



3.126 Fathers of Confederation (Quebec Conference)

TOPIC 3.9

Autonomy?

Newfoundland decided not to confederate with Canada in the 1800s. In what ways might this decision have affected the colony?

What do you think would have happened in Newfoundland and Labrador if, during the 1948 referendum, responsible government was the “winner” and not confederation?

Introduction

The question of whether to remain independent or join with other British North American colonies was an issue from 1864 to 1949. In 1864, two Newfoundland

delegates attended the Quebec Conference and signed the resolutions that became the foundation of the 1867 British North America Act. Although Newfoundland

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A TIME OF DEBATE: *The confederation issue from 1864 to 1949*

1864-1869

Difficult economic times make the prospect of **confederation** with Canada an attractive option for some Newfoundlanders. However, a coalition of Roman Catholic Liberals and Conservative merchants – the former fearing a loss of power and the loss of a separate school system; the latter fearing increased taxation – help prevent the union.

1888

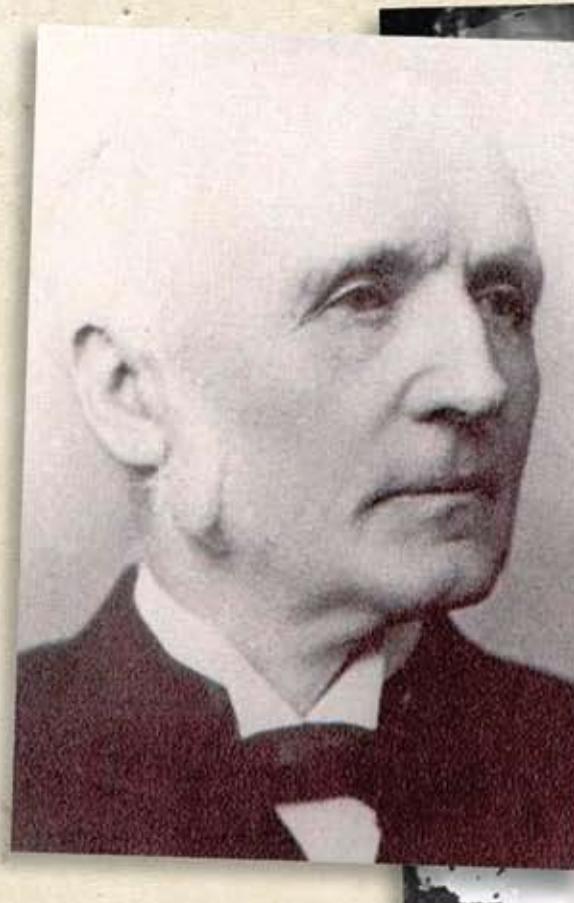
Fearing that a **bilateral** trade agreement might be reached between Newfoundland and the United States, Canada proposes that Newfoundland send a delegation to Ottawa to discuss confederation. None is sent.

1892

Newfoundland participates in the Halifax Conference, held to discuss issues affecting Canada and Newfoundland. Confederation is briefly discussed, but nothing concrete is achieved.

1895

An economic crisis brought on by Newfoundland's Bank Crash of December 1894 again raises the question of confederation. A delegation is sent to Ottawa. Neither side is very enthusiastic. The Newfoundland delegation feels it has its “back to the wall” and can see no alternative. The Canadian government is politically weak and plagued by financial difficulties.



3.128 Ambrose Shea (left) and Frederic Carter (right)

In 1864, Newfoundland's Conservative government decided to send two delegates to the Quebec Conference: Frederic Carter, Speaker of the House of Assembly; and Ambrose Shea, leader of the Liberal opposition. These delegates did not have the power to commit the colony in any way, but they signed the Quebec Resolutions "as individuals" to show their support.

delegates supported resolutions passed at the conference, the Newfoundland government feared opposition to confederation and declined to proceed.

The issue of confederation was debated in the colony throughout the 1860s. In 1869, this culminated with an election that was based almost solely on this issue. It was won by the anti-confederates in a landslide victory, winning 21 of 30 seats. Not yet ready to give up "independence,"

Newfoundlanders had decided that they could survive and prosper on their own. The election was so decisive that the idea of confederation was set aside – indeed, it became a dirty word in many circles. Thus Newfoundland became the only British North American colony to try the experiment of independence within the British Empire. It would be over 80 years before Newfoundland would become a Canadian province in 1949.

1933

The Newfoundland government is virtually bankrupt. The possibility of confederation with the Canadian government is discussed. However, no concrete steps are taken.

1946

National Convention is organized to address future form of Newfoundland government. Confederation is identified as one option.

1948

A referendum is held to allow Newfoundlanders to choose among three options: confederation with Canada, responsible government, and Commission of Government. As a result, Commission of Government (which received the fewest votes) is dropped, and a second referendum is held. Confederation wins and Newfoundland signs the Terms of Union on Dec. 11, 1948.

1949

Newfoundland becomes part of Canada just before midnight on March 31.

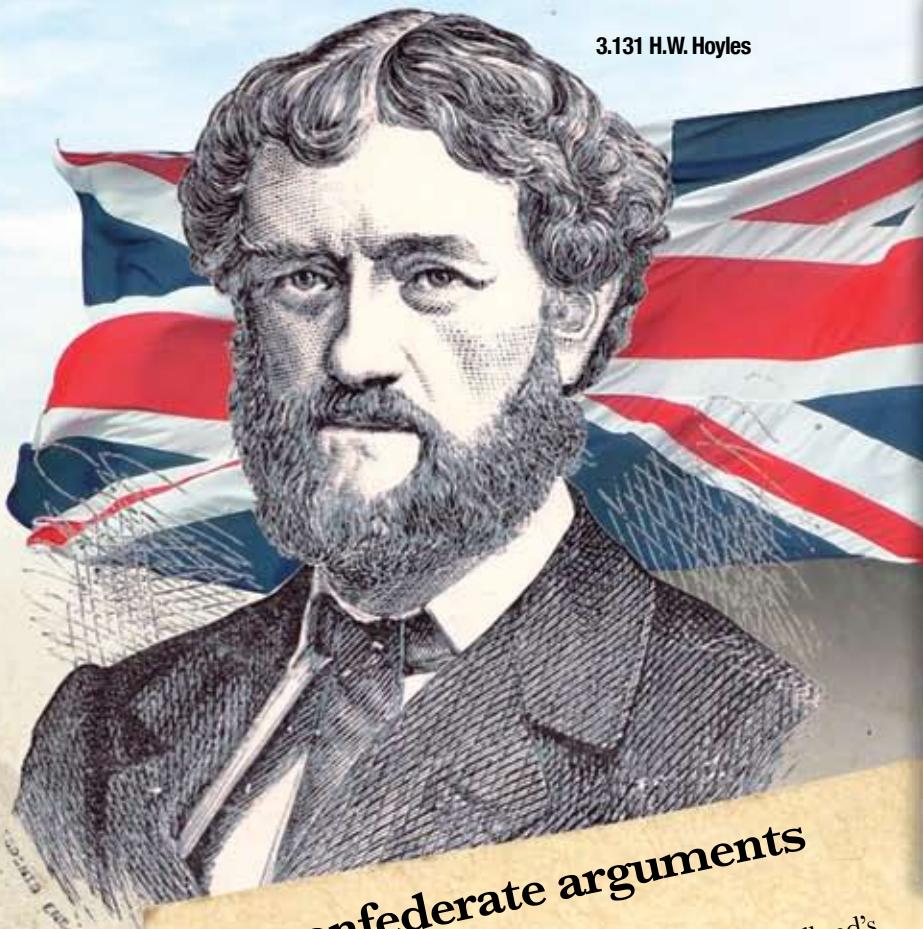
3.129 Charles Fox Bennett



3.130 An anti-confederation ad
from the *Morning Chronicle*, St. John's, Sept. 29, 1869

“For my part I believe that it [Union with Canada] will interfere with our present intercourse with the United States and other countries, and do our commerce incalculable injury. And if we are to be supplied with Canadian manufactures free of duty, higher import dues will necessarily have to be imposed upon our imports from Great Britain and elsewhere, and a heavy tax to be levied also upon the export of our fish, oil, and other produce.”

— An excerpt from a letter written by Charles Fox Bennett as printed in *The Newfoundlander*, Jan. 12, 1865. At the time, Bennett was a prominent St. John's merchant. He was premier of Newfoundland from 1870-1874.



Pro-confederate arguments

1. Taxes would be reduced.
2. Union with Canada would strengthen Newfoundland's economy; investment would be encouraged.
3. Newfoundland would have a better future by becoming part of the old North Atlantic world.
4. Confederation would improve public services in Newfoundland.

"As time rolled on, our debt increasing year by year, and a third of our population for a third of the year were in a starving condition. The end of all this it was not difficult to discover — certain, inevitable national bankruptcy; and if so, where was the hope, in our present isolated state, for the future of Newfoundland? Go into confederation, and these evils are, to a great extent mitigated."

— An excerpt from a speech by Premier H.W. Hoyles (Conservative, District of Burin) Assembly Debate, Feb. 14, 1865. *The Newfoundland*, March 16, 1865.

3.132 A pro-confederation ad from *The Newfoundland*, Sept. 10, 1869

Questions:

1. The 1869 election was centred on whether or not Newfoundland should become part of Canada. What might have been the most significant argument offered by each side in the debate? How would you have voted? Why?
2. "Not yet ready to give up independence, Newfoundlanders had decided that they could

REASONS WHY

THE PEOPLE OF THIS COLONY SHOULD WISH TO BECOME CONNECTED WITH THEIR FELLOW-COLONISTS OF CANADA, NOVA SCOTIA AND NEW BRUNSWICK.

1st.—Because the condition of this country for some years past, proves the necessity of some important remedial change in our affairs.

2nd.—Because if such change be not effected, a large number of the people must leave the country for want of means to live in it.

3rd.—Because capital is being withdrawn from the trade, and there is no chance of maintaining even the present means of employment if we continue to rely on existing resources.

4th.—Because the population are broken down by poverty, and there is no hope in the future for the rising generation unless we can improve our condition.

5th.—Because it is found that wherever a Union of countries takes place on just and honourable conditions, the Union is strength, and leads to prosperity, as in the case of the United States of America.

6th.—Because the proposed Union with the neighbouring provinces will be on the terms of fair and equitable partnership (which terms will be guaranteed by the Imperial Government), in which equal rights will be secured and the interest of all will be to uphold one another and protect the common welfare and prosperity.

survive and prosper on their own." To what degree was Newfoundland and Labrador truly "independent"?

3. Although the anti-confederates won the 1869 election, was it inevitable that Newfoundland and Labrador would become part of Canada? Support your position.