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OF THE IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT
FOR THE
UNION
OF
CANADA, NOVA SCOTIA AND
NEW BRUNSWICK,
AND THE
GOVERNMENT THEREOF;
AND FOR PURPOSES CONNECTED THEREWITH.

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JOHN A. MACDONALD

The Indispensable Politician



by Alastair C.F. Gillespie
With a Foreword by the Hon. Peter MacKay

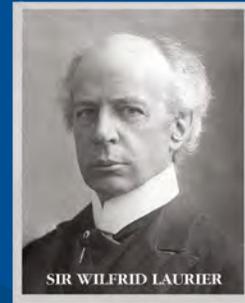




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Charlottetown Conference Delegates, 1864. Library and Archives Canada.

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Foreword

In Kingston, where he lies at rest, there is no elaborate memorial – none is needed, for all of Canada is his monument. As long as there is a Canada, Canadians will remember Sir John A. Macdonald. As we mark an important national anniversary, it is fitting to pay tribute not just to his central role in Confederation, but also his lasting imprint on Canada’s national character.

A hero not just to Conservatives but to many Canadians of all political stripes, Macdonald has always been understood as one of the chief architects of Confederation. He was a statesman and his own first Minister of Justice, who drew up many of the resolutions underpinning the British North America Act, described by one participant at the final negotiations in London as a “sharp fox...the man of the conference.”

Beyond the undeniable achievement of Confederation, Canada’s first Prime Minister left an indelible mark on Canadian culture – setting in motion a government and a way of life that is not a copy of other countries, but has become an example to other nations.

Presiding over Canada’s formation, Macdonald helped define the Canadian approach to national life, which has always depended on Canada being more than a nation-state. “We must look indulgently upon each other’s faults and foibles,” he would say. “We must try to get over these little discrepancies instead of enlarging them for mere party political purposes.”

Canada’s success has always depended on generations of Canadians adopting Macdonald’s viewpoint – reaching past trivial old-world differences to become citizens of a common country in the new world. In the debate on Canadian values, Macdonald had the first and last word. “I never asked the question, and never will ask, what a man’s religion, race or ancestry may be,” Macdonald said. “If he is a capable man, the ‘right man for the right place,’ that is all I ever enquire into.”

Lest anyone state otherwise, Macdonald was a man ahead of his time on subjects of diversity, equality and justice for all. Allied with George-Etienne Cartier, he resisted complaints about “French domination,” calling for French-Canadians to be treated as a nation. Later in life, he tried to extend the vote to widowed women. In these initiatives, Macdonald met fierce resistance. As with so much of the character and accomplishments of this remarkable man, he was not only modern in his time, but had his eyes firmly fixed on the future.

Macdonald’s instinct for unity – his unionism – was the core of his contribution to Confederation: “If I had any influence over the minds of the people of Canada, any power over their intellects, I would leave them this legacy – ‘whatever you do, adhere to the Union – we are a great country and shall become one of the greatest in the universe if we preserve it; we shall sink into insignificance and adversity if we suffer it to be broken.’”

With the character of our federation still an open question, Macdonald was emphatic that Canadians must be one united people. He called on Canadians to “strengthen the Central Parliament, and make the Confederation one people and one government, instead of five peoples and five governments, with merely a point of authority connecting us to a limited and insufficient extent.”

A man who Wilfrid Laurier acknowledged possessed greatness of soul, Macdonald left behind the original example of Canadian political leadership. He pioneered the political party as an instrument of national unity, summing up his approach to politics as a “Government holding an even balance between all parties, and all sections of the Province.” At a time when cultural and religious conflicts embittered Canadian public life, his consistent message was conciliation.

Macdonald’s unique political strategy for Confederation should be remembered. Long resisting George Brown’s calls for constitutional change, Macdonald insisted that the constitution was not

a party question – likening it to the abolition of the slave trade as an issue that went beyond partisan lines. In that spirit one of his greatest acts was to take his greatest rival George Brown into the coalition government of 1864. He was a consensus builder extraordinaire, who encouraged all the participants to share the dream, and the credit of a unified Canada.

Rightly called the “indispensable politician,” among the 36 Fathers of Confederation, Macdonald alone formed an effective political alliance to deliver a new constitution – bringing together Brown and Cartier, rival leaders of Upper and Lower Canada, along with idealists like Thomas D’Arcy McGee and the federalist Alexander Galt. With Charles Tupper and Samuel Leonard Tilley as allies in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick – they delivered Confederation together. A force of personality with few rivals in that era, while not without his own admitted flaws, had the capacity to draw people together. His perseverance and work ethic allowed him to deliver great national projects, and filled friends and foes alike, if not always with admiration, certainly with respect.

By instinct a coalition-builder, Macdonald’s success was no accident. A descendent of Highland Scots of humble beginnings, he was an unlikely nation builder. A man who overcame obstacles and life’s trials and tribulations, he pursued Canada’s greatness with a determination that not only defined him, but also the nation he founded with others. In a country of diverse peoples and vast geographies, coalition-building was a political imperative, but it was also a moral choice that continues to shape who we are.

It was in this spirit, my friend and colleague the Rt. Hon. Stephen Harper and I, sought to build the modern Conservative Party, delivering for Canadians the second longest Tory administration since Macdonald’s. At its core was the same successful approach of building bridges, physical and metaphorical, with citizens of all walks of life, in an inclusive, pragmatic, pan-Canadian political movement. And just as Sir John A. pursued a band of steel called the Canadian Pacific Railroad to solidify the nation, today’s leaders must pursue modern infrastructure such as high speed rail and pipelines to propel us into the next century.

Canadians have become a people united by free institutions and shared values, chief among these that a Canadian’s national origin shouldn’t matter. Not all at once, and with mistakes along the way. But Macdonald’s vision and farsightedness set us on the path to greatness – and for that he certainly deserves the thanks and remembrance of a grateful country. ◆◆◆

Hon. Peter MacKay
Former Leader of the Progressive Conservative Party
Former Deputy Leader of the Conservative Party and Federal Cabinet Minister

Avant-propos

A Kingston, où il repose en paix, il n'y a pas de monument élaboré – aucun n'est nécessaire, car le Canada dans son entier constitue son monument. Tant qu'il y aura un Canada, les Canadiens se souviendront de Sir John A. Macdonald. Or, puisque nous célébrons un important anniversaire national, il convient de lui rendre hommage non seulement pour son rôle central dans la Confédération, mais également pour son empreinte durable sur le caractère national du Canada.

Héros non seulement pour les conservateurs, mais aussi pour de nombreux Canadiens de toutes les allégeances politiques, Macdonald a toujours été considéré comme l'un des principaux architectes de la Confédération. Cet homme d'État et le premier qui a été ministre de la Justice a formulé un grand nombre de résolutions sur lesquelles repose l'Acte de l'Amérique du Nord britannique. L'un des participants à la phase finale des négociations à Londres l'a décrit comme étant un « fin renard... l'homme de la Conférence ».

Outre son rôle indéniable dans la création de la Confédération, cet homme qui a été le premier à être Premier ministre du Canada a laissé une marque indélébile sur la culture canadienne – en mettant en place un gouvernement et un mode de vie dissemblables à ceux des autres pays, toutefois devenus exemplaires.

Président à la formation du Canada, Macdonald a contribué à définir l'approche canadienne de la vie nationale, qui a toujours reposé sur une vision du Canada qui dépasse la simple notion d'un État-nation. « Nous devons considérer avec indulgence les défauts et les faiblesses de l'un et de l'autre; nous devons essayer de passer outre ces légères divergences au lieu de les grossir à des fins purement politiques. »

Éprouvé par de nouvelles vagues de diversité, le succès du Canada a toujours été tributaire de générations de Canadiens qui adhéraient à la vision de Macdonald – dépasser les différences triviales du vieux continent pour devenir citoyens d'un pays commun dans le Nouveau Monde. Lors des débats sur les valeurs canadiennes, on peut affirmer que Macdonald a eu le premier et le dernier mot. « Je n'ai jamais posé la question et ne la poserai jamais, à savoir quelle peut être la religion, la race ou l'origine d'une personne, a déclaré Macdonald. Tout ce que je tiens à savoir c'est s'il s'agit d'une personne capable, de la "bonne personne au bon endroit". »

Personne ne peut contredire le fait que Macdonald était un homme en avance sur son temps quant aux questions de diversité, d'égalité et de justice pour tous. Allié à George-Étienne Cartier, il a résisté aux plaintes contre la « domination française », réclamant que les Canadiens français soient considérés comme appartenant à une nation. Tard au cours de sa vie, il a tenté d'étendre le droit de vote aux veuves. Dans ces initiatives, Macdonald a fait face à une opposition féroce. Cet homme remarquable, qui brillait par son tempérament et ses réalisations et qui nous a faits tels qu'il a été décrit, était en avance sur son temps.

L'instinct de Macdonald pour l'unité – son unionisme – était au cœur de sa contribution à la Confédération : « Si j'avais quelque influence que ce soit sur la mentalité de la population, quelque influence que ce soit sur son intelligence, je lui laisserais cet héritage – "Peu importe ce que vous ferez, adhérez à l'Union – nous sommes un grand pays et devrions devenir l'un des plus grands sur la planète si nous le préservons; nous sombrerons dans l'insignifiance et l'adversité si nous permettons qu'il soit scindé". »

Le caractère de notre fédération est encore une question ouverte, mais Macdonald croyait que nous devons être un peuple uni. Il a prié les Canadiens de « renforcer le Parlement central et de faire de

la Confédération l'instrument permettant d'unifier – pour former un même peuple sous un seul gouvernement – cinq peuples et cinq gouvernements reliés entre eux de façon limitée et insuffisante ».

Homme dont Wilfrid Laurier a souligné la grandeur d'âme, Macdonald a laissé derrière lui l'exemple original du leadership politique. Il a été un pionnier de l'utilisation d'instruments tels que le parti politique pour réaliser l'unité nationale, résumant son approche de la politique sous la forme d'un « Gouvernement préservant un juste équilibre entre toutes les parties et toutes les sections de la province ». À une époque où les conflits culturels et religieux contaminaient la vie publique canadienne, son message constant a été la conciliation.

Nous devons nous rappeler la stratégie politique unique de Macdonald pour réaliser la Confédération. Résistant longtemps à l'appel de George Brown pour un changement constitutionnel, Macdonald a insisté sur le fait que la constitution n'était pas un enjeu partisan – arguant que la question dépassait les lignes partisans, tout comme l'abolition de l'esclavage. Dans cet esprit, l'un de ses plus grands accomplissements a été d'attirer son grand rival George Brown dans le gouvernement de coalition de 1864. Conciliateur extraordinaire, il a encouragé tous les participants à partager le rêve d'un Canada uni et la reconnaissance vouée à cet accomplissement.

Nommé à juste titre l'« homme politique indispensable » parmi les 36 Pères fondateurs du Canada, Macdonald a formé seul une alliance politique efficace pour établir une nouvelle constitution – réunissant Brown et Cartier, les dirigeants rivaux du Haut et du Bas-Canada, avec des idéalistes comme Thomas D'Arcy McGee et le fédéraliste Alexander Galt; il a rallié à sa cause Charles Tupper et Samuel Leonard Tilley de la Nouvelle-Écosse et du Nouveau-Brunswick. Ensemble, ils ont livré la Confédération. Doté d'une personnalité d'une force avec peu de rivaux à l'époque, bien que non exempt de défauts de son propre aveu, il était rassembleur. Sa persévérance et son éthique de travail lui ont permis de réaliser de très grands projets nationaux, ne lui valant pas toujours l'admiration, mais certainement le respect indéfectible de ses amis comme de ses ennemis.

Les succès de Macdonald, conciliateur naturel, n'ont pas été obtenus par accident. Il était originaire des Highlands, en Écosse, et ses humbles débuts en faisaient un bâtisseur de pays peu probable. Homme ayant surmonté les obstacles et les épreuves de la vie, il s'est appliqué à réaliser la grandeur du Canada avec une détermination qui l'a non seulement défini, mais qui a aussi défini la nation qu'il a fondée avec d'autres. Dans un pays occupé par une diversité de peuples et constitué de vastes zones géographiques, la formation de coalitions était un impératif politique, mais c'était aussi un choix moral qui continue à façonner ce que nous sommes.

C'est dans cet esprit que mon ami et collègue, le très honorable Stephen Harper et moi-même cherchons à construire le Parti conservateur moderne, pour offrir aux Canadiens le deuxième gouvernement conservateur le plus long depuis celui de Macdonald. En son noyau se trouve la même approche fructueuse pour édifier des ponts, physiques et métaphoriques, avec les citoyens de tous les horizons, au sein d'un mouvement politique inclusif, pragmatique et pancanadien. Et tout comme Sir John A., qui comptait sur le réseau ferroviaire appelé *Canadien Pacifique* pour solidifier la nation, les dirigeants d'aujourd'hui doivent poursuivre la modernisation des infrastructures tels que les trains à grande vitesse et les pipelines pour nous propulser dans le prochain siècle.

Les Canadiens sont devenus un peuple uni grâce à des institutions libres et des valeurs communes dont la toute première est que l'origine nationale importe peu. Non pas d'un seul coup et avec des erreurs en cours de route. Mais la vision et la clairvoyance de Macdonald nous ont amenés sur les sentiers de la grandeur – et pour cela, Macdonald mérite certainement la gratitude et le souvenir d'un pays reconnaissant. ◆◆◆

L'hon. Peter MacKay
Ancien chef du Parti progressiste-conservateur
Ancien chef adjoint du Parti conservateur et ancien ministre du Cabinet fédéral

Introduction



“I am glad there is a party willing to agitate the country on the question of disunion, because we can then fight and struggle upon the subject, it can be our war cry. (Hear.) I go with all my power and force in favour of the continuance of the union, and I say this – whatever may have been the antecedents of any man in Canada, whether he has acted with me or against me, if he becomes a disunionist, I disown him; and I don’t care what may have been the antecedents of another, though he may have struggled fiercely against me, if he enters himself as a supporter of the union with England, under Her Majesty the Queen, and of the union of the two Canadas, I hail him as a brother, and am ready to act with him. (Cheers.) God and nature have joined the two Canadas, and no factious politician should be allowed to sever them. The same great waters flow past them, the mighty St. Lawrence connects them, their interests are the same. Our country, Sir, is one.”

Address by the Hon. John A. Macdonald to the Electors of the City of Kingston 1861, 91.

“**Y**ou’ll never die, John A.!” Many Canadians recognize this phrase, shouted at a rally in John A. Macdonald’s last campaign of 1891. Of the five great Canadians featured in the Confederation Series, it is the Glasgow-born and Kingston-raised Macdonald who lives on most in the popular imagination, and of the five perhaps most likely to be credited as *the* Father of Confederation. After all, he was reputed to have drafted 60 of the 72 Quebec Resolutions, was described as “*the* man” of the London Conference, and became Canada’s first prime minister, winning six majority governments over the 34 years after Confederation, presiding over Canada’s expansion to the Pacific Coast. Macdonald’s image was burnished by Donald Creighton in his classic biography – his Laurentian vision carving out a transcontinental destiny for Canadians – and the 200th anniversary of his birth has inspired new appraisals of his life, including a two-volume biography. In a way, he lives with us still.

Yet for years before Confederation, Macdonald set himself resolutely against George Brown’s demands for constitutional change, insisting the existing Union of Upper and Lower Canada could work, proving it with a smile and a wink from his place on the government benches as attorney general for Canada West. He dismissed representation by population as his rival Scot’s “great quack nostrum” (*Mirror of Parliament*, March 23, 1860), and was a late and almost theatrically reluctant convert to federalism. An early and characteristic political message praised practical development over “fruitless discussions on abstract and theoretical questions of government” (Biggar 1891, 56). These positions and his reputation as a political opportunist led opponents like Brown to charge that crediting Macdonald for Confederation was an example of carrying off a victory that rightly belonged to others. That view deserves to be rejected.

Macdonald's role in Confederation was exceptional, underpinned by a subtle and distinctive political strategy. Unlike George Brown, who made constitutional change a partisan wedge, Macdonald argued the Constitution must not be made a party question. His apparent resistance to constitutional change, and the supposed "suddenness" of the Coalition of 1864, are better explained in Macdonald's own words, as evidence of a decidedly Burkean strategy for change: the issue of Canada's future should "proceed on its own merits," and action should come only when the issue was "ripe." As Brown forced the Union into crisis, Macdonald waited until opportunity knocked, taking his lifelong opponent into the Great Coalition. Confederation was the greatest achievement of a resourceful man – the indispensable politician who successfully meshed the clashing forces of his political rivals like an oily political gearbox.

Yet Macdonald was much more than a ubiquitous politician; he was also concerned with what Burke called the "moral and political country." Long before Confederation, Macdonald was practising a brand of informal federalism within Canada's unitary state, demonstrated in his actions and his political speeches, which he acknowledged in the Confederation Debates. With his instinct for settling divisive questions, and through his alliance with George-Étienne Cartier, Macdonald set the pattern for successful Canadian leadership, bridging the principal divides in Canadian politics, rewarded with lasting power. As we shall see, some of Macdonald's greatest contributions to Confederation came in the trenches of his partisan battle with Brown, when he campaigned to save the Union from dissolution, and pursued the politics of the whole over the politics of the part. The frontiers Macdonald expanded were not merely geographical, they were also frontiers of the spirit. ◆◆◆

Shaping the Soul of Canada

A worsening strategic position

In early 1858, John A. Macdonald was still co-premier of the United Province of Canada, but licking his wounds after a bruising regional election defeat in Upper Canada at the hands of George Brown. Three ministers were defeated, and the opposition Reformers had taken a majority of seats in Upper Canada, calling for representation by population and the abolition of Catholic schools. Macdonald only kept power backed by Cartier's majority in Lower Canada, a political ally so close, they called each other brothers. Macdonald's strategic position was worsening – Brown's regional strategy was eating into support in Upper Canada, and more and more Conservatives were accepting Reform's call for rep by pop, even as their Lower Canada allies rejected it. So far Macdonald resisted Brown's campaign for constitutional reform – but he was standing on a peninsula's edge with the sands eroding away. "Sir, our opponents may hold the offices, but we have the hearts of the people – our principles have been endorsed by the public mind of Upper Canada," Brown proudly declared to a Reform party rally (*Toronto Globe*, January 14, 1858).

Parliament reconvened, and with the debate on his government's throne speech rumbling along, Macdonald was sitting in the House, listening to Brown vaunting his election victory. His arch-foe was ticking through the names of ousted Upper Canada Conservatives, and their newly elected Reform replacements, asking why such a significant change. The government had no policy, declared Brown; it ignored all the great issues in the election, especially the Constitution. Some wanted to dissolve the Union. Galt called for federation of all the provinces. Dorion of Montreal called for a federation of Upper and Lower Canada alone, and Brown called for rep by pop. "I am convinced that I speak the views of the great mass of Upper Canadians in saying so," Brown declared, "that we

would accept any one of these solutions, rather than continue the existing system of demoralization” (Toronto *Globe*, March 11, 1858).

Politics of the Whole

Macdonald rose to defend his government on March 12, his first speech an opportunity to galvanize supporters and contain Brown’s advance. So far, the Conservatives had no policy to meet Brown’s demands for constitutional change and rep by pop – other than to defend the existing Union. This stalemate was symptomatic of how Macdonald was both helped and hurt by the Cartier alliance. With the strength of his united caucus, the French-Canadian leader kept Macdonald in power. Cutting against that was the price – the *Bleus* got their way on a host of policies that were growing increasingly unpopular in Upper Canada. Seeking support in Upper Canada alone, Brown could take advantage of an ample supply of wedge issues where Macdonald’s hands were tied – the Constitution, Catholic schools, the expensive buyout of the *Seigneurs*. As Brown divided the country, Macdonald portrayed himself practising the politics of the whole. Two fundamentally opposed political strategies were in contest – not just for partisan spoils, but as Macdonald painted it, in a battle for the soul of Canada itself.

“Two fundamentally opposed political strategies were in contest – not just for partisan spoils, but as Macdonald painted it, in a battle for the soul of Canada itself.”

Dividing the Country

East of Kingston, Macdonald claimed, Upper Canada was opposed to rep by pop to a man, its interests indissolubly linked with Lower Canada by the stream of commerce flowing down the valley of the St. Lawrence. The real cause of his setback in Upper Canada, Macdonald declared, was Brown pitting different Canadians against each other, willingly exploiting religious prejudice – nothing to do with the Constitution. Even in 1858, the charge of dividing the country was one of the most serious that could be levelled in politics. “The question of defeat or Election in Upper Canada was determined by the ‘no-Popery’ cry,” Macdonald declared. “The cry on which the honourable member for Toronto himself [Brown] was elected was not representation by population; but it was a cry against the Pope, nunneries, and ecclesiastical corporations. (Hear, hear – no, no.) The question of representation by population had no more to do with it than it had with affairs in Kamchatka (Hear, and laughter.)” (*Scrapbook Debates*, March 12, 1858).

As usual, Macdonald’s taste for light-hearted mockery turned to his advantage, in reading aloud the outrageous election placards used by Brown and allies to secure their divisive victory. “‘Those electors who fear God and desire to put the present government out, and get those who are right-hearted men, will vote for Henry Munro, Esq.’ (Loud laughter.) And next follows the prayer of the reverend right-hand man of the honourable member for Toronto: – ‘We trust that every man will on his bended knees seek the Divine aid to elect Henry Munro.’ (Loud laughter.) ‘Let no man wait for a leader to call for him; every man must feel that he is an officer, that the work is his own under God, and let every woman pray and rouse up any husband or son’ (renewed laughter) ‘who may be lukewarm, and the victory is certain.’ (Laughter.)” Macdonald was enjoying himself again, the

House of Commons man seeming to feel his grip over the Assembly: “Well, the prayers of the righteous are said to avail much” (Ibid.).

Good, practical government

Characteristically, Macdonald praised his government’s practical accomplishments, under the moderate Liberal-Conservative coalition he had helped bring about in 1854. Good, practical government was a key part of Macdonald’s brand, and he was proud to have settled the vexed issues of the clergy reserves and the seigneurial tenure that mixed religion and politics. “On quiet, sober, second thought, he felt convinced that the people of Canada, looking at the acts of the administrations of which he had been a member, would agree that those administrations had given their best energies and abilities to advance the social, the moral, the material interests of the country. And he would say one thing more, that if gentlemen opposite were to occupy the treasury benches tomorrow, they would find very little of the legislation of 1854, ’55, ’56 or ’57 that could be profitably amended” (Ibid.).

Brown’s problem – Macdonald declared – was that he was making the Constitution a partisan question, a wedge issue, rather than raising it for discussion on the merits. Macdonald’s tone shifted away from partisan banter. One Upper Canada leader was speaking directly to the other, one in government, the other resolute in Opposition, exposing what he saw as indefensible contradictions in Canada’s conflicted Union. The slave trade was not abolished by British statesmen through partisanship, Macdonald declared:

No, they kept it out of the political arena; they laid information before the people; they worked with statesmen of all parties, gaining what they could from each successive administration until at length the public mind became imbued with correct ideas concerning it, and it was carried as a national, by no means as a party question. (Cheers.) Again, the attempt to alter the criminal law of England – a law so severe that it was said to be written in Blood, – was not made by a mere political party. Those who wanted a reform in the law got what they could from a Conservative government, then again a little more from a Whig government, until they had accomplished their ends. (Hear.) So Canadians should do who wished to amend the representation of the people in Parliament (Ibid.).

Strategy for constitutional change

Consciously or not, Macdonald had just told his chief rival how they could deliver Confederation together. Macdonald’s advice to Brown was Macdonald’s own strategy for constitutional change. “A national, by no means a party question,” he called it. Resisting change when premature, ready to move when opportunity knocked, Macdonald’s was the strategy of an admirer of Burke. The rivalry between the two Scots in Upper Canada saw Macdonald holding the balance between Brown and Cartier, but tilting the scales to his Lower Canada ally. The clash between Macdonald and Brown would define the 15 years of Canadian politics before Confederation. The strategies of both men were rational responses to political forces at work in a divided country, creaking under machinery of government with no federal division of powers. ◆◆◆

Roots of the Macdonald-Brown Conflict

Federal union in fact, legislative union in name

Look past the formalistic milestones of 1864–1867 and Macdonald was bringing Canada to life in the 15-year period before Confederation. Gifted with a knack for compromise, Macdonald practised a brand of informal federalism within Canada’s unitary state. “We have had a Federal Union in fact, though a Legislative Union in name,” (Confederation Debates, 30) he later declared. Brown, in contrast, was determined to expose the contradictions of Canada’s conflicted Union. On Catholic schools, for example, Brown brooded about destruction of the public system by an interfering Church. Macdonald’s persona was different – whether as a result of instinctive broadmindedness, the Cartier alliance, or cultivation of the Catholic Church for votes, Macdonald would say that parents should educate their children their own way. In Macdonald’s view, the necessities of government in a country like Canada demanded respect for religious diversity:

If they could make the world all of one way of thinking, it might work more harmoniously, but yet he doubted very much if things would go on a bit better on that account. The severance of opinion, the right of private judgment, tended to the elevation of men, and he should be sorry if a Legislature, the majority of whose members were Protestants professing to recognize the great Protestant principle of the right of private judgment, should yet seek to deprive Roman Catholics of the power to educate their children according to their own principles, or, if they chose to term it so, according to their own religious prejudices (*Scrapbook Debates*, May 28, 1855).

“This country is settled by several races, having various religions, and it is very important for the mutual inhabitants of Canada that we should agree as much as possible, and if so we should respect each other’s religious principles and prejudices.”

John A. Macdonald

Respecting religious diversity

Another relatively minor incident the previous year was typical of the differences between Macdonald and Brown. A complaint was raised that religious holidays in Quebec caused repeated closures in the banking system (*Scrapbook Debates*, October 27, 1854). A month of every year would be taken up in holidays, Brown exclaimed to uproar in the House. Macdonald’s response was characteristic. This was a “trifling” inconvenience, so minor it was a pity it could be the cause of insult to Catholics. “This

country is settled by several races,” he said, “having various religions, and it is very important for the mutual inhabitants of Canada that we should agree as much as possible, and if so we should respect each other’s religious principles and prejudices. (Hear, hear). Unless they were actuated by a spirit of conciliation and kindly feeling towards each other, they never would be able to get on” (Ibid.). A small enough thing – but Macdonald was making a very Canadian point. Macdonald the founder can be seen in Macdonald the young politician.

Charges of dishonour

In early 1856, a nasty confrontation drove a wedge between the two men. One night in February near midnight, Macdonald launched into a harangue against Brown in a “state of wild excitement,” and was said to have “deluged [Brown] with a torrent of abuse which would have made the oldest habitué of Billingsgate stand aghast” (*Toronto Globe*, February 27, 1856). Eight years previously, Brown had conducted an official inquiry into abuses at the provincial prison, laying serious charges against the warden, a friend of Macdonald’s. Macdonald accused Brown with falsifying evidence, a charge that could dishonour Brown and bar him from politics. Creighton says Macdonald was goaded into this explosion, facing a bleak political situation and the despair of his perpetually ill wife. (Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician* 1952, 226). Ged Martin, a more recent biographer, simply notes that Macdonald was “obviously drunk” (Martin 2013, 62).

Brown later pointed to this incident as barring relations with Macdonald, other than Parliamentary business, until reparations were made. Brown had a committee struck to clear his name, but to no satisfactory end. There was no finding against Brown – but no apology was forthcoming. Macdonald conceded his language was inappropriate, but maintained he had adequate grounds to raise the charge. It was “a breach of Parliamentary courtesy, for which I was amenable to the discipline of the House, and which I regret; but at the same time I must say that the language was only used after peculiar and bitter provocation” (Macdonald 1856, 1). The incident was the outcome of some deep incompatibility between the two men. “There was a difference between liberty and licentiousness which that gentleman had not found out” (*Scrapbook Debates*, March 15, 1855). Macdonald once declared. This was the personal hurdle to get over before the Great Coalition could form. ♦♦

Opposition to Constitutional Change

Against this background, Macdonald’s longstanding opposition to Brown’s drive for constitutional change is more readily understood, including his mocking response to the short-lived Brown-Dorion government of August 1858, detailed in *George Brown: The Reformer*. Safely back in power as attorney general for Canada West, Macdonald was determined to exploit his opponent’s humiliation to maximum advantage. Brown was still dangerous, and Macdonald was determined to finish him off.

“His worst enemies can afford to pity him,” exclaimed Macdonald. (*Scrapbook Debates*, August 4, 1858). “Some fish require to be toyed with – a prudent fish will play around the bait for some time before he takes it,” an apt description of Brown’s leap for power. “But in this instance the fish scarcely waited till the bait was let down. He jumped out of the water to catch it.” Cheers and laughter broke out, before a dig at Brown’s vexed relations with French Canadians: “He said he did not want to be

in the government; he wished to pursue his great objects unfettered by office, but the moment the chance came he was willing to join *moutons* and all. (Cheers.) He was willing to join anybody and everybody, so that he could only get into office” (Ibid.).

Two-facedness in Brown’s bid for power

Macdonald zeroed in on what he saw as the two-facedness of Brown’s bid for power – the contradictions of a man who railed against “French domination” only to join with Dorion, promising a constitutional deal. Brown had vowed that rep by pop was the goal of his political life, but now watered it down with checks and guarantees to protect Lower Canada. It reminded him of an old campaign, Macdonald said, where his opponent had worn a green handkerchief on the steps of a Catholic house, but waved an Orange one at Protestant doors. But soon the old Brown would return, Macdonald warned. “When he found that it would not do, that the offer would not be taken, he went back again and became as rabid as ever. Then again they were *moutons*. Then again was their religion vilified, once more their endowments were threatened, and I do not know if it was not at the dictation of the honourable member that the member for North Ontario said that the nunneries were houses of ill fame” (Ibid.).

Moderation, at great personal cost

The force of the attack suggested more than a mere partisan harangue. It was as if Brown had had the liberty of saying what he pleased, whereas Macdonald had to toe the moderate line at great personal cost. “This is the government in which they ask us to put confidence – we would be wanting to ourselves and to our duty to our country if we did not at once unmask this unholy combination,” Macdonald declared. “From one end of the country to the other, the honourable member will be condemned for having, for the mere sake of power, made an entire sacrifice of his principles.” He sat down to applause, doubtless convinced he had given Brown a thorough showing up.

Yet one nagging question hung in the air – where was Macdonald’s response to Brown’s greatest issue, the Constitution? Whatever Brown’s methods, he had succeeded in singling out the injustice in a system that left thousands of voters in Upper Canada without their rightful proportion of the votes. Under the strain of Brown’s onslaught, the Union was beginning to creak, and beyond, the conundrum lay unsolved of how to unite the provinces that would one day form Canada. Macdonald had said nothing when Alexander Galt tabled his federation resolutions earlier in the year. Sooner or later, he would play his indispensable part, uniting the provinces of British North America. ♦♦

The Politics of the Whole

After the political crisis of August 1858, Macdonald continued as co-premier, but the initiative in constitutional matters remained with others. Overall leadership passed to Cartier, and federation was made government policy when Alexander Galt entered cabinet, wooed by Macdonald to cross the floor.¹ The Opposition also continued its drive for constitutional change, Brown organizing the Reform Convention of 1859, tabling its resolutions in the House the following year asking for a federal Constitution for Upper and Lower Canada. As the constitutional debate unfolded, in 1860 there was another compelling passage at arms between Brown and Macdonald, with Macdonald continuing to defend the politics of the whole over the politics of the part.

On March 21, during a no-confidence debate triggered by the Opposition, Brown denounced Macdonald's "humiliating" position, ruling Upper Canada against her will, backed by Cartier's votes. Something was triggered in Macdonald, for what followed was an assault on Brown's whole career, introduced with a memorable quip on rep by pop "The honourable gentleman had promised at a future time to show the true remedy for all the evils of the country – the *great quack nostrum* that would cure all that was found fault with" (*Mirror of Parliament*, March 23, 1860).

“Government holding an even balance between all parties, and all sections of the Province”

Unlike the Reformers, Macdonald claimed Conservatives had patiently built a coalition crossing Canada's political divides, through the disciplined moderation needed to build a united movement out of Canada's discordant materials. By contrast, at the last election, Brown appealed to prejudice, Macdonald charged, to the point that Conservatives were voted out for supposedly being in league with the Pope. It was "a war of religion raised for political purposes," with Conservatives going down to defeat with honour:

They chose rather to suffer defeat, and retire into private life, than to secure their election, as they could have done if they had chosen, by means that the opposite party did not scruple to employ – they chose rather to sustain defeat, than to lose their position as a Government holding an even balance between all parties, and all sections of the Province. It was true that in consequence of the Government holding that even balance, they would not excite them; moderation was not an enthusiastic quality. It required an enthusiastic mind, and a position in which that enthusiasm could be exercised without danger (*Ibid.*).

Depths of meaning were wrapped up in that single phrase: "*a Government holding an even balance between all parties, and all sections of the Province.*" Probably the most epigrammatic statement of Macdonald's political strategy, it was an argument that every Canadian politician must have the interests of the whole country at heart. "The Honourable member for Toronto, when his feelings were roused at that time, was quite irresponsible to the country; he was pushing his way and his party's way, and he could adopt cries for a time, and drop them when it served his purpose." Canadian governments were held to a higher standard – they must be instruments of national unity.

In April 1860, Brown's federation resolutions were debated in the House, the high-water mark in his first failed drive for constitutional reform, detailed in *George Brown: The Reformer*. Macdonald's reaction expanded on the differences between himself and Brown. "He was not a loadstone to attract the Hon. member for Toronto, nor was the Hon. member attractive to him," (*Mirror of Parliament*, April 23, 1860) he admitted, laughter breaking out around the House. "If any two persons were unfortunately placed in personal hostility, it was that Hon. gentleman and himself, but the matter was forced upon them and he had always regretted it; but that hostility would perhaps prevent them from ever forming a closer intimacy than was required by ordinary parliamentary courtesy."

“ He did not and could not under-rate the importance of the subject . . . A respectable body of five or six hundred gentlemen had met in Convention, their conclusions were entitled to full consideration, and should be met gravely and fairly by the house.”

John A. Macdonald

Opening to the future

Little noticed, there was also a curious opening to the future, Macdonald paying respects to Brown's constitutional resolutions, and the Reform convention that gave rise to them. Macdonald noted Brown's "courtesies" during the present session, and that this was "very pleasant" – suggesting Brown's cross-partisan overtures were already taking effect. "He did not and could not under-rate the importance of the subject . . . A respectable body of five or six hundred gentlemen had met in Convention, their conclusions were entitled to full consideration, and should be met gravely and fairly by the house." This was a generous acknowledgment of one of his opponent's chief organizational accomplishments. But the existing Constitution could be made to work, declared Macdonald. He was not prepared to admit all the grievances in the Convention's report, and many could be fixed under the existing Constitution.

Still Macdonald would watch and wait. The constitutional issue was not yet ripe. ♦

Keeping Canada Together

Steadfast Unionism

To revive his fortunes in Upper Canada, Macdonald went on a speaking tour in 1860-61, with his key message unswerving support for the Union of Upper and Lower Canada. Macdonald's steadfast Unionism became one of his most important contributions to Confederation, keeping the nucleus of Canada together during a critical period, evolving naturally into his support for a strong central federal government. "I go with all my power and force in favour of the continuance of the Union," (Macdonald 1861, 91) he declared. "I am a sincere Unionist, I nail my colours to the mast on that principle" (Ibid., 90). Within increasing demands for the Union to be repealed, the speeches record not just a partisan contest, but a battle to keep the country together.

“If I had any influence over the minds of the people of Canada, any power over their intellects, I would leave them this legacy – ‘whatever you do, adhere to the Union.’”

John A. Macdonald

Cautioning against a breakup

Warning that Brown was putting the Union in jeopardy, Macdonald cautioned Canadians against a breakup. "What would Upper Canada be, separated from the sister Province, but a petty municipality, having no exit to the seaboard, and in a constant state of dependence upon the good-will of the neighbouring Republic?" he asked one audience (Ibid., 89). He told a crowd at Hamilton that it would be "suicidal" to dissolve the Union, and spoke of unionism as his greatest bequest to Canadi-

ans: “If I had any influence over the minds of the people of Canada, any power over their intellects, I would leave them this legacy – ‘whatever you do, adhere to the Union – we are a great country and shall become one of the greatest in the universe if we preserve it; we shall sink into insignificance and adversity if we suffer it to be broken’” (Ibid., 92–93).

Canada was becoming a nation, Macdonald told the crowds, but all depended on maintaining the Union: “Preserve it and we should become a great nation – great in thought, great in action, great in hope, and great in position” (Ibid., 88–89). Canada had a population equal to the United States at independence, and though wanting Canada’s alliance with Great Britain to continue, Macdonald looked ahead to Canada’s independence: “if we ever are severed from her we shall be severed as one people, great in territory, great in resources, great in enterprise, great in credit, great in capital, as we can only be through and during the Union” (Ibid., 92–93). Promising to accept any Unionist as a brother, and to disown anyone against, Macdonald declared, “God and nature have joined the two Canadas, and no factious politician should be allowed to sever them. The same great waters flow past them, the mighty St. Lawrence connects them, their interests are the same. Our country, sir, is one” (Ibid. 91).

Indulging each other’s faults and foibles

Canadian values also featured in Macdonald’s speeches, Macdonald speaking of the understanding required to make the Union of French and English-speaking peoples a success. “It is true that when two people of different races, antecedents and associations are together, there must be a certain amount of animosity and heart-burning,” he explained to one gathering (Ibid., 89). “We must look indulgently upon each other’s faults and foibles; we must try to get over these little discrepancies instead of enlarging them for mere party political purposes” (Ibid.). One hundred years passed before opposition to the Union of Scotland and England slipped away, but Canada was already a tremendous success, Macdonald maintained. “When we consider . . . that when the union took place the two Provinces were actually fighting hand to hand, and sword to sword, we may well wonder that civil war has died away, that political dissensions are only kept up by political demagogues, and that we have risen to such a height of credit before the civilized world” (Ibid., 91–92).

“*I never asked the question, and never will ask, what a man’s religion, race or ancestry may be: if he is a capable man, the ‘right man for the right place,’ that is all I ever enquire into.*”

John A. Macdonald

Fighting sectarianism

Macdonald also fought back against the Catholic-Protestant religious sectarianism disfiguring Canadian politics, another threat to the Union. He opposed repealing the Separate School Clause as a matter of justice: “As a fair man, I could not, sir, administer one kind of justice to my Roman Catholic friends in Upper Canada and deprive them of a privilege they enjoyed, while at the same time my Protestant brethren in Lower Canada were enjoying the same rights to a greater extent” (Ibid., 80–81). With the country embittered by sectarianism, Macdonald accused Brown of being a “Protestant Pope” (Ibid., 84), telling Canadians he believed in equal treatment for all. “Protestants and Catholics

are both subjects of Her Majesty – are both inhabitants of the land – both contribute to the public revenue – and both bear a part of the public burthens . . . I never asked the question, and never will ask, what a man’s religion, race or ancestry may be: if he is a capable man, the ‘right man for the right place,’ that is all I ever enquire into” (Ibid., 79).

John Milton and the Opposition’s double game

Brown’s charges of French domination were false, Macdonald told the crowds, explaining the Opposition’s double game – pressuring the government’s moderate strategy by pushing extreme positions in Upper Canada. “They say we are traitors to our race; that we knuckle to Frenchmen; that we are faithless to our religion; and that we are under Roman Catholic influences” (Ibid., 23–24). But it was “very strange” the Opposition reversed itself in Lower Canada, charging Cartier with selling out to his Upper Canada allies (Ibid., 24). Macdonald was not about to fall prey to the old tactic of telling different stories in different parts of Canada.

Macdonald claimed Brown’s federation plan amounted to dividing the country so he could rule a portion of it, Brown not caring if he broke up the Union. “The language the poet Milton put into the mouth of his Satanic majesty is very applicable to his case – ‘I would rather reign in hell than serve in heaven,’” Macdonald declared (Ibid., 93). The consequences of breakup could be grievous, he warned: “Gone for ever the prospects of attaining a high position in the world – gone for ever all our glorious expectations if we again sank into two wretched municipalities, with different interests, different religions, and opposing prejudices” (Ibid., 88–89). Macdonald’s government might not excite the passions, he would argue, but he claimed to have the best interests of all Canada at heart: “We attempt, in our humble way, to advise the head of the Government for the good of the whole country and the equal interest of all.” ♦♦♦

Addressing the Constitution

Finally ready to address the constitutional issue, Macdonald gave a major speech on representation by population in April 1861. Delivered in the Assembly on April 19, it was described as “the best speech Macdonald ever delivered in his life” by one newspaper observer, and reprinted in full in Macdonald’s published collection (Ibid., 96–114). During a debate Macdonald described as “almost a hand-book to our constitution,” he declared his support for Confederation, but again insisted the Constitution must not be made a partisan question.

Denouncing Opposition disloyalty

Macdonald had a field day denouncing Opposition threats that Upper Canada might “look to Washington” for a solution to constitutional troubles. “Was it becoming for honourable gentlemen to rise and threaten this House with an appeal to arms, that would set man against man, introduce a state of civil war, and repeat in this country the dreadful scenes which were now being enacted across the border” (Ibid., 104). Such tactics were absurd, Macdonald argued, where the Opposition admitted that rep by pop was “no sufficient remedy,” and instead called for federation:

When people set the wheels of revolution rolling . . . there was no saying when and where the revolution might stop. And deep would be the criminality and sin of those men who, for any purpose of that kind, would announce to the world that the people of Upper Canada were going to throw off their allegiance to their Sovereign, and look to Washington,

introducing a civil war of man against man and brother against brother, because forsooth we will not agree to a principle which those very men themselves say now is no remedy at all for the evils under which the country labors (Ibid., 105).

He called for the Opposition to cease its factious course. Only “an enthusiast, a one idea’d fanatic” would put the country’s future at risk – and once Canadians realized their interests were at stake, Reform would have its just reward: “The yeomanry of Upper Canada were too intelligent and too loyal to their Sovereign and the best interests of their country, to allow themselves to be made the dupes of a parcel of political hacks, or calmly to suffer those great interests to be sacrificed for selfish and party ends” (Ibid., 108).

“*The true principle of a confederation lay in giving to the general government all the principles and powers of sovereignty, and that the subordinate or individual States should have no powers but those expressly bestowed on them.*”

John A. Macdonald

Confederation with a strong central government

The real solution to Canada’s conflicted politics was Confederation, with a strong central government, Macdonald declared: “The only feasible scheme which presented itself to his mind, as a remedy for the evils complained of, was a confederation of all the provinces” (Ibid., 109). Not a federation like the United States, he added. State sovereignty had been the Americans’ “fatal error,” leading to the Civil War. “The true principle of a confederation lay in giving to the general government all the principles and powers of sovereignty, and that the subordinate or individual States should have no powers but those expressly bestowed on them. We should thus have a powerful Central Government – a powerful Central Legislature, and a powerful decentralized system of minor Legislatures for local purposes” (Ibid.).

Burkean strategy of a youthful “Old Tomorrow”

Macdonald returned to his strategy for constitutional change, first explained to Brown in 1859. “Our first great consideration should be to calm this agitation,” he declared (Ibid. 110). If as a principle it was right, “in the long run, truth was strong and must prevail” (Ibid., 112). But the issue should not be regarded as “a question affecting one party more than another,” and should be resolved on its merits and with the benefit of time. This was Macdonald’s Burkean strategy, the strategy of a youthful “Old Tomorrow,” repeated for Reformers’ benefit:

They might leave this question to fight its own way. They could take up other issues on which to quarrel and divide; and if they would only adopt this course they would prevent the unwholesome, the unholy agitation now going on; they would avoid all the injury which would otherwise result to the national interests of the country; they would avoid all the agitation on this subject as a matter of party consideration at the polls. By setting it aside from party politics, they would preserve peace, prosperity and quiet to the land; but by making it a matter of party strife, they agitated the country from end

to end and frustrated every possibility of its becoming law. Agitation would set interest against interest, section against section, and prevent the possibility of its passing into law (Ibid. 112).

Canada's great Unionist turned to the future that lay ahead, provided Canada remained united. "We were standing at the very threshold of Nations," Macdonald declared (Ibid., 114), Canadians were one people, he asserted, and the Union must not be broken because it was the condition of our "future greatness" (Ibid., 112). "God and nature had joined us together. Stretched the full length along the Northern Shore of the great lakes and commanding the mighty St. Lawrence, we possessed the same common interests – interests which were only now beginning to be developed" (Ibid., 113). Canada was "fast-ceasing to be a dependency and assuming the position of an ally of Great Britain" (Ibid., 114).

Macdonald's unionism led to his support for a centralized federation – in the balance between center and periphery, he consistently leaned to one side. Introducing the printed edition of his speeches, Macdonald confirmed his support for Confederation, again with the caveat that Canada must be a strong federation with a powerful central government. "We must however endeavour to take warning by the defects in the Constitution of the United States," Macdonald wrote, "which are now so painfully made manifest, and to form (if we succeed in a Federation) an efficient central Government" (Ibid., viii). These views would significantly influence the terms of Union agreed in 1867, and shape Macdonald's leadership of Canada in the decades after 1867. ◆◆◆

“ Just give us the government and we will show you what we can do.”

John A. Macdonald

Falling on a Point of Honour

Macdonald and Cartier went into opposition in 1862, defeated on an expensive militia bill necessitated by the staggering conflict unfolding in the United States. Although it was badly handled, Macdonald maintained the government had chosen to fall on a point of honour, awaiting return at a propitious moment. The moderate Reformer Sandfield Macdonald took power, trying to govern Canada on the "double majority" principle, a quasi-federal idea requiring any government to hold majority support in both Upper and Lower Canada. Under Sandfield, Reformers gave up rep by pop, giving Macdonald the opportunity for a memorable quip. Sandfield was like Frankenstein, said Macdonald, and Brown "the monster whom he had created and endowed with life, who afterwards pursued him over the whole earth" (*Scrapbook Debates*, August 13, 1863). Macdonald watched and waited, hoping Reformers would hang themselves by their own rope.

The debates reveal hints the Liberal-Conservatives had not given up their stalled plan for a union of all the Provinces. On October 6, 1863, when the Liberal-Conservatives tried to topple Sandfield, Galt proposed reviving the federation initiative, saying "let us stretch out the hand of fellowship to our fellow provinces, and seek that which we wanted in the range of a broader national existence" (*Scrapbook Debates*, October 6, 1863). It is not too much to speculate that the Liberal-Conservatives were

plotting a return to government and revival of their federation plan. “Just give us the government and we will show you what we can do,” Macdonald said.

The old system coming to an end

When the Union descended into ungovernability, and Brown brought forward his motion for a committee on the Constitution, Macdonald opposed his rival’s proposal. But this move should not be mistaken for outright opposition to constitutional change. Macdonald could not fall in line behind a Brown initiative for obvious political reasons, and was also positioning himself for the coming fight for a strong central government. “If we wished to avoid the dangers and troubles which had befallen the United States, we must form not a Federal Union, but a union in fact” (*Scrapbook Debates*, March 14, 1864), he declared, speaking on the motion. This meant legislative union – one government, as opposed to federation. Brown jumped in: “Is that the policy of the honourable member for Montreal East?” Cartier barked back: “No, No.” Macdonald’s key ally had drawn a red line that could not be crossed.

The Sandfield government finally collapsed on March 21, 1864. Macdonald and Cartier were back as attorneys general for Canada West and East, leading the last party government under the old Union. On May 19, Brown’s motion again came up for debate, Macdonald still opposed, letting slip another seeming pronouncement against federation. “Recent events in the United States had made him more disinclined to a federation, believing that a stronger form of union and government was requisite” (*Scrapbook Debates*, May 19, 1864). Brown secured his committee, and three weeks later it reported back, calling for federation of Canada only, or of all the North American provinces. Among three holdouts – John A. Macdonald, who voted against. His government collapsed that very night, June 14, 1864, at a quarter to midnight. Pure politics reigned in Canada, but the old system was coming to an end. ❖

An Extraordinary Coalition

Macdonald, the indispensable politician, was about to deliver his greatest coup, an extraordinary coalition deal that a less versatile leader would have struggled to secure. The next afternoon, on June 15, he asked for the House to be adjourned for the day, while he met with the governor general. Brown replied with a hint that extraordinary developments were afoot. With no party able to command a majority in the House, the government should be given every opportunity to consider its options. “These gentlemen have grave responsibilities and should have time to deliberate upon what is the best course for them to pursue. (Cheers.) I hope, for my part, they will take full time and adopt a course consistent with the respect due to this House and themselves before they come to a decision. And I hope that decision will do credit to the country and themselves” (*Scrapbook Debates*, June 15, 1864).

The force of extreme circumstances

It was Friday before Macdonald announced the negotiations taking place behind the scenes. After Tuesday night’s defeat, he sought the governor general’s consent to an election, with permission granted Friday morning. The threat of fresh elections in hand as leverage, Macdonald said the government “considered it our duty” to see if a way could be found to form a government “with a majority from both sections of the province” (*Scrapbook Debates*, June 17, 1864). Negotiations were opened with a leading member of the opposition, and a solution seemed possible. With a whimsical

flair for dramatics, Macdonald coolly added: “I may say that the honourable gentleman with whom I conferred is the honourable member for South Oxford (Mr. Brown).” Pandemonium erupted – prolonged cheering on all sides. The door to coalition had been opened.

“ With a whimsical flair for dramatics, Macdonald coolly added: ‘I may say that the honourable gentleman with whom I conferred is the honourable member for South Oxford’.”

John A. Macdonald

Brown stood to reply, in a crucial moment in the history of Canada. Upper Canada’s personal and political antagonists were now finally working together. Only “the force of very extreme circumstances” could have compelled his old enemy Macdonald to approach him, Brown said. Nothing but the sectional standoff between the two provinces could have induced him to entertain such a step, and the unlikelihood that an election offered a way out of the impasse. “We have to consider the interests of both sections of the Province, and to endeavour to find that settlement of existing difficulties which will be satisfactory to both . . . we shall reach a termination of those constant scenes of discord that have only been too frequent in past years. (Hear, hear, and cheers.)” (Ibid.).

Cross-party alliance and partisan tensions

There was no coalition yet – negotiations continued Saturday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, before at 4 p.m. on Wednesday, June 22, 1864, Macdonald announced the deal he had struck with Brown. It was meticulously documented in a memorandum of “ministerial explanations” covering every aspect of the grand bargain, which Macdonald read to the House, with Cartier then repeating in French. Crafted to convince doubtful partisans that neither side had sold out, the announcement underpinned the cross-party alliance, but also signaled *disagreements* illustrating the partisan tensions at the heart of the Great Coalition. As discussed below, the coalition negotiations were an extraordinary piece of political performance art.

Political performance art

After the Taché-Macdonald government collapsed, Macdonald began, “Mr. Brown spoke to several supporters of the Administration strongly urging that the present crisis should be utilized in settling for ever the constitutional difficulties between Upper and Lower Canada.”² Two Conservatives, including the early Confederation enthusiast Alexander Morris, relayed the news to Macdonald and Galt. When the House met on Thursday, June 16, Macdonald approached Brown, standing in the centre of the assembly in open view of all its members, asking if he would object to meeting with Galt to discuss. “Certainly not,” he replied. Morris arranged a meeting for the next day.

Galt and Macdonald met Brown at his Quebec City hotel, the St. Louis, at 3 p.m., June 17. Brown opened with a warning shot, saying only the “extreme urgency of the present crisis” could justify such a meeting, “the hope of settling the sectional troubles of the Province for ever.” Brown hated coalitions, and had railed against the 1854 coalition creating the Liberal-Conservative party. This was the first exchange in an elaborate signaling exercise by Brown and Macdonald, whose sceptical supporters might reject the deal unless persuaded it was warranted by extreme circumstances.

“We are charged to invite your aid,” said Macdonald, “in strengthening the Administration, with a view to the settlement of the sectional difficulties of Upper and Lower Canada.” But Brown resisted, and had to be seen to resist, if he was to convince Reformers to join their partisan opponents. “Quite impossible,” Brown replied. It would be “highly objectionable” for such bitter opponents to form a government together, to the point that it would shock the public mind. He could not enter government, and was determined to remain independent, but would try to swing his supporters behind a settlement of the representation issue. Not an auspicious beginning.

“We are charged to invite your aid in strengthening the Administration, with a view to the settlement of the sectional difficulties of Upper and Lower Canada.”

John A. Macdonald

Settlement of sectional conflict

What had Macdonald and Galt come to propose, Brown asked? How would the Conservatives tackle the “injustice” suffered by Upper Canada and the “settlement of the sectional trouble?” The manner of Brown’s question was significant – this was the constitutional question from Upper Canada’s point of view, an aggrieved region chafing under institutions that thwarted its political will. Macdonald and Galt replied that their proposal “was a Federal Union of all the British North American Provinces; local matters being committed to local bodies, and matters common to all to a General Legislature, constituted on the well-understood principles of Federal Government.”

“Not acceptable,” replied Brown. The words jar and jump off the page, understandable only as Brown’s tough strategic position comes into focus. When the 1858 federation proposal had come to nothing, despite silken promises from the Cartier-Macdonald government, Brown’s fear was that federation of all the Provinces would go nowhere, bogged down in negotiations with the other Provinces. Brown now applied pressure, determined to extract a concession to show to his supporters. The Great Coalition was no paragon of political peacemaking – Brown was determined to get the best deal he could get.

Upper Canada wouldn’t settle for less than representation by population, declared Brown. This was sheer intransigence, a step back in time to the old Grit war cry. “Impossible,” replied Macdonald and Galt. There was no way forward except federation, they stressed, the principle of Brown’s own committee. There was symmetry in this, each side effectively asking the other to agree with itself. Macdonald and Galt were asking Brown to agree with his committee, which itself had been formed citing Galt’s federation memorandum of 1858. The issue was one of timing and certainty. Brown knew only one reform was within Canada’s sole power to deliver: federation for Upper and Lower Canada alone, and he pressed for it with all his might.

Federation for British North America – the larger question

At last a possible compromise was suggested. Federation of all British North America would be adopted “as the larger question,” *or* it would be adopted “for Canada alone,” with the other provinces and the North-West entering later “when they should express the desire.” This was the first step toward resolving the impasse. It accommodated Brown’s insistence on a deal now to split and

federalize Upper and Lower Canada. But it tied in the wider vision of Macdonald, Galt and Cartier for the federation of all British North America. The meeting again broke up, but the parties agreed there was “hope of an ultimate understanding.” Another meeting was set for Saturday, this time including Cartier.

“ At Macdonald’s insistence, federation of all the provinces would first be sought then if unsuccessful, federation of Canada alone.”

Galt, Cartier, Brown and Macdonald met at 1 p.m., agreeing that Upper Canada’s demand for rep by pop could not be met under the straightjacket of the old Union, and therefore federation had to be adopted. At Macdonald’s insistence, federation of all the provinces would first be sought then if unsuccessful, federation of Canada alone. This still wasn’t enough for Brown, who still demanded an immediate commitment for Canada alone. Brown’s position was reflected in the compromise reached in the final agreement:

The Government are prepared to pledge themselves to bring in a measure, next session, for the purpose of removing existing difficulties by introducing the Federal principle into Canada, coupled with such provision as will permit the Maritime Provinces and the North-West Territory to be incorporated into the same system of government. And the Government will seek, by sending Representatives to the Lower Provinces, and to England, to secure the assent of those interests which are beyond the control of our own Legislation to such a measure as may enable all British North America to be united under a general Legislature based upon the Federal principle.

Jousting on cabinet seats – and the leadership

More jousting followed on how to share cabinet seats. Brown demanded half the places, as “security for the fairness” of the details to be worked out. “Impossible!” replied Macdonald, Cartier and Galt – and the meeting broke up until Monday, June 20. Brown wanted four slots in Upper Canada, two in Lower Canada, making six out of the total twelve. Cartier and Galt argued for no change in Lower Canada – saying they didn’t need the “embarrassment” of new *Rouge* colleagues. Macdonald said if he was reduced to two seats in Upper Canada, his supporters would desert – three places at most could be given to Brown.

Brown asked Macdonald about the Upper Canada leadership – directness was one of his qualities. Macdonald said he couldn’t step down without “diminishing his usefulness,” but he had been “anxious to retire” and “would be quite ready to facilitate arrangement[s] by doing so.” It was a striking offer, one of several times Macdonald threatened to leave politics in the course of his career. Perhaps Macdonald wanted to remind Brown that *he* was the indispensable politician, inviting Brown to consider the consequences if he walked away.

A deal was struck – three Reformers in cabinet, Brown included. This was a political spectacle – two key Confederation ministers being pushed reluctantly into power, exactly the impression both wanted to show supporters. As Macdonald concluded his announcement, the stage management was complete – each side seen to be dragged kicking into the Great Coalition. ♦

Rivals Joined at Last

The modern view is that the Great Coalition, once lauded as a great example of non-partisanship, was very much an expression of partisan politics, one historian concluding Macdonald and Brown grasped each other “not by the hand, but by the throat” (Martin 2013, 84). Although that view is supported by the facts, the Great Coalition was also rooted in a shared understanding that changing the fundamental rules of politics required cross-party consensus. Change came in Canada under coalition, and each of the other provinces would send government *and* Opposition members to the Confederation conferences.

“I think the House will admit, that if a crisis has ever arisen in the political affairs of any country which would justify such a coalition as has taken place, such a crisis has arrived in the history of Canada.”

George Brown

Brown’s reply to Macdonald

Brown rose to make his reply to Macdonald’s account of the negotiations, “laboring under the deepest emotion, which for a time almost choked his utterance” (Toronto *Globe*, June 23, 1864).

“Did I conceal from the House, that I feel in all its force the painful position I now occupy, I should be deceiving honourable members. For ten years I have stood opposed to honourable gentlemen opposite in the most hostile manner it is possible to conceive of public men arrayed against each other in the political arena . . . I have used language and spoken in tones such as would forbid my standing in the position I occupy today, with any hope of justifying myself before the country, had the agreement you have just heard read been signed under the conditions usually attached to political alliances. I do not conceal from myself how directly exposed I am to the suspicion, that what I do this day I have done from personal motives from a desire to raise my position in this country” (Ibid.).

Only extraordinary circumstances could justify this step, Brown continued: the chance to reform Canada’s straightjacket Constitution. For years, Brown pointed out, he stood ready to join politicians of any political party to settle Canada’s bitter sectional conflict forever. “I think the House will admit, that if a crisis has ever arisen in the political affairs of any country which would justify such a coalition as has taken place, such a crisis has arrived in the history of Canada,” Brown declared. “That day which I have long expected has now arrived, and I think, had I not listened to the approaches made to me by gentlemen opposite, I would have shown that I was one of the vilest hypocrites that ever entered public life” (Ibid.). Perhaps sensing his vulnerability, Brown made the most of his resistance to joining the new coalition:

Can they fancy it is to gain anything personal any of us have taken this position? Can it be in any shape an object of ambition, to sit down in the same Cabinet with gentlemen to whom you have been opposed for a life-time, or to stand in opposition to old friends with whom you have acted cordially for years? Nothing but a most stern sense of duty could

have brought me into such a position . . . let us try to rise superior to the pitifulness of party politics in the interests of our country; let us unite together to consider and settle this question as a great national issue, in a manner worthy of us as a people (Ibid.).

Brown turned to Cartier, singling out his counterpart for special praise. “One thing I must say. It is little sacrifice to me to agree to this compromise. It is little for the Attorney-General West [Macdonald] to accept this compromise. It is comparatively little even for the member for Sherbrooke [Galt] to accept this compromise.” But for Cartier, said Brown, “it was a great thing, a most bold and manly thing,” to accept this plan to settle Canada’s sectional conflict forever. When Brown resumed his seat, there were resounding cheers around the house, and a French-Canadian member crossed the floor and embraced him.

Risking it all for a wider Union

Above all the Great Coalition was the result of a calculated and courageous political gamble by Macdonald, the indispensable politician staking his career on the larger dream of Confederation. Who else could have assembled such a coalition – his old ally Cartier, then Galt and McGee wooed to cross the floor, and finally Brown accepted as a necessity. But the Coalition platform was a ticking clock – if Confederation could not be secured in time, it meant immediate federation for Upper and Lower Canada alone. Rep by pop would shift the balance of power to Reform, with new seats given to Upper Canada, changing the rules of the political game that had once worked to Macdonald’s advantage. Where Brown fought the field as an Upper Canada man, Macdonald stood for the union of all the Provinces. This contrast between the two is fundamental – one practising the politics of the part, the other practising the politics of the whole. Now Macdonald was risking it all, for a wider Union still. ◆◆

“For twenty long years I have been dragging myself through the dreary waste of Colonial politics. I thought there was no end, nothing worthy of ambition, but now I see something which is well worthy of all I have suffered in the cause of my little country.”

John A. Macdonald

From Charlottetown to Quebec

The romance of the Charlottetown Conference lay ahead, its plan for Maritime Union superseded by the arrival of Canadian delegates, sped down the St. Lawrence on their Clydebuilt government steamship *Queen Victoria*, playing games on deck and with a hold full of Champagne. Events in Charlottetown are too well known to repeat. Notes kept by Nova Scotia premier Charles Tupper record Macdonald explaining “the views of the Canadian Government in favour of a confederation of all the B.N.A. colonies and the means by which they proposed to obviate the difficulties which would

attend such Union” (*Confederation Documents*, 36). The conference resulted in an agreement to reconvene in Quebec City to consider a detailed plan of union.

One united people

The best record of Macdonald’s message came in a speech to a banquet given at the Halifax Hotel, printed up in a wonderful 1865 edition of the celebratory speeches given at the conference (Whelan 1865). After departure from Charlottetown, delegates were treated to the hospitality of Nova Scotia at Halifax. Replying to Charles Tupper’s “Toast to Colonial Union,” Macdonald declared Union was a question of “such magnitude that it dwarfs every other question on this portion of the continent” (Whelan 1865, 42). His struggles in politics must have been in mind, as for once his lighthearted demeanor darkened. “For twenty long years I have been dragging myself through the dreary waste of Colonial politics. I thought there was no end, nothing worthy of ambition, but now I see something which is well worthy of all I have suffered in the cause of my little country.” Whatever the obstacles, whatever the difficulties, Macdonald declared, the “wheel is now revolving” and union was a “fixed fact.”

With the spectacle of the Civil War before him, and facing the dilemma of how to govern four or five scattered provinces, Macdonald sounded a first, powerful note of union. Canadians must be one people under one government, with residual powers flowing to the centre. What Canada needed was a “strong central government,” he declared, “a great central Legislature . . . which will have all the rights of sovereignty except those that are given to the local governments. Then we will have taken a great step in advance of the American Republic” (Ibid.). Yet Macdonald carefully balanced these views. “We must consult local prejudices and aspirations,” he continued. Canada needed “a constitution that . . . will preserve for each Province its own identity – and will protect every local ambition; and if we cannot do this we shall not be able to carry out the object we have now in view” (Ibid.).

“Everybody admits that Union must take place sometime. I say now is the time. If we allow so favourable an opportunity to pass, it may never come again.”

John A. Macdonald

Charlottetown showed differences could be overcome, Macdonald claimed, and British North Americans could be one people. The delegates had arrived as provincial men but came away as Canadians. “In the Conference we have had we have been united as one man . . . feeling that in our hands were the destinies of a nation” (Ibid.). Finally the time for Confederation was ripe: “Everybody admits that Union must take place sometime. I say now is the time,” declared Macdonald. “If we allow so favourable an opportunity to pass, it may never come again” (Whelan 1865, 46–47). Loud cheers filled the room, and amid the laughter and tinkling glasses, the parties, the dinners and the dances, a new Canadian patriotism was kindling into life.

The plan of Union

Charlottetown had merely authorized a second meeting, and it was at Quebec that the concrete plan of Union was hammered out in 72 resolutions. Macdonald’s important role in the Quebec Conference is well understood, freshly and skilfully recounted by Christopher Moore in *Three Weeks in Quebec City: The Conference that Made Canada*. Creighton wrote of Macdonald as exercising “di-

recting control,” pointing to the stack of resolutions in Macdonald’s own handwriting (Creighton 1952, 372). Moore properly explains the significant contributions of others. Still it seems impossible to ignore the symbolism of the resolutions Macdonald moved, including the first, accomplishing his plan of Union: “That the best interests and present and future prosperity of British North America will be promoted by a Federal Union under the Crown of Great Britain, provided such union can be effected on principles just to the several Provinces” (*Confederation Documents*, 58).

Other central resolutions followed, providing that the executive would be “administered according to the well understood principles of the British Constitution, and setting out 32 heads of federal power, including the all-important residual power flowing to the federal government. Notes by Hewitt Bernard, the Conference secretary, record Macdonald repeating his view there must be no state sovereignty in Canada (*Confederation Documents*, 94). It was fitting that Macdonald should usher in the new Union government, as he saw it a real central government, with important sovereign powers. Brown also played his suitable part, moving the first federation resolution, declaring it was “the system of government best adapted . . . to protect the diversified interests of the several Provinces,” with a general government for common interests, and local governments for local matters (*Ibid.*, 60). Brown also moved the resolution for rep by pop, a personal triumph and the culmination of his 15-year campaign for constitutional reform (*Ibid.*, 72). ♦

“We had election after election, we had ministry after ministry, with the same result . . . some step must be taken to relieve the country from the dead-lock and impending anarchy that hung over us.”

John A. Macdonald

Confederation Debates: Parliament Approves the Plan of Union

After Quebec, the plan of Union was sent for parliamentary approval, in the Confederation Debates of 1865, which run to over 1,000 pages. On Monday, February 6, Macdonald led off a coordinated barrage of the key coalition ministers, Brown, Cartier, Galt and McGee to follow, each tackling the subject from a different angle. The debates sparkle with life today, because they set out enduring questions in Canadian life, and the original answers given by Canada’s Confederation generation. Macdonald had two overarching goals for his speech: to justify his unexpected coalition and his late conversion to the cause of federation, and to lay the merits of the new Constitution before the people. The question of Confederation was “not a new one,” he said (*Confederation Debates*, 25). “For years it . . . has been looked upon by many far-seeing politicians as being eventu-

ally the means of deciding and settling very many of the vexed questions which have retarded the prosperity and colonies as a whole” (Ibid.).

Danger of impending anarchy

Only recently had Confederation begun to “assume its present proportions,” Macdonald said, turning to the problems federation could solve (*Confederation Debates*, 26). Canada had been in a dangerously ungovernable state, with its single legislature for two historically separate provinces so equally balanced that a single vote decided the fate of governments. Upper Canada’s demand for representation by population was irreconcilable with equality of representation, a fundamental condition of the Act of Union. “Such was the danger of impending anarchy,” men of all political opinions could see that unless something was done, Canada would “suffer under a succession of weak governments, weak in numerical support, weak in force, and weak in power of doing good” (Ibid.). Constitutional change was absolutely required. “We had election after election, we had ministry after ministry, with the same result . . . some step must be taken to relieve the country from the dead-lock and impending anarchy that hung over us” (Ibid.).

The government was not formed “without a great deal of difficulty and reluctance,” said Macdonald, turning to his coalition with Brown (Ibid.). “The gentlemen who compose this Government had for many years been engaged in political hostilities to such an extent that it affected even their social relations” (Ibid.). So much enmity was bound up in that short sentence, the infamous night when Macdonald lost his temper, Brown’s years of frustrated ambition embittered by the success of his laughing rival. “The crisis was great, the danger was imminent, and the gentlemen who now form the present Administration found it to be their duty to lay aside all personal feelings, to sacrifice in some degree their position, and even to run the risk of having their motives impugned, for the sake of arriving at some conclusion that would be satisfactory to the country in general” (Ibid.).

A fortunate coincidence

Confederation’s time had come, affirmed Macdonald. “A happy concurrence of events . . . a fortunate coincidence” he called it – that at just the moment the Canadian coalition was announced, the Maritime Provinces were meeting at Charlottetown to plan their own union, readily agreeing to the grander plan (*Confederation Debates*, 27). When delegates met again in Quebec City, Macdonald explained, they passed unanimously the first resolution before the House: “that the best interests and present and future prosperity of British North America will be promoted by a Federal Union under the Crown of Great Britain, provided such union can be effected on principles just to the several provinces” (Ibid.).

Forming a great nationality

Macdonald came to his first, great declaration, that Canadians must form and be one people, rousing the House to cheers. “If we wish to be a great people; if we wish to form – using the expression which was sneered at the other evening – a great nationality, commanding the respect of the world, able to hold our own against all opponents, and to defend those institutions we prize; if we wish to have one system of government, and to establish a commercial union, with unrestricted free trade, between people of the five provinces, belonging, as they do, to the same nation, obeying the same Sovereign, owning the same allegiance, and being, for the most part, of the same blood and lineage; if we wish to be able to afford to each other the means of mutual defence and support against aggression and attack – this can only be obtained by a union of some kind between the scattered and weak boundaries composing the British North American Provinces” (*Confederation Debates*, 27–28).

Three options for constitutional reform

There were three options for constitutional reform, Macdonald told the House. Dissolution of the existing Union would leave Canada “two weak and ineffective governments, instead of one powerful and united people” (*Confederation Debates*, 28). Then there was rep by pop, not in the country’s best interest, Macdonald said, for it would leave Quebec “with a sullen feeling of injury and injustice,” a defensive faction looking only to sectional interests, instead of dividing on political issues the same way as other Canadians (*Ibid.*). The third option was federal or legislative union of all British North America, and on this Macdonald had to explain his seemingly last-minute conversion. “I have again and again stated in the House, that, if practicable, I thought a Legislative Union would be preferable” (*Confederation Debates*, 29). Legislative union was stronger and cheaper and better, said Macdonald, but Canadian realities had convinced him that federation was a necessity.

“We were forced to the conclusion that we must either abandon the idea of union altogether, or devise a system of union in which the separate provincial organizations would be in some degree preserved.”

John A. Macdonald

Federation “the only scheme practicable”

Legislative union was “impracticable,” he explained in the next breath – no trifling epithet in the Macdonald vernacular (*Ibid.*). French Canadians would never stand for it, “because they felt that, in their peculiar position – being in a minority, with a different language, nationality and religion from the majority . . . their institutions and their laws might be assailed, and their ancestral associations, on which they prided themselves, attacked and prejudiced” (*Ibid.*). The same held true for the Maritimes, also unwilling to be swallowed whole. “[W]e were forced to the conclusion that we must either abandon the idea of union altogether, or devise a system of union in which the separate provincial organizations would be in some degree preserved” (*Ibid.*). He was forced to change his mind, Macdonald explained. Federation was “the only scheme practicable” (*Ibid.*).

Macdonald continued his federalist analysis of the new Constitution. “In the proposed Constitution,” he said, “all matters of general interest are to be dealt with by the General Legislature; while the local legislatures will deal with matters of local interests, which do not affect the Confederation as a whole” (*Confederation Debates*, 30). The Union of Upper and Lower Canada was like England and Scotland, said Macdonald, an informal federation where Scotland’s interests were protected. “No matter how important it may be for the interests of the empire as a whole to alter the laws of Scotland – no matter how much it may interfere with the symmetry of the general law of the United Kingdom, that law is not altered, except with the consent of the Scottish people, as expressed by their representatives in Parliament” (*Confederation Debates*, 30–31).

Fighting for a real central government

In fact, Macdonald’s federalist conversion was entirely manufactured: he had served in a federalist cabinet in 1858, and supported federation in 1861 as the “only feasible scheme” to relieve Canada’s constitutional difficulties (Macdonald 1861, 109). But the artificial reversal served an important po-

litical purpose: positioning Macdonald to fight for a real central government, powerful enough to make Canadians one united people. Canada must not adopt the American federal system leaving sovereignty in the states, giving only weak delegated powers to the centre, he declared. In Canada all great subjects of legislation would be given to the federal government in its enumerated powers, with residual powers upstreaming “all subjects of general interest not distinctly and exclusively conferred on the local governments and local legislatures” (*Confederation Debates*, 33). This way Canada would “strengthen the Central Parliament, and make the Confederation one people and one government, instead of five peoples and five governments, with merely a point of authority connecting us to a limited and insufficient extent” (*Confederation Debates*, 41).

“Strengthen the Central Parliament, and make the Confederation one people and one government, instead of five peoples and five governments, with merely a point of authority connecting us to a limited and insufficient extent.”

John A. Macdonald

Choosing to show this change of mind for political purposes, Macdonald’s speech was that of a federalist unionist, with federalism serving as the catalyst of the new wider Union. He spoke of finding “the happy medium,” a system of government with: “the strength of a legislative union and the sectional freedom of a federal union, with protection to local interests” (*Ibid.*, 32). Canada would preserve the “liberty of action” (*Ibid.*) of its constituent provinces, he declared, with “guarantees for local institutions and for local laws.” (*Ibid.*, 33). As a federalist unionist, Macdonald declared: “It is a matter of great importance, and one of the chief advantages of the Federal Union and of local legislatures, that each province will have the power and means of developing its own resources and aiding its own progress after its own fashion and in its own way” (*Ibid.*, 40).

Advantages of the new Constitution

Shifting to the merits of the new Constitution, Macdonald argued in grand Canadian tradition that Canada would have better institutions than the United States. Parliamentary government would secure constitutional liberty better than a presidential system. An American president was “a despot, a one-man power,” declared Macdonald, “perfectly uncontrolled by responsible advisers, his cabinet being departmental officers merely” (*Ibid.*, 33). Macdonald was speaking of real cabinet government, in which a prime minister is first among equals, with powerful personalities around the table representing important interests in the country. Also unlike the United States, Macdonald emphasized that sovereignty would flow to the central government: “We have strengthened the General Government. We have given the General Legislature all the great subjects of legislation. We have conferred on them, not only specifically and in detail, all the powers which are incident to sovereignty, but we have expressly declared that all subjects of general interest not distinctly and exclusively conferred upon the local governments and local legislatures, shall be conferred upon the General Government and Legislature. We have thus avoided that great source of weakness which has been the cause of the disruption of the United States” (*Ibid.*).

But Macdonald's was no reflexive anti-Americanism. "It is the fashion now to enlarge on the defects of the Constitution of the United States, but I am not one of those who look on it as a failure," said Macdonald (Ibid., 32). "I think and believe that it is one of the most skillful works which human intelligence ever created; is one of the most perfect organizations that ever governed a free people" (Ibid.). The American constitution had its roots in the British constitution, noted Macdonald, pointing out the great traditions of free government we shared in common. But we should learn by their example, and take care that our own federation not be split on the rock of state rights.

“*Springing from the people, and one of them, [the Senator] takes his seat in the Council with all the sympathies and feelings of a man of the people, and when he returns home, at the end of the session, he mingles with them on equal terms.*”

John A. Macdonald

The Senate

Next Macdonald turned to the Senate, which he called the “house which has the sober second-thought in legislation” (Ibid., 35). It would be formed on the basis of regional equality, not provincial equality, originally with three sections of 24 members representing Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritime Provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick taken together, provision being made for four extras if Newfoundland joined. The intention was to represent different regional interests, he explained. The Senate would now be appointed, at the request of the Maritime Provinces, in a change from the elections recently adopted. Canada's elected Upper House had not been a failure, said Macdonald, and the arguments for it were strong: “I ought to say so, as one of the Administration responsible for introducing the elective principle into Canada (Ibid.). Perhaps in this, Macdonald left a trail for some reformer of the future.

The Senate should be a real check on the Commons, with real, regulating influence, even if it must ultimately yield to the popular branch: “it would be of no value whatever were it a mere chamber for registering the decrees of the Lower House. It must be an independent House, having a free action of its own, for it is only valuable as being a regulating body, calmly considering the legislation initiated by the popular branch, and preventing any hasty or ill considered legislation” (Ibid., 36). But in a young country like Canada, the Senate could never be hereditary like the British House of Lords, Macdonald continued. Senators must reflect the equality of Canada's North American people: “Springing from the people, and one of them, [the Senator] takes his seat in the Council with all the sympathies and feelings of a man of the people, and when he returns home, at the end of the session, he mingles with them on equal terms, and is influenced by the same feelings and associations, and events, as those which affect the mass around him” (Ibid., 37).

The House of Commons

Now Macdonald came to the House of Commons, the arena of real Canadian politics. Canadians would continue to enjoy government from the people, by the people, through ministers responsible to the people, under the system of responsible government. He referred to the ancient guarantee

of freedom in every parliament – that no money be spent, except after a vote of representatives of the people, with every money vote proposed by an executive responsible for government finances (Ibid., 42). With a light touch, he ticked through the major federal powers – trade and commerce, transportation and other works connecting two or more provinces, works for the general advantage of Canada, defence, and the criminal law. The general parliament, he emphasized again, would hold general sovereign powers – unlike in the United States.

“This great constitutional change, this peaceful revolution”

Drawing to his conclusion, Macdonald urged the House not to let Confederation slip away. We should be “grateful,” he said, that Canada could pursue “this great constitutional change, this peaceful revolution” not in time of war or insurrection, but in peace (Ibid., 44). Canadians would have a free government, Macdonald declared. “We enjoy here that which is the great test of constitutional freedom – we will have the rights of the minority respected. (Hear, hear.) In all countries the rights of the majority take care of themselves, but it is only in countries like England, enjoying constitutional liberty, and safe from the tyranny of a single despot or of an unbridled democracy, that the rights of minorities are regarded” (Ibid.). Macdonald was referring to a long tradition of parliamentary freedoms. Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, and the rule of law – all were Canada’s constitutional inheritance.

It had fallen to Macdonald to open the debate, and his case for Confederation was not the final word. Alluding to Canada’s great future, Macdonald spoke of relations with Britain evolving into a “healthy and cordial alliance,” saying, “no one can look into futurity and say what will be the destiny of this country. Changes come over nations and peoples in the course of ages” (Ibid., 33). With Canada a mere geographical expression, his most important message was to sound a powerful note of unity, using federalism to strengthen his longstanding unionism, to make Canada’s Union wider still. The single great question that night was “what sort of country are we?” To this Macdonald had answered: We will be one people, we will be united, and we will be free. ♦♦♦

Brown’s Conversion to the Politics of the Whole

One of Macdonald’s greatest achievements had been to exile Brown from government, then harness his energies to a practical plan of Confederation. Macdonald’s aphorism that in politics there is no room for personal jealousies and resentments held true. When the Reformer spoke on Wednesday, February 8, 1865, the latter half of his speech was that of a much-changed man, a pan-Canadian patriot and convert to Macdonald’s politics of the whole. But bearing the marks of years of opposition, Brown also pitched Confederation as the remedy for “evils” done to Upper Canada he was long powerless to clear away. “I cannot help but feeling that the struggle of half a life-time for constitutional reform – the agitations in the country, and the fierce contests in this chamber – the strife and the discord and the abuse of many years – are all compensated by the great scheme of reform which is now in your hands” (*Confederation Debates*, 84).

Brown opened with a jab at his coalition colleagues. Macdonald and Cartier claimed Confederation was rooted in their policy of 1858, and Brown regretted the “mysterious plant” was only now “forced to fruition,” after they succeeded in “bottling it up from all the world except themselves”

(Ibid.). There was laughter at this uncomfortable moment. “For myself, Sir,” said Brown, “I care not who gets the credit of this scheme” (Ibid.). “The whole feeling in my mind now is one of joy and thankfulness that there were found men of position and influence in Canada who, at a moment of serious crisis, had nerve and patriotism enough to cast aside political partisanship, to banish personal considerations, and unite for the accomplishment of a measure so fraught with advantage to their common country” (Ibid.).

“ I cannot help but feeling that the struggle of half a life-time for constitutional reform – the agitations in the country, and the fierce contests in this chamber – the strife and the discord and the abuse of many years – are all compensated by the great scheme of reform which is now in your hands. ”

George Brown

Sensible of the moment’s historic importance, Brown claimed Canada’s founding should attract attention around the world, negotiating solutions to issues that drove other countries to war. “Here is a people composed of two distinct races, speaking two different languages, with religious and social and municipal and educational institutions totally different; with sectional hostilities of such a character as to render government for many years well-nigh impossible; with a Constitution so unjust in the view of one section as to justify any resort to enforce a remedy. And yet, sir, here we sit, patiently and temperately discussing how these great evils and hostilities may justly and amicably be swept away forever” (Ibid., 85).

Showing grace to new allies

Long had Brown fought to see justice for Upper Canada, to free her from what he saw as the domination of Canadian institutions by Lower Canada. But now Brown tried to show grace to his new ally Cartier, and acknowledge the French fact in North America. “One hundred years have passed away since these provinces became by conquest part of the British Empire. I speak in no boastful spirit – I desire not for a moment to excite a painful thought – what was then the fortune of war of the brave French nation, might have been ours on that well-fought field. I recall those olden times to mark the fact that here sit today the descendants of the victors and the vanquished in the fight of 1757, with all the differences of language, religion, civil law, and social habit, nearly as distinctly marked as they were a century ago” (Ibid.).

Again Brown reflected on the extraordinary character of the moment. “Here we sit today seeking amicably to find a remedy for constitutional evils and injustice complained of – by the vanquished? No, sir – but complained of by the conquerors!” (Ibid.). At this, there were cheers from the French-Canadian members of the House. “Here sit the representatives of the British population claiming justice – only justice; and here sit the representatives of the French population, discussing in the French tongue whether we shall have it” (Ibid.). More cheers erupted. “Where, sir, in the page of history, shall we find a parallel to this?” (Ibid.).

Laying the foundations “from the Atlantic to the Pacific”

Canada’s great regionalist now turned Canadian nationalist, surveying the vast extent of the territories to be united. The plan to unite the Provinces would “rouse the ambition and energy” of all, declared Brown (*Confederation Debates*, 86). Newfoundland was the size of Portugal, and Nova Scotia the size of Greece. New Brunswick was the equal of Denmark and Switzerland put together, and Lower Canada as great as France. Upper Canada was greater than Britain and Ireland together, and after crossing the North West Territories, you came to British Columbia, “land of golden promise” (Ibid.). “Sir, the bold scheme in your hands is nothing less than to gather all these countries into one – to organize them all under one government . . . What we propose now is but to lay the foundations of the structure – to set in motion the governmental machinery that will one day, we trust, extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific” (Ibid.).

“The questions that used to excite the most hostile feelings among us have been taken away from the General Legislature, and placed under the control of the local bodies.”

George Brown

Solving the representation issue

Whatever the flaws of Confederation, all paled before solution of the representation issue, declared Brown. The *quid pro quo* struck with Lower Canada for rep by pop in the Commons was equality among regions in the Senate, Brown explained (Ibid., 88). Confederation would return self-government to Upper Canada, with a fair share of control over how her taxes were spent, he continued. “The people of Upper Canada will have the entire control of their local matters, and will no longer have to betake themselves to Quebec for leave to open a road, to select a country town, or appoint a coroner” (Ibid., 94).

Canada’s sectional warrior now declared the chief strength of Confederation was to clear away the very conflicts that had vaulted him to regional power. “Mr. Speaker, I am further in favour of this scheme because it will bring to an end the sectional discord between Upper and Lower Canada” (Ibid., 96). Brown grasped that division could supply unity, seeing federalism through the darker glass of regional conflict. “The questions that used to excite the most hostile feelings among us have been taken away from the General Legislature, and placed under the control of the local bodies” (Ibid.). Pushing divisive issues down to the provinces, federalism would constitute Canadians as a people, clearing the way for a new national politics. “It sweeps away the boundary line between the provinces so far as regards matters common to the whole people – it places all on an equal level – and the members of the Federal Legislature will meet at last as citizens of a common country” (Ibid.).

All the disappointments of Brown’s political career came boiling out, his anger at a rigged political game. “No man need hereafter be debarred from success in public life because his views, however popular in his own section, are unpopular in the other, for he will not have to deal with sectional questions, and the temptation to the Government of the day to make capital out of local prejudices will be greatly lessened, if not altogether at an end” (Ibid.). There would be an end to the “hot feuds,” declared Brown, which “caused our public men, the more faithful they were to the opinions and wishes of one section, to be the more unpopular in the other” (Ibid.). Brown was effectively deliver-

ing a verdict on his own political career. “A most happy day will it be for Canada when this bill goes into effect, and all these subjects of discord are swept from the discussion of our legislature” (Ibid.).

“*The proposal now before us is to throw down all barriers between the provinces, to make a citizen of one, citizen of the whole.*”

George Brown

“Citizen of one, citizen of the whole”

Brown turned back to the advantages of Confederation, his tone markedly changed, from indignant regional leader to citizen pondering a national future. Confederation would “raise us from the attitude of a number of inconsiderable colonies into a great and powerful people” (Ibid., 97). He tallied the population, trade and resources of the Provinces to be united. Union would give us a national marketplace, eliminating trade barriers between the provinces. “If a Canadian goes now to Nova Scotia or to New Brunswick, or if a citizen of these provinces comes here, it is like going to a foreign country. The customs officer meets you at the frontier, arrests your progress, and levies his imposts on your effects” (Ibid., 99). All that would change with Confederation. “The proposal now before us is to throw down all barriers between the provinces, to make a citizen of one, citizen of the whole” (Ibid.).

Brown came to his emphatic conclusion, full of eloquence and hope for the future. “I think I have given reasons enough to satisfy every candid man who desires the advancement of his country, why this House should go unanimously and enthusiastically for “the union, the whole union, and nothing but the union!” (Ibid., 108). The proposal he said was to “lay the foundations deep and strong of a powerful and prosperous people”(Ibid., 87). Some might live to see the day, Brown said, “when a great and powerful people may have grown up in these lands – when the boundless forests all around us shall have given way to smiling fields and thriving towns” (Ibid., 115).

Such had been the journey of George Brown, from regional opposition to national power, converted by federalism to Macdonald’s politics of the whole. For long years Brown held it better to rule in Opposition than to serve in government. The irony was that his outsider path was his slingshot to power, regional power his entrance to the national stage. Yet if his methods were troubling, it seems they were necessary, for true to the portion he was now the deliverance of the whole. Side by side with John A. Macdonald, their entwined, conflicted and complementary careers symbolize the creative tension between regional and national loyalties that continues to profoundly shape Canadian life. ◆◆

Parliament’s Right to Approve the Constitution

With the Confederation Debates still rumbling along a month after Macdonald and Brown’s historic speeches, news arrived in Ottawa on March 4, 1865 of Samuel Leonard Tilley’s defeat in the New Brunswick election, which threatened to derail the entire project. Mac-

Macdonald announced a bold stroke: His government would push for an early close to the debate and a yes or no vote on Confederation. Then they would prorogue the House and send delegates to England (*Confederation Debates*, 648–651). On Friday, March 10, Macdonald got both votes through (*Ibid.*, 962), but not before an important skirmish over the issue of popular approval for the new Constitution. The Opposition called for an election before Confederation took effect, a thought-provoking demand in view of modern experience with referendums.

Skirmish over popular approval

The skirmish was the setting for a final, sparkling speech from Macdonald, defending the right of Parliament to enact the new Constitution. Opposition leader Luther Holton goaded Macdonald in the course of a speech demanding an election – reminding the House that Macdonald supported legislative union, not Confederation, declaring he was a practical man but no statesman (*Ibid.*, 997). Macdonald struck back hard: “Well, sir, I am satisfied to confine myself to practical things – to the securing of such practical measures as the country really wants. I am satisfied not to have a reputation for indulging in imaginary schemes and harbouring visionary ideas that may end sometimes in an annexation movement, sometimes in Federation and sometimes in a legislative union, but always utopian and never practical. I am satisfied to leave the imaginary, the poetic and the impossible to the honourable member for Chateauguay” (*Ibid.*, 1002).

“What followed was a profound defense of representative government, a classic statement reminiscent of Burke’s declaration that representatives owe the electorate their independent judgment, not their obedience, when making unpopular choices in the best interest of the country.”

Macdonald the constant federalist

Then Macdonald beat back the charge he was an insincere federalist, looking back to 1861 and his great speech on rep by pop. “As to my sentiments on Confederation they were the sentiments of my life, my sentiments in Parliament years ago, my sentiments in the Conference, and my sentiments now” (*Ibid.*). Holton had charged he had “belied the whole of my political life” by proposing federation. But Macdonald maintained he had been a constant federalist, if one wanting a strong federal government: “These, sir, were the opinions I uttered in a speech delivered in 1861; and I say that the Constitution which this House, by a majority of three to one, has carried out as far as it is concerned, is, in spirit and letter, that which I then pointed out; and that was not the result of my experience, my thought and my opinion alone, but of the experience, thought and opinion of every man who had studied and taken into consideration the character of the Constitution of the United States” (*Confederation Debates*, 1002).

The virtues of representative government

Macdonald closed with a spirited defence of the right of Parliament to authorize the new Constitution. Referendums were once and for all – a “subversion of the first principles of British constitutional gov-

ernment” – and could easily become an instrument of tyranny, warned Macdonald: “Sir, a reference to the people – a direct reference to the people – of a question of this kind may be the means by which a despot, an absolute monarch, may get that popular confirmation and approval which he desires for the laws necessary to the support and continuation of his usurpation . . . in every free country where there is a Constitution at all, the vote must be taken by the constituted authorities, the representatives of the people, and not become a mere form and cover to tyranny, but a measure which accords with the calm and deliberate judgments of the people, as expressed through their representatives” (Ibid., 1004).

The Constitution sent them here, Macdonald reminded the House, “to make laws for the peace, welfare and good government of the people of Canada . . . no man who values representative government would consent to sit here under a less extensive commission – no man will get up and disclaim the possession of such powers” (Ibid., 1007). What followed was a profound defense of representative government, a classic statement reminiscent of Burke’s declaration that representatives owe the electorate their independent judgment, not their obedience, when making unpopular choices in the best interest of the country. Why bother with Parliament at all, Macdonald asked, if members could take no action without an authorizing vote from their constituents:

If we represent the people of Canada, then, in the words of the Constitutional Act, we are here to pass laws for the peace, welfare and good government of the country. But if we do not represent the people of Canada – if we declare so by passing this resolution – then what great criminals have we been in the past! If we do not represent them, if we have no right to represent them, then we have no power to pass one single bill and declare it to be law, even although it be a bill to establish a saw-mill. If we do not represent the people of Canada, we have no right to be here. But if we do represent them, we have a right to see for them, to think for them, to act for them; we have a right to go to the foot of the Throne and declare that we believe it to be for the peace, welfare and good government of the people of Canada to form of these provinces one empire, presenting an unbroken and undaunted front to every foe; and if we do not think we have this right, we are unworthy of the commission we have received from the people of Canada (Ibid.).

Canada’s original House of Commons man had spoken. One of our greatest parliamentarians delivered his fitting last word in the Confederation Debates, a ringing defence of the virtues of representative government. Any Canadian seeking to restore Parliament’s central role in Canadian life might leaf through this page of history with pride. ◆◆

The Indispensable Politician

Macdonald not only delivered Confederation, but he also established a system that endures. His career established important patterns of moderate, common-sense government that persisted in Canada long after his departure from the Canadian stage. Amid political conflict exacerbated by religious, cultural and regional differences, Macdonald consistently shunned extremism and held the political centre. Canada’s governor general reported during Macdonald’s time in office with an extraordinary forecast of the long-term impact of diversity in Canada, with a memorandum that also helps explain Macdonald’s success. The memorandum was a profound description of Canadian politics, saying as much about diversity in Canada as Tocqueville said about democracy in America:

If it is difficult for any statesmen to stem their way amid the mingled interests and conflicting opinions of Catholic and Protestant, Upper and Lower Canadian, French and English,

Scotch and Irish, constantly crossing and thwarting one another, it is probably to the action of these very cross interests and these conflicting opinions that the whole united province will, under providence, in the end owe its liberal policy and its final success. In such circumstances, constitutional and parliamentary government cannot be carried on except by a vigilant and careful attention to the reasonable demands of all races and of all religious interests Whatever may be the personal convictions and whatever may be the religious belief of a Canadian politician, if he means to lead his countrymen as a whole, he must school his mind to principles of toleration, and he must learn to respect the feelings and even the prejudices of others who differ widely from himself . . . the very conflict of races and opinions which makes our present course difficult and dangerous, holds out to the whole united province as its ultimate result the surest hope of sound self-government and individual freedom.³

It fell to Macdonald to govern Canada in the 25 years after Confederation, facing challenges that gave opportunities to vindicate or violate the possibilities of a genuinely Canadian statesmanship. The frontiers Macdonald expanded were not only the physical; they were also frontiers of the spirit – resisting extremism, conciliating regional differences, literally constituting Canadians as a people. Inevitably, there were disappointments in governing on terrain of such complexity. Macdonald himself often acknowledged his “sins of omission and commission,” telling crowds he erred for he was “but human,” but they were mistakes of the head and “not of the heart.” Yet contemporaries acknowledged Macdonald was a necessity: “Sir John Macdonald may be the Prince of Darkness; with some of its imps he is certainly far too familiar. But an angel of light would perhaps have not been so successful in holding together the motley and discordant elements, local, ethnological, religious, social and personal, on a combination of which the Dominion government has been based; or if he had, it would not have been without detriment to his seraphic purity” (*The Week*, February 28, 1884). This was “the excuse if not the justification of Sir John Macdonald” (*Ibid.*, April 10, 1884).

More than any other, Macdonald was the indispensable politician who made Confederation possible. Many had dreamed of Confederation – only the most resourceful politician could actually achieve it. With Canada in the grip of a social, religious and political conflict, he appeared at a critical juncture wearing the recognizable garb of every Canadian prime minister. His rise to power was no accident – it was a consequence of who we are. The facts of life of Canadian politics – the “mingled interests and conflicting opinions” of Canadians – meant that Macdonald’s path of compromise and conciliation was the path to power. This was the permanent task of leadership in Canada, Macdonald’s *métier*. Macdonald often meditated on the merits of moderate government, and one above all captures his contribution to Confederation – an ideal of what all Canadian governments have striven to be since Confederation:

That government which is satisfied with being useful – with doing its duty to the people who placed it in power – which, when it finds a practical evil, sets itself to work to reduce it in a practical way, is not a government about which you can get up much enthusiasm. I am happy to say, however, that the administrations of which I have formed part have been of this kind. They have been contented with being useful in their day and generation, and whenever any thing has been pointed out that was necessary for the reform of law, or for the protection of the liberty of the subject, they have met it, and instead of making it a matter of party agitation, or getting up before it a cry at the hustings, they have remedied the evil, calmly and quietly, and they have their reward (Macdonald 1861, 48–49). ◆◆



About the Author



Alastair Gillespie is a Canadian lawyer living in London, England. He is an associate in the London office of a large New York-based international law firm and his experience includes a broad array of corporate finance transactions. Alastair has also completed a secondment to a major investment banking institution. He is a Munk Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute.

Alastair has authored articles reporting on the founding speeches of five key Fathers of Confederation, published as a series by the *National Post* on occasion of the 150th anniversary of the constitutional debates held in the Legislature of Canada in 1865 prior to Confederation. The *National Post* also published Alastair's reflections on the life of Sir John A. Macdonald on the 200th anniversary of his birth.

Prior to his legal career, Alastair was Special Assistant to the Hon. A. Anne McLellan, Deputy Prime Minister of Canada and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Alastair holds a B.A. in History from Yale University where he was a research assistant to Dr. Paul M. Kennedy, a member of Yale's Studies in Grand Strategy program and a rower on the Lightweight Crew. Alastair holds a B.C.L./LL.B. from the McGill University Faculty of Law where he was an Editor of the *McGill Law Journal*.

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Endnotes

- 1 For a detailed review of these events, see *George-Etienne Cartier: The Canadian* and *Alexander Galt: The Federalist*.
- 2 *Scrapbook Debates*, June 22, 1864. Quotations that follow are taken from this source.
- 3 *Head to Labouchère*, June 16, 1857.



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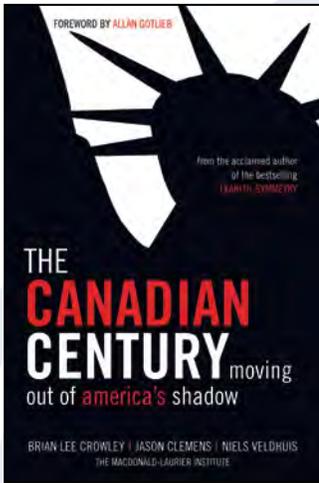
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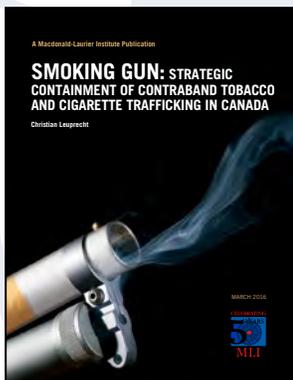
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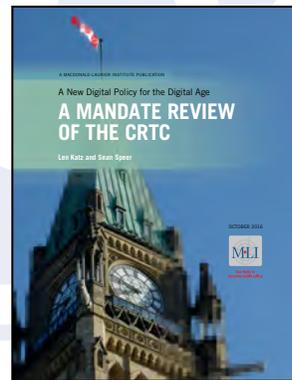
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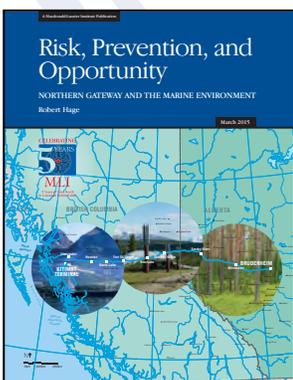
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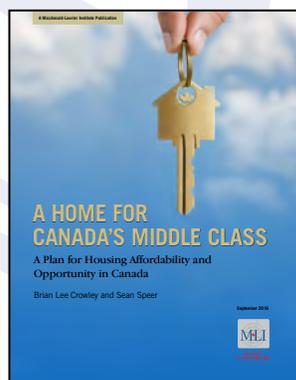
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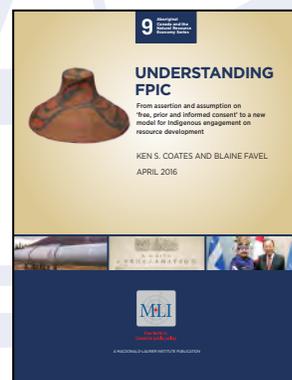
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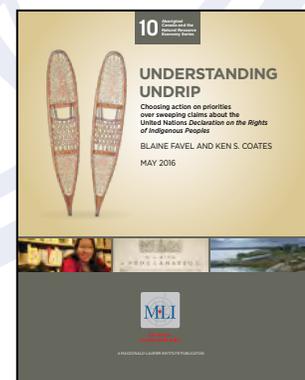
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