

Historica Canada Education Portal

The Confederation Debates: Alberta Senior Mini-Unit

This [mini-unit](#) for senior-level classes helps students to understand and analyze the key ideas and challenges that preceded Alberta's entry into Confederation. The first section deals with the debates in the provincial and/or federal legislatures, while the second section addresses more specifically founding treaty negotiations with the First Nations. Each section can be taught independently.

The activities and attached materials will help students understand the diversity of ideas, commitments, successes and grievances that underlie Canada's founding.

By the end of this mini-unit, your students will have the opportunity to:

1. Use the historical inquiry process—gathering, interpreting and analyzing historical evidence and information from a variety of primary and secondary sources—in order to investigate and make judgements about issues, developments and events of historical importance.
2. Hone their historical thinking skills to identify historical significance, cause and consequence, continuity and change, and historical perspective.
3. Develop knowledge of their province/region within Canada, minority rights and democracy, and appreciate the need for reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.



Primary Source: Frederick W. A. G Haultain's Views on Confederation

When the Northwest's Legislative Assembly debated provincial status, Frederick Haultain said the following points:

SUMMARY STATEMENT

"We have a clear and definite policy and we are united on it. We believe in one province with all rights of other provinces: we believe in the full control of the lands, the mines, the minerals and all the royalties of this country: we believe in adequate compensation for all the public lands that have been used for Federal purposes: we believe in getting a fair adjustment of any outstanding¹ debt there may be against the Territories; we believe in the subsidy² being given, not on a population of 400,000 people, but that it should be as large as that received by any other province; in fact, we believe in being treated the same as the other provinces, and that is the proposition we made to the Federal Government, with the provision that we be made into one province and not into a number of small ones. I believe that in this we are backed up by a loyal following in this House and knowing the justness of our claim we rest assured of the outcome. (Cheers.)"³

The Leader, 3 April 1902.

REASONS FOR BECOMING A PROVINCE

"As practical men they must conclude that the present institutions would not do if joined with the financial embarrassment. Outside of the method of direct taxation⁴ the only method open was to negotiate for entrance to Confederation. There was no question that when we went in we would receive more money than we receive now. Whether we would receive all that the Territories were entitled to was a different question, depending on the Government and the Legislature of the day, depending on the men entrusted with the negotiations. The settlement would not be consummated to-day, nor possibly next year, but the question was one which it seemed to him the new Legislature would have to take up, and he thought it was the most important question that the new Legislature would have to deal with. He made this statement for the Government as showing that the future attitude of this Government would have the end of provincial establishment in view."

The Leader, 13 September 1898.



Image held by the Saskatchewan Archives

¹ Outstanding = unpaid

² Subsidy = money given by an entity

³ Cheers = applause from fellow politicians.

⁴ Direct taxation = direct taxes are paid directly by the people to their government

[Sample page of quotations from Frederick W.A.G. Haultain](#)

Wilfrid Laurier in Brief



This summary borrows from the Dictionary of Canadian Biography entry listed in the "Additional Resources" section of this mini-unit.

Wilfrid Laurier was born in the parish of Saint-Lin (Laurentides), Lower Canada on 20 November 1841. His father, Carolus, was a bilingual, literate farmer and surveyor who was eager to improve his family's modest economic prospects and went on to become the municipality's first mayor. He also closely followed and sympathized with the *Parti Patriote*, whose rebellion transpired just before Wilfrid's birth.

Early in his childhood, Carolus moved Wilfrid to a school in New Glasgow, a few miles from the family's home, where English language and customs prevailed, and these experiences gave him a fondness for and familiarity with both of Canada's European cultures. He subsequently attended Collège de L'Assomption, where he excelled, though he left the conservative and ultramontane institution with a strong passion for liberalism. He subsequently studied law at McGill College and met Zoé Lafontaine, who he would later marry. After passing his law examinations, Laurier initially practiced law in Montreal before moving to Arthabaskaville (Arthabaska).

Laurier, along with other *Rouges*, initially opposed Confederation, arguing that it would lead to the assimilation of French Canada into an English-Protestant country. Like the *Rouge* leader, Antoine-Aimé Dorion, he decided to work accept his new country. After a brief time in the provincial legislature, Laurier won the federal seat for Drummond—Arthabaska in 1874 and quickly established himself as a moderate liberal intent on winning Quebec over to his party. Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie recognized Laurier's talent and appointed him Minister of Inland Revenue, bringing him into the inner circle of Canadian politics. During the Liberals' long time in opposition, Laurier continued to emphasize French-Canadian perspectives by contesting, for example, Louis Riel's execution in 1885, while also emphasizing the compatibility of French and English Canada.



Image held by Library and Archives Canada.

When Edward Blake decided to resign as Liberal leader, he surprised many by selecting the French-Canadian Laurier. Indeed, Laurier initially refused, but Blake persisted and Laurier eventually accepted, though he continued to worry that English-Canadians would not accept his leadership. Canadian politics made this especially challenging. Debates concerning the use of French language in the Northwest and Manitoba constantly threatened to divide Canadians. On these occasions, Laurier generally pursued compromise and slowly won the favour of Canadian voters. The tactics paid off during 1896 election when, with the Conservatives in disarray following Macdonald's death, the Liberals won the election.

When it came time to create Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905, Prime Minister Laurier again tried to find compromise when divisions arose around the question of French language and separate schools in the Northwest. The government's initial bill defied Haultain and protected separate schools by reintroducing measures that Haultain's governments had previously overturned. When Clifford Sifton resigned from the cabinet over provincial control of education and others threatened to follow, however, Laurier bowed to political reality and removed these protections. He nevertheless insisted on the establishment of two (rather than one) province, as well as federal control of Crown lands and natural resources. Laurier continued as premier minister until 1911, and he remained as leader of the Liberal Party and a protector of French Canadian interests until his death in 1919.

[A brief biography of Sir Wilfrid Laurier](#)



Handout: Chief Ahtahkakoop

Ahtahkakoop, also known as Tall Pine and Star Blanket, was born about 1816 on the prairies of what is now western Canada. He would become a respected chief and would lead his people during a time full of challenging circumstances and transitions. His life spanned a period of dramatic change for Indigenous Peoples on the plains, and much of his time as a leader was concerned with navigating these changes.

As a child, Ahtahkakoop was raised in a Cree nation that had not yet been significantly impacted by the arrival of European settlers. As historian Deanna Christensen, the only person to undertake a substantial study of Ahtahkakoop's life, writes:

Every year in early summer, his family and other members of the band moved their tipi camp to one of the sacred places on the plains. Here they joined a large encampment of Plains Cree for the annual Sun Dance and other religious ceremonies. After the ceremonies were over, they travelled the vast expanses of prairie grasslands hunting buffalo, and they gathered the roots, herbs, and berries that grew on Mother Earth.

As fall approached, the people separated into smaller family groups and moved into the wooded hills of the parklands—the Thickwood Hills, the Eagle Hills, and the valleys of the Eagle and Battle rivers. Winter came. Now, in addition to building pounds to entrap buffalo, the people killed moose, elk, and deer, and they hunted fur-bearing animals. This was the time for storytelling, the time when dry grass was stuffed between the tipi covers and their liners to insulate the tipis against the cold. Then, as the days grew longer and the air began to warm, sap started to run in the birch and maple trees. The sap was tapped and made into syrup or sugar. Ducks, geese, and other waterfowl returned from the south, providing a welcome change to the winter diet. Later, the eggs were collected.

It was a good life, the old people have always said. Their spiritual world centered on the Creator and his spirit helpers. In their physical world, life focused on the buffalo (Christensen 2000, 15).

Ahtahkakoop learned how to hunt buffalo, becoming a renowned hunter, and was taught the meaning and procedures of sacred ceremonies. An important part of many Cree ceremonies was the smoking of the pipe. His teacher taught him that:

The tobacco in the sacred stone pipe is also a spirit helper. The smoke of the tobacco mixes with the fire in the pipe and disappears into the heavens, to the spirit world. What we see as nothing in the air holds untold energy. This nothingness is full of energy. It is full of the energy that is part of the energy the Creator put in all of His creations. When the smoke mixes with what seems to be nothingness, it is actually communicating with the Creator and his spirit helpers. We were given the sweetgrass and the pipe so we could have a true



Image held by the Saskatchewan Archives

[Sample page of quotations from Chief Ahtahkakoop](#)

Curriculum Objectives

This mini-unit has been broadly designed for Alberta senior-level classes. The activities described in the pages, for example, fulfill the following outcomes listed in “Grade 9: Canada: Opportunities and Challenges” curriculum guide.

The mini-unit can be accessed here:

<https://hcmc.uvic.ca/confederation/pdfs/alberta-national.pdf>

Background

Before each province and territory became a part of Canada, their local legislatures (and the House of Commons after 1867) debated the extent, purposes and principles of political union between 1865 and 1949. In addition to creating provinces, the British Crown also negotiated a series of Treaties with Canada’s Indigenous Peoples. Although these texts, and the records of their negotiation, are equally important to Canada’s founding, as the Truth and Reconciliation Committee recently explained, “too many Canadians still do not know the history of Indigenous peoples’ contributions to Canada, or understand that by virtue of the historical and modern Treaties negotiated by our government, we are all Treaty people.”

The vast majority of these records, however, remain inaccessible and many can only be found in provincial archives. By bringing together these diverse colonial, federal and Indigenous records for the first time, and by embracing novel technologies and dissemination formats, [*The Confederation Debates*](#) encourages Canadians of all ages and walks of life to learn about past challenges, to increase political awareness of historical aspirations and grievances and engage present-day debates, as well as to contribute to local, regional and national understanding and reconciliation.

