

The sensitive New Brunswick school question, turning on whether Roman Catholics in New Brunswick had possessed legal rights to separate schools in 1867, did not come before the 1874 session despite of the best efforts of the indefatigable John Costigan of Victoria, New Brunswick. Instead the matter was pursued through judicial channels. In July, after the session was over, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council dismissed the Catholic minority's appeal against a negative New Brunswick court judgment. In the 1875 session Costigan would try for an amendment to the British North America Act to acknowledge the Catholic position, but his effort was unsuccessful and the issue died. The Liberal administration and the Conservative opposition alike breathed a sigh of relief.

Temperance measures were also on the public agenda in 1874. There was demand for a federal law restricting or banning alcoholic beverages. But the Canada Temperance Act (popularly known as the Scott Act) would only be passed by the Mackenzie Liberals in 1878, allowing for the prohibition of spirituous liquors in municipalities according to the wishes of the electorate, and thereby laying to rest an issue that had dogged Parliaments since Confederation.

Events outside Canada barely touched the 1874 session. The most salient topic was whether the Liberal elder statesman, George Brown, sent by Mackenzie to Washington to try for a renewal of the reciprocity treaty, would be successful. Questions were asked about the state of Brown's negotiations during the session but Mackenzie chose not to be specific in reply. At last, on 18 June, a completed treaty was sent to the United States Senate, but without an endorsement by the Grant administration. It was received by the foreign relations committee, postponed until the following year and never reported into the full Senate. The cause of free trade with the United States of America, advocated by the Liberals, was not an opportune one. Indeed, Macdonald and the Conservatives were to go on to mine a richer deposit of protectionism, with their "National Policy" to protect Canadian manufacturers from American competition helping them back into power in 1878.

The session of 1874 was an important one for the new administration of Alexander Mackenzie. Through it the Liberals were able to establish their credentials as "reformers" and move the country from a reliance on electoral practices that were becoming increasingly discreditable. Through the adoption of a system of official reporting, a start was made towards ensuring that the deliberations of Parliament would be better and more widely understood and its legislative function made more accountable. Alexander Mackenzie never exhibited the mastery of Parliament achieved by his rival John A. Macdonald, but in his leadership of the House in 1874 he acted with an honest respect for the institution that was to be an important example for the country in the years to come.

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