

*Parallel Paths:
Canadian-Australian Relations since the 1890s*

In the last quarter of the 19th century, the vast physical and psychological distances that separated Canada and the six Australian colonies suddenly narrowed. Victorian England's string of imperial successes in Africa and Asia--victories that gave London control over a quarter of the globe and over a third of its people--sparked a wave of romantic enthusiasm for the empire. This was particularly true in Canada, where economic stagnation, French-English tension and the lure of easy American wealth caused some to doubt the young country's capacity to survive on its own. By the mid-1880s, as the Canadian Pacific Railway wove its final few miles through the Rocky Mountains to the edge of the Pacific, a number of influential Canadians began to envision the new railway as an integral part of a network that would unite Britain with its Asian empire. Throughout the decade, as Canada settled its western provinces and looked outward across the Pacific, popular support for an "All-Red Route" that would link Canada by cable and steamship to Australasia grew steadily.

Reluctant Relations: 1886-1939

The romance of empire made a much smaller impression on the Canadian government. Nevertheless, it was soon forced to consider its relations with the Australian colonies. A slump in world trade, unrelenting pressure from Vancouver logging interests and the persistent arguments advanced by Sir Sandford Fleming, a leading advocate of the Pacific cable, prompted it to accord the colonies a new importance. In May 1893, cabinet agreed to give an Australian, James Huddart, a £25,000 subsidy to operate a regular steamship service between Canada and New South Wales. Shortly after, Canada's first minister of trade and commerce, Mackenzie Bowell, agreed to lead a delegation to Australia to seek new markets for Canadian exports. He was not optimistic. "I do not," he wrote on the eve of his departure, "anticipate any great immediate results from our visit to Australia. The parties with whom we have been estranged so long can scarcely be brought into a close relationship at a moment's notice."¹

Bowell was surprised by his warm reception in Australia, and following his return to Canada in the winter of 1894, the government reached two decisions designed to enhance Canada's relations with Britain's Pacific colonies: first, it agreed to convene a colonial conference in the summer of 1894; and second, it resolved to send John Short Larke to Australia as Canada's first trade commissioner.²