagant scheme proposed professedly with that object, and not shown to be either necessary or practicable."<sup>25</sup> Others complained that the 80-cent per capita grant to British Columbians would be onerous and out of proportion to that paid to other provinces. Thus the Liberal opposition to the terms of British Columbia's entry into Confederation was deeply rooted in the frugal mid-nineteenth-century liberalism of Ontario. But the government persevered and by early April the die had been cast – on 6 April, the House endorsed the extension of the federal *Militia Act* to British Columbia. A bill to incorporate a Pacific railway followed. A British Columbia delegation soon set out for Ottawa to close the deal.

The fractiously debated expansion of Canada onto the western plain and to the Pacific was shadowed by another powerfully felt tension throughout the 1871 session – the unresolved issue of Canadian–American fishing rights. But this tension went largely undebated in the House. The most telling indicator of its simmering importance was the absence of Prime Minister Macdonald from the House through virtually all of the 1871 session. For all but two weeks of the session, the ruling party was a party without its leader. In Macdonald's stead, George-Étienne Cartier (known in the House as "the Lightning Striker" for his deft ability to wield

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23. See: Margaret A. Ormsby. *British Columbia: a History*, Toronto: Macmillan, 1958; and Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

24. All quotations: 28 March and 1 April 1871.

25. 30 March 1871.