

RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT BACKGROUNDER

Use this backgrounder to support the activities in Historica Canada’s Responsible Government Education Guide.

DEFINITIONS

Confidence (of Parliament): The principle that a government must have the support of the elected members of the assembly to remain in office. The government must have the confidence of parliament to pass laws, budgets, and taxes. A government is expected to resign or seek the dissolution of Parliament and call a general election if confidence is lost (usually through a vote of non-confidence).

Family Compact: A name used to describe the network of people who dominated the legislative, bureaucratic, business, religious and judicial centres of power in Upper Canada (Ontario) from the early- to mid-1800s. Members of the Family Compact held largely conservative and loyalist views and were against democratic reform and Responsible Government.

Château Clique: The counterpart of the Family Compact in Lower Canada (Québec). They were mostly wealthy anglophone merchants.

Oligarchy: A form of government where power is held by a small, exclusive group, often from a dominant class or clique.

Assimilation: Causing a person or group to become part of a different society, country, etc.; the process by which a person acquires the social and psychological characteristics of another group.

BIOGRAPHIES



Robert Baldwin, 1846 (courtesy Toronto Reference Library/Baldwin Collection/Jrr 271 Cab II).

Robert Baldwin, an anglophone from York (present-day Toronto), entered politics in 1829. Not a friendly or charismatic man, he commanded political respect through his strength of character and his moral uprightness. This led him to sacrifice his interests before those of the institutions he believed in: he resigned political office more than once rather than compromise his principles. He was unequivocally committed to popular government, democratic reform through peaceful means, and the possibility of a bicultural nation. Baldwin “created, more than anyone else, Canada’s political future of Responsible Government and biculturalism.”¹



Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine (courtesy Patent and Copyright Office/Library and Archives Canada/C-005961).

Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine was first elected to the Lower Canada Assembly in 1830. Early on, LaFontaine realized the importance of cooperation. This belief was validated when Baldwin offered to support LaFontaine’s nomination in the North Riding of York after LaFontaine was physically (and violently) shut out of re-election in his own riding. This alliance was the beginning of a long and productive friendship that required great physical courage and defied cultural and societal norms. LaFontaine later arranged for Baldwin to run in a seat in Rimouski after Baldwin lost in his own riding due to violence, despite the fact that Baldwin spoke no French. LaFontaine was bilingual, but he insisted on speaking French in the Assembly. His actions directly caused the repeal of the clause in the Act of Union prohibiting the official use of French.



James Bruce, Lord Elgin (courtesy Getty Museum/84.XA.886.5.13).

Lord Elgin – James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin, was named governor general of Canada in 1846 and arrived in Montréal on 30 January 1847. The Colonial Office had previously resisted the idea of Responsible Government, but Elgin and the new colonial secretary, Earl Grey, believed it offered the best way to settle Canadian political conflict. When a Reform majority won the 1848 election, Elgin commissioned LaFontaine (with Baldwin at his side) to form the first truly Responsible Government.

1. Cross, Michael S., *A Biography of Robert Baldwin: The Morning-Star of Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.