

Historica Canada Education Portal

The Confederation Debates: British Columbia Intermediate Mini-unit

This [mini-unit](#) for intermediate/senior-level classes helps students to understand and analyze the key ideas and challenges that preceded British Columbia'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.



Amor de Cosmos in Brief

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

Amor de Cosmos was born under the name William Alexander Smith in Windsor, Nova Scotia, in 1825 to a family of Loyalists. In 1852, he moved to California to work as a photographer. In 1854, a bill from the California Senate approved his name change to Amor de Cosmos. Four years later, he joined his brother at Vancouver Island after hearing that gold has been found on the Fraser River. He founded the *British Colonist* newspaper in 1858, where he began his lifelong advocacy for the city of Victoria. His paper also fought for responsible government, the unification of the colonies, and the development of a “nation” in BC that employed Chinese workers without giving them full rights within the community. He also espoused a strong belief in progress, growing populations and an economic future for BC based on farming, fisheries, and forestry. He held a seat in the Vancouver Island Legislative Assembly from 1863 until 1866. After the union of the provinces of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, he sat in the British Columbia Legislative Council for four years.



Image held by Library and Archives Canada.

De Cosmos supported Confederation because he believed it would prevent American expansionism into British Columbia. He hoped that, with time, a larger British political union would mature to the point that it would occupy a seat in an imperial legislature in London, England. His intense advocacy for Victoria also led him to push for that city to become the chief Canadian Pacific transportation hub. To accomplish these lofty goals, he founded the Confederation League with other British Columbian politicians in 1868. At the League's convention in Yale that year, the League passed motions to join Confederation, and sparked considerable support for the colony to join Canada. He and his supporters continued to pursue responsible government and Confederation for several years against those who opposed uniting with Canada. This latter movement was led by de Cosmos's chief rival: John Sebastian Helmcken.

From 1871 to 1874, de Cosmos was elected to the British Columbia Legislative Assembly, where the lack of sufficient progress on the Canadian Pacific Railway limited his effectiveness. De Cosmos served as British Columbia's second premier from 1872 to 1874. He is known as British Columbia's “Father of Confederation” because of his important role in founding the Confederation League, uniting the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, and for fervently advocating bringing the province into Confederation.

[A brief biography of Amor de Cosmos](#)



Primary Source: John Sebastian Helmcken's Views on Confederation

When British Columbia's Legislative Council debated Confederation, John Helmcken said the following points:

UNION IN GENERAL

"I have opposed the Government on Confederation. I think it probable that when the terms come back from Canada they will bear but little resemblance¹ to themselves; so until the country is satisfied I will oppose Confederation. It is sufficient that the ultimate issue now rests with the people themselves; and I hope they will band themselves together to demand these or better terms..."

"I intend now to offer no factious opposition to the conditions, but it will be my duty to point out what I consider faults,² and though I will support the terms as they are, or nearly so, others must go in. I will not attempt to introduce anything which Canada cannot concede;³ so that on the one hand, Canada may have no excuse to refuse to accept the terms, and on the other, if Confederation does come it may come accompanied with conditions that will be beneficial to the material interests of the Colony. I now bide my time;⁴ when the terms as agreed to by Canada return, the people may find them changed, and not so attractive and enticing as they now appear."

British Columbia, *Legislative Council: Debates on the Subject of Confederation*, 11 March 1870, pg. 52.



Image held by Library and Archives Canada.

RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

"A new election ought to have been called before this question was brought on; but there is one satisfaction left us, it is that Her Majesty's Government have left the terms to the Colony.

"It is for the people to use that power rightly, wisely, and well, to see that Confederation means the welfare and progress of the Colony.

"Now, Sir, in the first place, it is necessary for the people to see that Confederation must be for the general good of the Colony."

British Columbia, *Legislative Council: Debates on the Subject of Confederation*, 9 March 1870, pg. 9.

¹ Resemblance = similarity

² Faults = mistakes

³ Concede = admit

⁴ Bide my time = wait for an opportunity

[Sample page of quotations from John Helmcken](#)



Handout: David Latass (Also Latasse, Latess and Latesse)

David Latass was born Songhees and came to be a chief in the Saanich (WSÁNEĆ) nation, having relocated there between the ages of seven and fifteen when he went there to live with an aunt upon the death of his parents. He spent the remainder of his life living at the Tsartlip First Nation. Speaking to a reporter in 1934, Latass claimed to be 105 years old. He was, according to the reporter, “still mentally keen.” Addressing doubts concerning his age, Latass said: “White people doubt my age can be 105 years. They see my bright eyes, they saw me move quickly until a few years ago, they heard me speak in council and address the tribes when long past ninety years old, and they said it was impossible for me to have known James Douglas. But I was a grown man when the big pow-wow was held [in 1850] in Beacon Hill.” Historian Neil Vallance has written that, despite extensive research, he has found wildly varying accounts of Latass’s age and had been unable to confirm it conclusively.

Very few Indigenous accounts of the signing of the Douglas Treaties were written down. Two of the accounts comes from Latass, who recounted the signings of the 1850 Esquimalt/Songhees treaties and the 1852 North Saanich Treaty. His accounts were recorded in a newspaper article from 1934. There is considerable uncertainty around the details of Latass’s life. As Vallance notes, “Latass (or his father) participated in the Songhees/Esquimalt meetings, and he (or his maternal uncles) participated in the Saanich meetings.”

Latass came to a leadership position in his nation, in part, because of his knowledge of the treaties. This was explained during questioning of Mr. Gabe Bartleman, then seventy-three years old, as part of a court proceeding. Louise Mandell, counsel for the Tsawout, questioned Bartleman:

- Q ...who was the leader of the Saanich people during the time when you were growing up?
- A. A gentleman by the name of Chief David Latesse...
- Q. Was David Latesse an elected leader or was he a leader by his birthright or hereditary line?
- A. He was a leader by his birthright and became a leader through the merits that he had behind him.
- Q. ...what did you understand that the merits were which the people recognized in him?
- A. At that time, Chief David Latesse apparently got to understand some of what is called the treaty, and he tried to inform the people that he looked after the best he could at that time.
- Q. Now you mention that Chief David Latesse had knowledge concerning the treaty...
- A. He didn't use the word “treaty,” they called it James Douglas's word.
- Q. ...and did Chief David speak about what happened to have that treaty concluded?

[Chief David Latass on Vancouver Island Treaties](#)

Curriculum Objectives

This mini-unit has been broadly designed for intermediate/senior-level

classes. The activities described in the pages, for example, fulfill the following outcomes listed in British Columbia's "Civic Studies 11" and "First Nations Studies 12" curriculum.

The mini-unit can be accessed here:

<http://hcmc.uvic.ca/confederation/pdfs/british-columbia-provincial.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.