

Historica Canada Education Portal

The Confederation Debates: Newfoundland and Labrador Intermediate Mini-Unit

This mini-unit for intermediate/senior-level classes helps students to understand and analyze the key ideas and challenges that preceded Newfoundland and Labrador'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.



Charles James Fox Bennett's Views on Confederation

Although Charles Bennett did not sit in Newfoundland's legislatures when the colony debate Confederation during the late 1860s, his newspaper, the Morning Chronicle, printed the editorial reproduced in nearly every one of its issues during the two months that preceded the 1869 election.

NO CONFEDERATION !

Reduced (not Increased) Taxation !!

Let us keep our Fisheries to Ourselves ! – Let us keep our Lands,
Mines and Minerals to Ourselves !! – Let us keep Our Revenue to Ourselves !!!

Newfoundland for the Newfoundlanders.

NO REWARDS FOR TRAITORS.

No Militia Laws for Our Young Men

NO DRAFTING FOR OUR SAILORS.

Let us Stick to our Old Mother Country, Great Britain, the TRUE Land of The Brave and Home of
the Free! !

LET US NEVER CHANGE THE UNION JACK¹ FOR THE CANADIAN BEAVER ! !

NEVER GIVE TO CANADA THE RIGHT OF TAXING US.

WHAT IS CONFEDERATION?

It is Taxation without limit upon our imports, our Exports, and upon all kinds of property, to be levied—not by our own people, but—by Canadians, residing more than a thousand miles from us, and who know nothing of our resources or requirements, and care less.

It is the giving up of all control over our valuable Fisheries, vesting² the management of them in the hands of the Canadians to be disposed of as they deem proper.

It is the giving up to Canada all our Lands, our Timber, our Mines and our Minerals, for a paltry³ and insufficient consideration.

It is the sending of our Revenue to Canada to aid people of that country in paying the interest of their Debt, in building Railroads,



Image held by Library and Archives Canada.

¹ Union Jack = the British flag, which was also used by Newfoundland and Labrador at the time

² Vesting = entrusting

³ Paltry = meager

[The mini-unit includes primary documents from prominent historical figures who contributed to the debate, such as Charles Fox Bennett.](#)



Joseph “Joey” Smallwood in Brief

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

Born in 1900, Joseph “Joey” Roberts Smallwood is considered by some to be the “Last Father of Confederation.” After enrolling in local schools and enrolling for a time as a boarder at Bishop Field College, Smallwood worked as a journalist, writing mainly for left wing publications and publicly identifying himself as a socialist. He subsequently moved to New York, he wrote for a series of left-wing dailies, as well as *The New York Times*.

In 1926, upon returning to Newfoundland, Smallwood founded the *Humber Herald* and entered politics as a campaign manager for Sir Richard Squires in 1928. His first attempt to win office failed in 1932. He ran a pig farm near the American air base at Gander Newfoundland, and was then elected to the 1946 National Convention as a delegate for Newfoundland’s Bonavista Centre.

Smallwood soon dominated the National Convention debates by lobbying hard for Confederation. Smallwood believed that union with Canada would create the economic prosperity and bring social welfare and public services to Newfoundland. His frequent domination of the National Convention’s debates drew the ire of St. John’s merchants, who claimed Smallwood was betraying Newfoundland’s independence.

After the convention’s first delegation to Ottawa—which went to Ottawa in 1947—Smallwood ensured that the option to join Canada as a tenth province was included in a referendum that also included options to maintain Newfoundland’s governance under the Commission of Government as well as a return to responsible government.

Beginning on 21 February 1948, Smallwood worked as the campaign manager for the Confederate Association and edited the association’s newspaper: *The Confederate*. The association promised that joining Canada would bring employment insurance, family allowances (also known as the “baby bonus”), stronger pensions, and a lower cost of living to the colony. Smallwood and the Confederation cause won the second of two referenda on 22 July 22 1948. Given his leadership of the Confederation cause, his inclusion in the final delegation to negotiate the terms of union with Canada was a forgone conclusion.

On 1 April 1949, Smallwood was appointed as the premier of Newfoundland’s interim provincial government. He was subsequently elected the leader of the Liberal Party and the party won its first election in May of 1949. He would not be seriously challenged as premier for the next two decades. During his nearly 23 years in power, his government improved roads and social services in Newfoundland and Labrador. Smallwood also tried to promote industrialization by seeking foreign investment. It largely failed at accomplishing this latter goal, and his increasingly autocratic control of Newfoundland’s politics drew the ire of many rivals. He resigned as Liberal leader in 1972 and, after a couple of failed attempts to regain his leadership of politics in Newfoundland, he retired from politics in 1977. He later became an author of several books, and passed away in St. John’s just days before turning 91.



Image held by Library and Archives Canada.

[The mini unit provides short biographies of all historical figures.](#)

Curriculum Objectives

This mini-unit has been broadly designed for Newfoundland and Labrador intermediate/senior level classes. The activities described in the pages, for example, fulfill the following outcomes listed in Newfoundland and Labrador’s “Social Studies Grade 7,” “Social Studies: Grade 8—Newfoundland and Labrador History” as well as “Social Studies: Canadian History 120” curriculum guides.

The mini-unit can be accessed here:

<http://hcmc.uvic.ca/confederation/pdfs/newfoundland-and-labrador-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.