

Summary Perspective

The Province of Canada: Canada West

John A. Macdonald and his allies mobilized massive support for Confederation. George Brown and his supporters also saw more advantages than drawbacks, although they had some reservations.

Representation

The province would finally get more representatives to match its growing population. It would therefore carry more political weight within the new Confederation than in the Province of Canada.

Prosperity

Confederation would create new markets, make the railway companies more profitable and help people enter the territory to settle land in the West.

Security

Confederation would allow better military protection against the Americans and others.

Since the advantages were obvious, 54 of the 62 members of the Legislative Assembly from Canada West voted in favour of ratifying the Confederation initiative.

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Province of Canada: Canada East

George-Étienne Cartier's party, the Parti bleu, enthusiastically supported the Confederation initiative. Antoine-Aimé Dorion's Parti rouge was, however, opposed.

Autonomy and Survival

The province would maintain control of its language, religion, education system and civil law. The rights of French Canadians would therefore be safe from the English. However, some people were worried about the scope of the federal government's power. They thought that the French would be outnumbered by the English, and that the religion most Francophones practiced might be threatened by the Protestant religion favoured by most English.

Security

Confederation would allow better military protection against the Americans and others. Some were scared, however, that the union might make people from other countries angry by provoking them into a fight. If all of the colonies were getting together, other countries might see a threat, and want to deal with it.

The Will of the People?

Dorion, who was anti-Confederation, criticized those who promoted Confederation for not allowing the people to express their opinion on it, either in a referendum or an election.

The supporters of Confederation won by a narrow margin: only 37 of the 62 members of the Legislative Assembly from Canada East voted in favour of ratifying the Confederation initiative.

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Nova Scotia

Although the delegates led by Charles Tupper were enthusiastic supporters of Confederation, the general population did not share their opinion. Joseph Howe fiercely opposed the initiative.

Little in Common

Nova Scotia had always been focused on the sea and on its relations with Great Britain, and had established few ties with the Province of Canada. Howe and many others feared that their colony would become weak in a much bigger country.

Under-representation

Like the other Maritime colonies, Nova Scotia was worried about being under-represented in an elected assembly.

Insufficient Transfers

The sums of money that the new federal government would transfer to the provinces seemed insufficient.

There was strong opposition to Confederation. Still, the Legislative Assembly ratified the initiative, against the general will of the people.

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New Brunswick

The delegates, led by Samuel Leonard Tilley, were enthusiastic supporters of Confederation, but the population itself was divided.

Under-representation

Like the other Maritime colonies, New Brunswick was worried about being under-represented in a legislative assembly. Its delegates insisted, in vain, on representation equal to that of the Province of Canada in the new Senate.

A Railway

The construction of an inter-colonial railway serving Saint John would open up new markets. Construction costs would be shared by all the colonies.

Trade

New Brunswick had always maintained closer commercial ties with the United States than with the Province of Canada. Uniting with the other colonies would not necessarily be good for business.

Security

Confederation would allow better military protection against the Americans and others, including an Irish group called the Fenians who conducted raids into Canada.

The Rights of Minorities

The Acadians and the Irish Catholics feared that their educational rights would be threatened by Confederation, since the Protestants would be in charge in the new country due to their greater numbers.

In the general election held at the beginning of 1865, the opponents of Confederation won a clear victory. Voters, however, changed their minds when a second election was held the following year, and the Legislative Assembly accepted the union.

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Prince Edward Island

Enthusiasm for Confederation was lower here than in any of the other colonies, even among the delegates. Confederation seemed to offer very few advantages.

Under-representation

As the colony with the smallest population, Prince Edward Island would be very weak within the new government. It wanted more seats in the House of Commons and the Senate.

Access to Land

The fact that most of the island belonged to wealthy British landowners was very unpopular. Residents wanted the new government to buy the lands and to give them to the Islanders living there.

The Economy

There were fears of higher taxes. In addition, the population did not want to be forced to pay for projects that would not benefit them directly, like an inter-colonial railway.

Defence

The Islanders did not want to be forced to get involved in conflicts or disputes that the Canadians might find themselves in with other countries on the border, especially the United States. Since Prince Edward Island was separate from the mainland, it felt it could avoid disagreements over borders and trade.

The debates tore apart the government of Prince Edward Island. The opposition was so strong that the Confederation initiative was rejected until 1873.

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Newfoundland

Newfoundland was not represented at the Charlottetown Conference, although two observers were sent to the Quebec Conference. They returned home enthusiastic but were unable to persuade most Newfoundlanders to care about the idea of Confederation.

The Economy

Some people hoped that Confederation would offer a solution to the island's economic problems, but most saw no advantages. There were fears of higher taxes.

Little in Common

Newfoundland had never been oriented to the land, but rather, to the sea. It had enjoyed a close relationship with Great Britain, and did not have ties with the other colonies.

The Rights of Minorities?

Many Newfoundlanders were of Irish origin, and they were scared of the union because they felt that Ireland's troubles came from its union with England. They were also scared of the anti-Catholic attitudes in Canada West.

Because indifference and opposition were so strong, Newfoundland did not join Confederation until 1949.

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Indigenous Nations

Indigenous nations were not represented at the Charlottetown Conference. Most delegates did not see them as important partners and believed that Indigenous peoples were going to become extinct.

A Changing Natural World

Colonists' and governments' theft of land forced Indigenous peoples to find new ways to survive but a new country, where they would not be able to keep their traditional lands or ways of making a living, was not of benefit to them.

Little in Common

First Nations had always believed they had a direct relationship with the British King or with the Queen, rather than with the colonies. They had not made treaties or agreements with individual colonies. While they may have been worried about the colonies joining, they felt as though they would be able to continue to deal directly with the Queen and her representatives to make treaty or for any other concerns they might have.

New Laws and New Limits

During the 1850s, the government passed laws that directly interfered with the rights of Indigenous peoples. Some laws promoted assimilation by sending Indigenous children to school to learn about settler ways, or by sending Indigenous people away from their homelands. As a result, First Nations and Metis people did not believe that the colonies would negotiate like good partners should.

Despite their relationship with the Crown and their rights to land, First Nations and Metis people were not invited to debate Confederation.

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Great Britain

The British government was involved in the negotiations in Charlottetown and Quebec City, but it took part in the London Conference.

Security

Confederation would allow Great Britain to reduce its costs in Canada, especially for the military, which was very expensive. If the colonies joined together, they would have to pay for their own military.

Investments

London financiers felt that the union of the colonies would help them get a return on their investments in North America, especially if the railway was built. This would make Canada a much richer country.

The British government did everything possible to promote Confederation. As instructed by London, the governors of the colonies used their influence to encourage colonies to join.

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Women

Not all women in Canada had the same experience, depending on where they came from, how old they were, and if they were rich or poor. Still, what was true of women at this time is that they were not considered persons under the law. For this reason, women were excluded from any of the discussions on Confederation.

A Rigid Legal Structure

Under the law, women did not have rights of their own. They belonged to their fathers, as property, until they got married. At that time, they became the property of their husbands. There were no laws protecting women's rights, or their right to be heard in any public way, especially in government.

Little in Common

From an early age, girls were taught that they did not have a place in government, or in any public realm. Opportunities for women to engage with politics were very limited. While some participated in local clubs and associations through their communities or churches, most women did not participate in, and were not aware of, many of the larger political issues at play.

Banquets and Ball gowns

If they were included in any of the events around Confederation, it was as companions to their husbands and fathers. Some women wrote about the Confederation Conferences in their diaries or in letters. Some others created crafts and other items to commemorate their participation in banquets and in balls.

Despite the important segment of the population they represented, the legal status of women as non-persons contributed to their non-participation in any of the discussions or the voting surrounding Confederation.