

Historica Canada Education Portal

The Confederation Debates: Newfoundland and Labrador Senior Mini-unit

This [mini-unit](#) for 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.



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.

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

Curriculum Objectives

This mini-unit has been broadly designed for senior-level classes. The

activities described in the pages, for example, fulfill the following outcomes listed in Newfoundland and Labrador's "Social Studies: Canadian History 1201" curriculum guide.

The mini-unit can be accessed here:

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

