

Fifty Years Since Confederation

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It is just fifty years since Confederation, and people are interested in reviewing the actions that led to this great historical event, and in reading once again the great speeches that were made by the statesmen of that time. For in those days there were statesmen—men with wisdom, clear vision and power of expression, men who though they differed in matters of policy were yet true imperialists as they were true Canadians.

Between 1759 and 1867 the various sections of British Empire in North America existed as independent units. In 1840 an attempt was made to unite Lower and Upper Canada, but the attempt was not wholly successful. A good sketch of conditions is given by Mr. Gray in his story of Confederation.

"The practical concession of their rights having been established, the people of British North America set themselves to work, each province in its own way, to develop the resources of its own locality. A healthy climate and great natural advantages bore them onward, but no one common direction governed the general movement. Each did what was best for itself, regulated its tariff by its own immediate wants, built its little Chinese wall round its own frontier, and taxed the manufacturers of a sister province as readily as those of Russia or the United States. Resting on its mother's leading hand, each toddled along in its own harmless way. But science, steam, telegraphs and railways had taught a new education. The stupendous progress of the United States, with an unrestricted commerce from Florida to Maine, stood out in bold contrast to the narrow policy of provincial isolation; and thinking minds, in advance of their time, conceived that if all the Provinces of British North America were united, with a common tariff and an unrestricted internal trade, a similar result, to a certain extent, might be obtained.

"No serious attempt, however, at a political union had been made; but the public mind was rapidly expanding both to its importance and necessity. In 1854 the question had been brought up in the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, and the great leaders of the Conservative and Liberal parties, Messrs. Johnston and Howe, throwing aside the rivalry of party, had delineated with equal power the advantages that would result from combining the scattered elements of prosperity and strength separately possessed by the several provinces.

"In 1858, in the Canadian Parliament, the movement assumed a more tangible shape, and union was made a part of the policy of the Government. Mr. Galt, on his becoming a member of the administration, insisted on its being made a cabinet question; and Sir Edmund Head, in his speech at the close of the session, intimated that his government, during the recess, would take action in the matter. These tendencies, however, were all abortive; they produced nothing.

"The war in the United States, however, and the Trent affair in 1861-2, put an end to all vacillation on the part of the Imperial Government; and from the Prime Minister to the peasant, whether Liberal or Conservative, whether Tory or Radical, but one policy for the future was to prevail. British America was to be consolidated; British America was to be made self-reliant; British America was to be put in a position to require as little from the British Government as was possible, with an allegiance that was

voluntary, and a connection that was almost nominal. The integrity of the Empire was to be preserved, but the outlying frontier was to be mainly instrumental in preserving it. Union received an astounding impulse. It perhaps never before occurred that two independent bodies, moving in their own orbits, so suddenly and so simultaneously received an influence from different causes, impelling them in the same direction, and that direction to result in their mutual good. The force was irresistible; it was to the same end, but neither body was to be coercive of the other. The outward pressure of mutual necessity and mutual advantage broke like light upon the public mind. Both parties were to be strengthened, but the result was to be obtained by the voluntary action of a free people, the exercise of their constitutional rights, the assent of the national judgment.

"In the winter of 1864, though the public mind was thus agitated, all reasonable hopes of effecting any arrangement with Canada, either of a fiscal nature or for the construction of the intercolonial road at an early day, seemed to have been abandoned in the Lower Provinces; and the Legislatures of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island had, at their sessions in that year, severally passed resolutions authorizing their respective Governments to enter into negotiations, and hold a convention for the purpose of effecting a union of the Maritime Provinces, political, legislative and fiscal. That convention was appointed to meet at Charlottetown, in Prince Edward Island, in the month of September following.

"For twelve years George Brown and John A. Macdonald had been the leaders of public opinion in Upper Canada, while George Etienne Cartier was the foremost politician in Lower Canada. At the time of the Deadlock the government was led by John A. Macdonald and Sir E. P. Tache. Party warfare was in those days carried on with a heat and bitterness rare in our time, and no politicians had ever denounced one another more fiercely than had George Brown and John A. Macdonald. To Brown belongs the honor of first laying aside personal feelings, and proposing that he and his friends should unite with their political opponents to bring about such a change in the mode of governing Canada as would allow her to become greater and more prosperous than ever before. Macdonald and Cartier gladly accepted the offer of their old opponent, and a coalition government was formed under the leadership of Sir E. P. Tache, whose purpose was to bring about a federal union of the two Canadas, and, if possible, of all the provinces of British North America. In this union the central government should have charge of all such matters as concerned the whole country, while each province should retain control of its own local affairs. The plan was known to be agreeable to the Imperial authorities, who were at that time anxious to be relieved of the responsibility of defending a number of scattered dependencies, each of which insisted upon having the fullest measure of self government.

"The provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island had, during the same year, sent delegates to a convention in Charlottetown in September, 1864, to deliberate on their own legislative union. A delegation from Canada, consisting of some of her most noted politicians, asked and obtained permission to attend the meetings of the Maritime Convention. They spoke in favor of the larger union of all the

British North American colonies, and persuaded the convention to adjourn their meeting and attend another to be held in Quebec in October. This famous Confederation Convention was held in the Parliament Buildings of Quebec, within sight of the field where, little more than a century before, Englishmen and Frenchmen had fought fiercely for the possession of Canada."

It is not necessary to review the Act of Confederation, known as the British North America Act. Its provisions are well known to the people. If the work had to be done over there might be a few minor changes, but the men of the time thought clearly and on the whole wisely. The conditions of the time may have made it necessary to insert or misplace one or two clauses, but the Act is not final and changes will no doubt yet be made.

It is interesting to read the speeches made in and out of parliament dealing with this question. There is space in this article for only three quotations.

Hon. George Brown—

"But far in advance of all other advantages would be this, that union of all the provinces would break down all trade barriers between us, and throw open at once to all a combined market of four millions of people. You in the east would send us your fish, and your coals, and your West India produce, while we would send you in return the flour and the grain and the meats you now buy in Boston and New York. Our merchants and manufacturers would have a new field before them—the barrister in the smallest province would have the judicial honors of all of them before him to stimulate his ambition—a patentee could secure his right over all British America—and in short all the advantages of free intercourse which has done so much for the United States, would be open to us all. One other argument there is in favor of the union that ought with all of us to weight most seriously, and that argument is, that it would elevate the politics and the politicians of our country. It would lift us above the petty strifes of small communities, and give to our public affairs a degree of importance, and to our leading public men a status very different from what they have heretofore occupied. On a survey of the whole case, I do think there is no doubt as to the high advantages that would result from a union of all the colonies, provided that terms of union could be found just to all the contracting parties, and so framed as to secure harmony in the future administration of affairs."

Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald

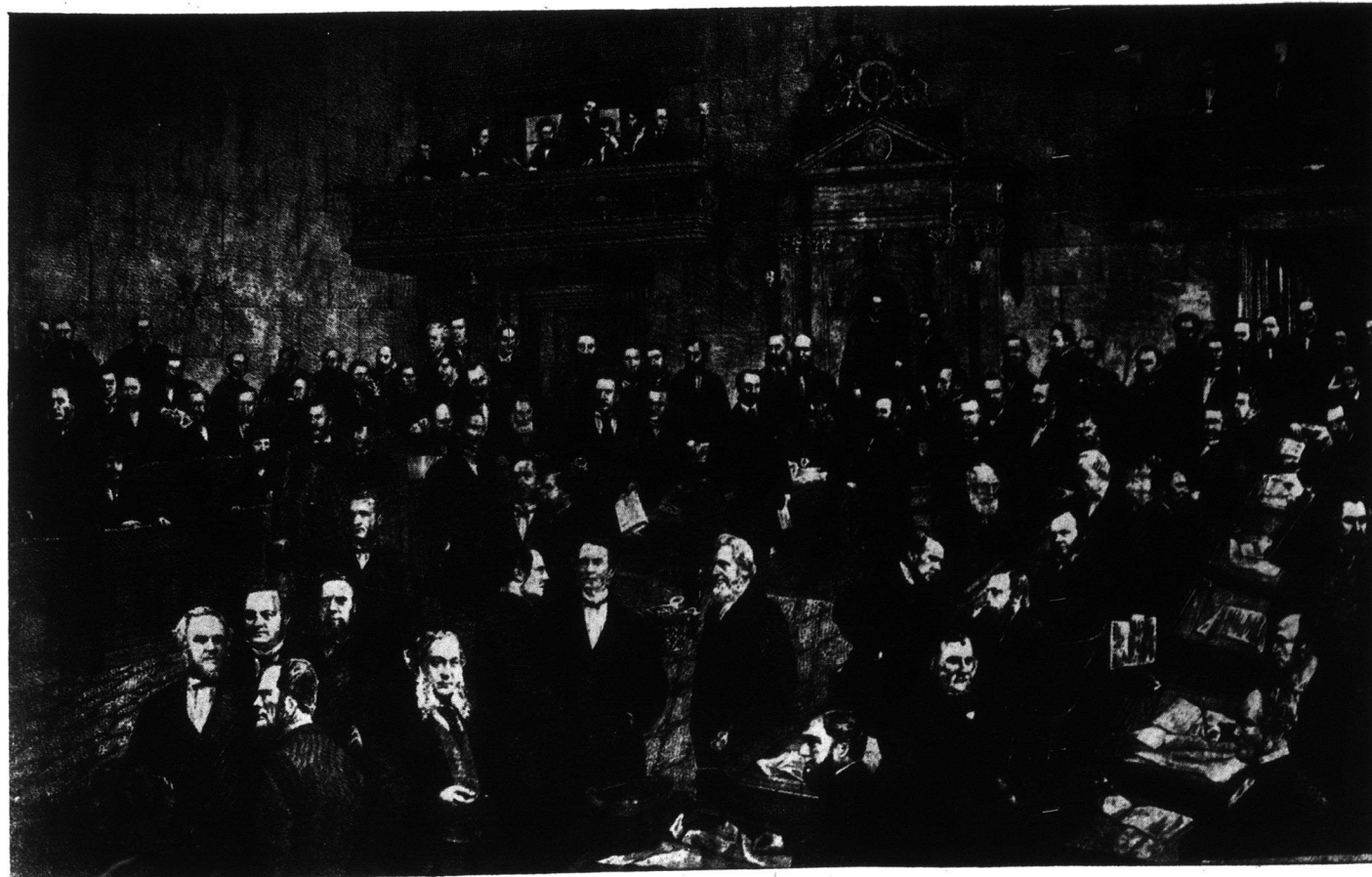
"The whole scheme of Confederation, as propounded by the conference, as agreed to and sanctioned by the Canadian government, bears upon its face the marks of compromise. It must be considered in the light of a treaty. Just so surely as this scheme is defeated will be revived the original proposition for a union of the Maritime Provinces, irrespective of Canada. We know that the United States at this moment are engaged in a war of enormous dimensions; that the occasion of a war with Great Britain has again and again arisen, and may at any time in the future again arise. We cannot foresee what may be the result; we cannot say but that the two nations may drift into a war as other nations have done before. It would then be too late when war had commenced to think of measures for strengthening ourselves, or to begin negotiations for a union with the sister provinces. At this moment, in consequence of the ill-feeling, which has arisen between England and the United States, the reciprocity treaty, it seems probable, is about to be brought to an end; our trade is hampered by the passport system, and at any moment we may be deprived of permission to carry our goods through United States channels; the bonded goods system may be done away with, and the winter trade with the United States put an end to. If we do not, while our avenue is threatened to be closed, open another by taking advantage of the present arrangement, and the desire of the lower provinces to draw closer the alliance between us, we may suffer commercial and political disadvantages it may take long for us to overcome.

Hon. Sir Alexander Galt

"Apart from the advantages from the free trade which will hereafter exist between us, the credit of each and all the provinces will be greatly advanced by a union of their resources. A larger fund will be available as security to the public creditor, larger industries will be subjected to the action of the legislation for the maintenance of public credit, and some of those apprehensions which have latterly affected the public credit of this country will be removed.

"Let us endeavor by this measure to afford a better opening than we now possess for the industry and intelligence of the people. Let us seek by this scheme to give them higher and worthier objects of ambition. Let us not reject the scheme with the bright prospect it offers of a nobler future for our youth, and grander objects for the

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The First Legislature of Ontario, following Confederation.