TOPIC 6.1

Road to Confederation

Did Newfoundland make the right choice when it joined Canada in 1949?

If Newfoundland had remained on its own as a country, what might be different today?

6.1 Smallwood campaigning for Confederation

6.2 Steps in the Confederation process, 1946-1949

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 11, 1946</td>
<td>The National Convention opens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 24, 1947</td>
<td>The London delegation departs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 19, 1947</td>
<td>The Ottawa delegation departs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 28, 1948</td>
<td>The National Convention decides not to put confederation as an option on the referendum ballot.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 11, 1948</td>
<td>Overriding the National Convention’s decision, Britain announces that confederation will be on the ballot after all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 3, 1948</td>
<td>First referendum is held.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 22, 1948</td>
<td>Second referendum is held.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec. 11, 1948</td>
<td>Terms of Union are signed between Canada and Newfoundland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 31, 1949</td>
<td>Newfoundland officially becomes the tenth province of Canada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1, 1949</td>
<td>Joseph R. Smallwood and his cabinet are sworn in as an interim government until the first provincial election can be held.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Referendum Campaigns: The Confederates

Despite the decision by the National Convention on January 28, 1948 not to include Confederation on the referendum ballot, the British government announced on March 11 that it would be placed on the ballot as an option after all. With the date of the first referendum set for June 3, this seemingly did not give either side of the debate much time to prepare for their campaigns. However, the Confederate Association, formed to advocate that Newfoundland join Canada, had a head start as it was created on February 21, 1948.

The Confederate Association elected Gordon Bradley as president and Joseph Smallwood as campaign manager. Its campaign was officially launched on April 7, 1948, although it had really begun when the National Convention defeated Smallwood’s motion to include confederation on the referendum ballot. Since that time, Bradley and Smallwood had given regular radio addresses over VONF and VOCM, condemning the delegates who had voted down confederation as the “29 dictators.”

The Confederate Association was well-funded, well-organized, and had an effective island-wide network. It focused on the material advantages of confederation, especially in terms of improved social services – family allowance (the “baby bonus”), unemployment insurance, better pensions, and a lower cost of living. At the same time, the confederates convinced voters that the anti-confederates represented the mercantile elite. They reminded voters of the corruption and poverty of the 1920s and 1930s, and suggested that a vote for responsible government would signal a return to depression-era poverty. These messages were combined in the confederates’ strong appeal to families and the parents of young children. The Association’s newspaper, The Confederate, described children as the future of Newfoundland, and argued that a vote for confederation was a vote for children.

“Playing on the fears and suspicions that Newfoundlanders associated with Responsible Government, and linking those fears explicitly to the well-being of the country’s children, Smallwood and his fellow Confederates utilised … the notion that a vote against Confederation was an abdication of parental responsibility …”


6.3 From The Confederate, June 23, 1948
The confederates used the idea that if one wanted to be a good parent, he or she needed to vote for confederation.

6.4 From The Confederate, May 5, 1948
The confederates often depicted anti-confederates as the mercantile elite.
The Referendum Campaigns: The Anti-Confederates

Compared to the Confederate Association, the anti-confederates had less funding, were less organized, and lacked clear leadership. Indeed, the anti-confederates were disunited and consisted of several groups with differing interests: the Responsible Government League, the Economic Union Party, and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese. However, despite the shortcomings of the anti-confederate campaign, it had widespread support. Its appeal was nationalistic and anti-confederates implored people: “Don’t sell your country.”

The Responsible Government League (RGL) argued that Newfoundland was economically and financially healthy, with rich natural resources and a strategic location in the North Atlantic. It thought that confederation was unnecessary and that the proposed terms of union posed a threat to the fisheries and the local industries that were protected by Newfoundland tariffs. Its platform was that responsible government should be restored first. Newfoundlanders could then decide whether or not confederation was the best option for the future and only then negotiate terms of union.

The Economic Union Party (EUP) argued for economic union with the United States. It was led by successful businessman Chesley Crosbie, who believed that if Newfoundland could export its resources to the United States, the economy would be strong enough for responsible government to succeed. However, since that was not an option on the referendum ballot, the Economic Union Party supported responsible government first. After confederation won the referendum, Crosbie served on the delegation from Newfoundland that negotiated terms of union. He did not sign these terms because he felt that the financial clauses would not allow Newfoundland’s provincial government to balance its books.
government as a step towards that goal.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese also argued for the restoration of responsible government, which it had been active in attaining in 1855. At the very least, it argued, responsible government should be restored before consideration was given to confederation with Canada. In particular, the Church was concerned with keeping the denominational school system, which it feared would be destroyed with confederation.

6.7 A letter from the Roman Catholic Archbishop of St. John’s supporting responsible government, from The Monitor, April 1948

6.8 A cartoon from The Independent, April 5, 1948, suggesting joining Canada would mean extra taxes for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians

*The Roman Catholic Church in eastern Newfoundland was largely the voice of Newfoundlanders of Irish extraction. West coast Roman Catholics seem to have been largely confederate.
Referendum Results

The first referendum occurred on June 3, 1948. Voters had three options: responsible government, confederation, or continued Commission of Government. In the first referendum, there were more votes against than in favour of responsible government. But in order to definitively settle the matter, a second referendum was scheduled for July, this time with the last-place Commission of Government option removed. The confederates realized that victory was within their reach, and they entered the second campaign with energy and enthusiasm. In the meantime, the anti-confederates remained disorganized and their morale was shaken.

In order to win additional votes, the confederates adopted two new tactics. First, they emphasized the role played by the Roman Catholic Church in the first referendum, which they hoped would swing Protestant votes to confederation. In early July, as a result of confederate pressure, the Provincial Grand Lodge of the Loyal Orange Association issued a circular letter to all members. It cited the role played by the Roman Catholic Church, condemned “such efforts at sectional domination,” and warned Orangemen of the dangers of such influence, which they should resist.

Second, the confederates attacked the members of the Economic Union Party for being disloyal, anti-British, and pro-republican. Confederation was presented as pro-British, and “British Union” became a new slogan. An anti-confederate response was to plaster St. John’s with posters reading “Confederation Means

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### Electoral boundaries and results of the first referendum, 1948

Based on an illustration by Duleepa Wijayawardhana, 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsible Government</td>
<td>69,400</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confederation</td>
<td>64,066</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission Government</td>
<td>22,311</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Commission Government Responsible Government Confederation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Commission Government</th>
<th>Responsible Government</th>
<th>Confederation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avalon</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Districts</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The result shown for each district in the map above is how the majority of that district voted. Information on the percentage vote received by each option is in the tables below.
Between the two referenda, the confederates were able to convince most of the Commission of Government supporters to vote for confederation. As a result, the second referendum, held on July 22, 1948, resulted in a narrow victory for confederation over responsible government. There was a sectarian element to voting patterns – most, but not all, Roman Catholics voted for responsible government while most, but not all, Protestants voted for confederation. However, the greatest division among voters was regional — in both referenda the majority of Avalon Peninsula districts voted for responsible government, while the majority of the other districts voted for confederation.

After the second referendum, the Roman Catholic Church abandoned its opposition to confederation and the Responsible Government League disbanded. However, some of its members did try to stop confederation. They sponsored a petition calling for a return to responsible government, and gathered 50,000 signatures. Peter Cashin and others took it to London, hoping to influence British parliamentarians, but it had little or no effect. They also took court action against the Commission of Government, claiming that the legislation authorizing both the National Convention and the referenda were unconstitutional, and that confederation could only be brought about by an elected legislature. However, the action was thrown out.

### Electoral Boundaries and Results of the Second Referendum, 1948

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Confederation</th>
<th>Responsible Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avalon</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Districts</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The result shown for each district in the map above is how the majority of that district voted. Information on the percentage vote received by each option is in the tables below.
—Was Confederation a conspiracy?—

Did Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans freely choose Confederation? Or were they herded through the National Convention and referendum process by Britain and/or Canada to ensure they arrived at a predetermined end? Historians have different views on this.
Most historians seem to agree that, from Britain's perspective, it was in their best interests to promote Newfoundland's confederation with Canada. In the postwar period, Britain's own financial situation was weak, which made expenditures on reconstruction in Newfoundland impossible. The British Empire and Commonwealth was also going through its first phase of decolonization (1946-49), in which the empire withdrew from colonial administration and encouraged some colonies to move towards independence. Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada must be understood within these financial and political contexts. From Britain's point of view, as historian Jeff Webb points out, “the best way of ensuring that the Newfoundland government did not look to Britain for further financial aid was therefore to have Canada take responsibility for the island.”

The question for you to decide is whether or not Britain simply acted to encourage confederation or if they used inappropriate influence to shape the future for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. For instance, some historians point out that despite the National Convention's recommendation that the referendum ballot include only two options – the restoration of responsible government versus the continuation of Commission of Government – Britain included confederation on the ballot anyway. Historian James Hiller argues that “it made the Convention seem like a waste of time, and convinced many that the British were more interested in manipulating events than listening to Newfoundlander.” Hiller suggests that the British should have restored responsible government first and then put their faith in the pro-confederates to win a general election and negotiate Newfoundland's union with Canada.

In the 60-plus years since Confederation, there has been much discussion on Britain's and Canada's involvement in these referenda and their legality and results. A few scholars have argued that Britain and Canada conspired secretly to get Newfoundland into confederation and that the outcome was somehow rigged. However, most historians reject the conspiracy theory and claim that there was nothing unlawful about the event. Indeed, some scholars suggest that, through the 1948 referenda, Newfoundlanders and Labradorians had more of a democratic say in their future than the residents of the four original provinces of Canada. What do you think?

1. Using the quotes in this dimension of thinking as evidence, whose perspective of Confederation seems most plausible?
2. What is your perspective on the quote from Dr. James Hiller that Britain should have restored responsible government and put their faith in the pro-confederates to win the election?
3. If there was a vote in Newfoundland and Labrador today to leave Confederation, what perspective would you take?
The feature film *A Secret Nation* was released in 1992. The screenplay, written by Edward Riche, follows the fictional story of history student Frieda Vokey, who stumbles upon what appears to be a conspiracy around Newfoundland’s Confederation with Canada. A mix of historic facts and fictional twists, the film looks at Confederation in a different light.
Secret Nation/delving into the past

It’s both wise and appropriate to go back in order to examine the film about Newfoundland’s 1848 rebellion on the very eve of Canada’s constitutional conundrum. Ironic, because Newfoundlanders are now demanding Ottawa to recognize the 1846 political leaders who were suppressed by the federal government in 1849, and the warning it serves of political rigidity: not just our lives may be at stake, but our very future as a nation.

Now is the time to explore film as a medium to create your final artwork for this course. Your assignment in this chapter is to select a theme related to the material you studied in this course and create a short film (four-seven minutes in length) about it. You may choose to do this solo or as part of a small group. Some possible themes include:

- Early peopling of “this place”
- The landscapes of Newfoundland and Labrador
- Your community (past, present, or future)
- Changes in the culture of this province
- A current issue

Once you identify your theme, begin the tasks of pre-production. This should include having your screenplay and storyboard prepared, as well as ensuring your actors, location, and equipment are ready for the production stage.

Experiencing the Arts

Now is the time to explore film as a medium to create your final artwork for this course. Your assignment in this chapter is to select a theme related to the material you studied in this course and create a short film (four-seven minutes in length) about it. You may choose to do this solo or as part of a small group. Some possible themes include:

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6.18 Signing of the Terms of Union between Canada and Newfoundland, Dec. 11, 1948.
Sir Albert Walsh (seated, right), chairman of the Newfoundland delegation, signs the Terms of Union at the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. Seated next to him is Canadian Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent. Standing (left to right): Hon. Milton F. Gregg, Minister of Veterans’ Affairs; Hon. J.J. McCann, Minister of National Revenue; Hon. Brooke Claxton, Minister of National Defence; F.G. Bradley; G.A. Winter; Philip Gruchy; J.R. Smallwood; and J.B. McEvoy.

6.20 Initiating the carving of Newfoundland’s coat of arms at the Parliament Buildings after Newfoundland joins Confederation
Shown are sculptor C. Soucy, Newfoundland Secretary of State Gordon Bradley, and Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent.

6.21 Not everyone celebrated the result of the second referendum.
Although there was much jubilation on the confederate side after they won the second referendum in 1948, other patriotic Newfoundlanders declared it to be a dark day in Newfoundland’s history. In their grief, some anti-confederates flew flags at half-mast outside their homes and businesses to symbolize mourning.
Terms of Union
The Terms of Union between Newfoundland and Canada were signed on December 11, 1948. The document contained 50 terms outlining how Newfoundland would fit into the existing Canadian Confederation. The first 16 of these detailed the shape of the Newfoundland provincial legislature and constitution, its electoral districts, and its representation in the Canadian House of Commons and the Senate. The remainder dealt with issues negotiated during the National Convention in 1947—that is, the “proposed arrangements” that were offered by Canada. These terms, unique to Newfoundland, included: the protection of the denominational school system (term 17); the continuation of existing laws in Newfoundland after union (term 18); and the maintenance of the Newfoundland Fisheries Board (term 22).

This was followed by considerable discussion about how the new province should be governed between the date of union—set for March 31—and the first provincial election. After many consultations, Canadian Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent appointed Sir Albert Walsh, who had served as a Commissioner for the Commission of Government, as the first lieutenant-governor. It was understood that he would in turn invite Smallwood to form an interim government. Gordon Bradley, who had been President of the Confederation Association, received a position in the federal cabinet.

On April 1, 1949, Walsh swore in Smallwood and his cabinet. On Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Bradley was sworn in as Secretary of State. He said:

“This is a day which will live long in North American history... It is a day of fulfillment—fulfillment of a vision of great men who planned the nation of Canada more than 80 years ago; and as we stand here on this day of destiny, our thoughts fly back through the years to those far-seeing men of the past—Macdonald, Brown and Cartier in Canada and Carter and Shea in Newfoundland... In fancy we see them now, bending over this scene in silent and profound approval... Thus we begin life as one people in an atmosphere of unity. We are all Canadians now...”

Questions:
1. What advantages did the confederate campaign have over the anti-confederate campaign?
2. What was the most significant reason(s) why confederation won a narrow victory over responsible government in the second referendum?
3. Was the decision for Newfoundland to confederate with Canada in 1949 a good decision? Support your answer.

*One of Newfoundland and Labrador’s major industries, the fishery, now came under federal control.

6.22 The signed Terms of Union of Newfoundland with Canada