Portail de l'éducation de Historica Canada

The Confederation Debates: British Columbia Senior Mini-Unit

This mini-unit for 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.

Primary Source: John Sebastian Helmcken's Views on Confederation

When British Colombia'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 resemblance[1] 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 1 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]

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 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 1964, 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.

A brief biography of Albert Smith

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 the Vancouver Island Treaties]

Curriculum Objectives

This mini-unit has been broadly designed for British Columbia 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:

https://hcmc.uvic.ca/confederation/pdfs/british-columbia-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.