

Historica Canada Education Portal

The Confederation Debates: Saskatchewan Senior Mini-unit

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

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

Albert James Smith in Brief

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



Sir Albert James Smith was born in 1822 in New Brunswick and was a successful commercial lawyer. Smith was elected to the Legislative Assembly on 18 May 1852 on a platform that advocated limited public spending, voting by ballot, biennial elections, an elected legislative council and the removal of the provincial capital from Fredericton so that an oligarchy of families would not dominate it. Smith was unique in the assembly as he fought against the privileges of the establishment, such as King's College in Fredericton.

In 1854, Smith became a part of Charles Fisher's Executive Council. Amongst this Liberal cabinet, Smith was considered to be a radical who maintained advocacy for the reorganization of the government departments, voter registration, diminution of the powers of the lieutenant governor and the nationalization of the European and North American Railway. Smith debated the practicality of Tilley's prohibitory liquor bill of 1855, which he opposed on the basis of refusing to compromise civil liberties. When Lieutenant Governor John Henry Thomas Manners-Sutton dismissed the Reform government on 1 January 1856 as a result of the failures of the prohibition bill, Smith opposed the centralization of power that allowed for Manners-Sutton to form a government with John Hamilton Gray. Smith was aggressive in his critique of Gray, which contributed to Grays defeat in 1857. After Fisher was caught up in a crown land scandal, Samuel Leonard Tilley became the new premier, with Smith as his chief lieutenant and attorney general. There, he often accused of bullying his opponents; one incident involved him attempting to assault Lestock DesBrisay with a fireplace iron.



Image held by Library and Archives Canada.

In 1861, Arthur Hamilton Gordon, who disliked Smith, succeeded Manners-Sutton. During Tilley's absence, Smith conflicted with Gordon when militia appointments were made without Smith and Tilley's involvement. In 1862, while out of office, Smith showed that he could organize support and undermined Tilley by opposing Gordon being paid in sterling over colonial pounds, which would have cost the provincial treasury an additional £600. During the 1864 North American Federation movement, Tilley organized former opponents like Gray, discarded colleagues like Fisher, but excluded Smith as a result of his consistent opposition to union schemes and the Intercolonial Railway. In November 1864, Smith publicly called the steps towards Confederation as prioritizing Canada over New Brunswick. In the 1865 election, Smith carried on his anti-Confederation rhetoric and won 26 seats out of 41 in the Assembly. Smith then selected an Executive Council which ended up including individuals who supported Confederation. By 1866, Smith's council was fragmented, as several members began to openly supported Confederation. Gordon accepted a pro-Confederation reply from the British Legislative Council, undermining Smith's stagnant government. Smith resigned and was not able carry New Brunswick in the May and June 1866 elections. Gordon's confederate team was successful in portraying Smith as anti-confederation and as an annexationist. All motions proposed by Smith were rejected in June 1866, and he accepted his defeat and stated that he was "anxious to assist in working out the measure."

After being elected to Canada's first parliament in 1867, Smith advocated for provincial rights and reduced tariffs on New Brunswick. In 1870, federal policies created dissatisfaction with Canada, and Smith could have led an annexationist movement but refrained. Smith was even offered a lieutenant governorship of New Brunswick under John A. Macdonald, which he declined in order to keep his seat in the House of Commons.

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



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

[The mini unit provides short biographies of Indigenous historical figures like Chief Ahtahkakoop.](#)

Curriculum Objectives

This mini-unit has been broadly designed for Saskatchewan intermediate/senior-level classes. The activities described in the pages fulfill the outcomes listed in Saskatchewan’s “History 30: Canadian Studies, Unit 2,” “Native Studies 10,” “Native Studies 30,” and “Social Studies 10,” and curriculum guides.

The mini-unit can be accessed here:

<http://hcmc.uvic.ca/confederation/pdfs/saskatchewan-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.

