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

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# GEORGE-ÉTIENNE CARTIER

## *The Canadian*

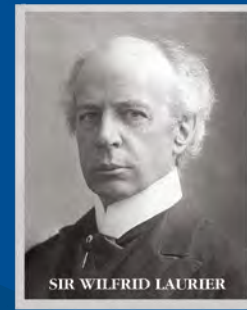
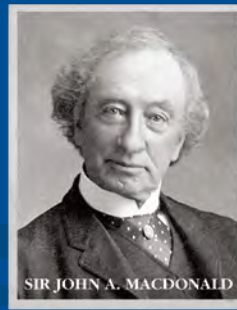
by Alastair C.F. Gillespie

With a Foreword by the Hon. Jean Charest and Antoine Dionne-Charest





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Charlottetown Conference Delegates, 1864. Library and Archives Canada.

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# Foreword

Many men have left a mark on history. However, few can claim to have created a country. Yet George-Étienne Cartier was one such man. Canada's history is intimately linked to Cartier's story, so much so that it's impossible today to take interest in the former without meeting at some point the latter. Of this political life, three dimensions naturally come to mind.

Firstly, Cartier's approach to politics is one of healthy pragmatism: he conducts politics according to its practical consequences. He adheres to the principle of responsible government according to which both the prime minister and his cabinet members are answerable to Parliament. He is one of the first politicians to defend such a principle and to put it into practice. His pragmatism is also supported by convictions. Cartier is a reformer in that he is always looking for a political middle ground. He opposes the Rouges, who advocate for Canada's annexation to the United States, as well as the Ultramontains, for whom political power must be subordinated to the Catholic clergy. He is a philosophical liberal in that he defends the right to property for all, because it confers a sense of dignity to all. Finally, as one of the Fathers of Confederation, he defends the idea that the Canadian political nationality is based on equality of the country's provinces and peoples.

Secondly, this equality is made possible by Cartier's political alliances, notably with Sir John A. Macdonald. The latter is a crucial because it demonstrates that, regardless of linguistic, religious and regional differences, a federal union is possible. It also shows that both the French-Canadian nation and the English-Canadian nation can share the same political nationality. It goes without saying that, at the eve of Canada's 150th anniversary, this notion of duality must be interpreted in the most inclusive way possible. That being said, when Cartier puts in place the Council for Public Instruction, the Civil Code or when he opposes the unitary vision of the country, he is merely expressing this understanding of duality.

Thirdly, Cartier is a staunch advocate of economic development. One need only think of railroad constructions, in particular those of the Grand Trunk Company, of which Cartier was both a political advocate and a legal advocate, which was common during that period. Moreover, it was largely due to Cartier that British Columbia and Manitoba joined the newly created federation, something that would have been unthinkable without the railroads. We should also add that economic development, like pragmatism, is supported by convictions. It allows provinces to be fully autonomous in their areas of jurisdictions, which is essential if Quebec wants to perpetuate its institutions, history and language.

Thus, if Canada remains today a contested ideal, as this article claims, this means that Canada's efforts at nation building are incomplete. We are a young nation. A nation that includes other nations. This multinational character is not an obstacle to the construction of our country, but a chance, even a form of strength. It will, however, only be a form of strength if we recognize such a form of diversity, by becoming aware that the country's unity lies not at the top, in the federal government, but at the bottom, that is, in the provinces, national minorities and citizens. It is them who maintain our unity, and it is thus up to them to follow in George-Étienne Cartier's footsteps by taking over Canada's nation building process. ♦

*The Hon. Jean Charest, Former Premier of Quebec  
Antoine Dionne-Charest*

# Avant-propos

**B**ien des hommes ont laissé une trace dans l'histoire. Peu d'hommes peuvent cependant se targuer d'avoir créé un pays. C'est pourtant le cas de George-Étienne Cartier. L'histoire du Canada est, en effet, à ce point imbriquée dans celle de Cartier qu'il est aujourd'hui impossible de s'intéresser à celle-là sans, à un moment où à un autre, rencontrer celui-ci. De son parcours politique, trois dimensions nous viennent naturellement à l'esprit.

Premièrement, Cartier pratique un pragmatisme de bon aloi : il fait de la politique en fonction de ses conséquences pratiques. Il adhère au principe de gouvernement responsable selon lequel tant le premier ministre que les membres de son cabinet sont imputables devant le Parlement. Il est un des premiers hommes politiques à militer pour ce principe et à le mettre en pratique. Ce pragmatisme est également sous-tendu par des convictions. Cartier est un réformiste en ce qu'il recherche constamment un juste milieu politique. Il s'oppose aux Rouges, qui militent pour l'annexion du Canada aux États-Unis, ainsi qu'aux Ultramontains, pour qui le pouvoir politique doit être subordonné au clergé catholique. Il est un libéral au sens philosophique du terme en ce sens où il défend le droit à la propriété pour tous, car cela confère une dignité à tous. Et, comme père de la Confédération, il défend l'idée que la nationalité politique canadienne repose sur l'égalité et des provinces et des peuples.

Deuxièmement, cette égalité est rendue possible par les alliances que Cartier noue avec d'autres chefs politiques, notamment avec Sir John A. Macdonald. Cette alliance est déterminante car elle démontre que, par de-là les différences linguistiques, religieuses et régionales, une union fédérale est possible. Elle démontre également que les nations Canadienne française et Canadienne anglaise peuvent partager la même nationalité politique. Il va de soi que, à la lumière du 150<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire du Canada, la dualité doit être interprétée de manière plus inclusive. Cela étant dit, lorsque Cartier instaure le Conseil de l'instruction publique, le Code civil ou qu'il s'oppose à la vision unitaire du pays, il ne fait qu'exprimer cette interprétation de la dualité.

Troisièmement, Cartier est un ardent promoteur du développement économique. Il n'est qu'à penser, à cet égard, à la construction des chemins de fer, notamment ceux de la compagnie du Grand Tronc, dont il est à la fois l'un des principaux promoteurs politiques et avocats, ce qui était chose courante à l'époque. Soulignons que c'est à Cartier que nous devons l'entrée de la Colombie-Britannique et du Manitoba au sein de la fédération canadienne, entrée qui aurait été impossible sans la construction des chemins de fer. Ajoutons que le développement économique, comme le pragmatisme de bon aloi, est sous-tendu par des convictions. Il permet aux provinces d'être entièrement autonomes dans leur champ de compétences, ce qui est essentiel afin de préserver les institutions, la langue et l'histoire du Québec.

Ainsi, si le Canada demeure aujourd'hui un idéal contesté, comme l'affirme cet article, c'est que le travail de construction nationale est inachevé. Nous sommes une jeune nation. Une nation qui inclut en son sein d'autres nations. Ce caractère multinational n'est pas un obstacle à la construction du pays, mais une chance, voire une force. Elle n'est cependant une force que si nous reconnaissons une telle diversité, en prenant conscience que l'unité du pays ne vient pas d'en haut, du gouvernement fédéral, mais d'en bas, c'est-à-dire des provinces, des peuples et des citoyens. Ce sont eux qui maintiennent l'unité du pays, et c'est donc à eux qu'incombe la tâche de poursuivre l'effort de construction nationale entreprise par George-Étienne Cartier. ♦♦♦

*L'hon. Jean Charest, Ancien premier ministre du Québec  
Antoine Dionne-Charest*



# Introduction



*“Now, when we are united together, if union is attained, we shall form a political nationality with which neither the national origin, nor the religion of any individual, will interfere. It was lamented by some that we had this diversity of races, and hopes were expressed that this distinctive feature would cease. The idea of unity of races is utopian – it is impossible. Distinctions of this kind will always exist. Dissimilarity, in fact, appears to be the order of the physical world and of the moral world, as well as in the political world. But with regard to the objection based on this fact, to the effect that a great nation cannot be formed because Lower Canada is in great part French and Catholic, and Upper Canada is British and Protestant, and the Lower Provinces are mixed, it is futile and worthless in the extreme . . . In our own Federation we will have Catholic and Protestant, English, French, Irish and Scotch, and each by his efforts and his success will increase the prosperity and glory of the new Confederacy . . . We are of different races, not for the purpose of warring against each other, but in order to compete and emulate for the general welfare.”*

George-Étienne Cartier, February 7, 1865.

In the winter of 1837, George-Étienne Cartier fled to the United States, wanted for high treason after fighting in the late ill-starred rebellion. He was reported dead, frozen to death in the woods in the course of his escape (Quebec City *Le Canadien*, December 27, 1837, 2). Yet, by spring the next year, he returned to Lower Canada and set out on a path that transformed a sometime rebel into a successful lawyer, premier, and Father of Confederation. So significant was Cartier’s role, it would be possible to write a revisionist history of Confederation placing the French-Canadian leader at the centre of the drama, with the other characters revolving around the central star.

Forging a political partnership with John A. Macdonald, Cartier trod the path of power in Canadian politics, defending French-Canadian equality by fighting George Brown’s bid for representation by population. As leader of the powerful French-Canadian contingent in the legislature, his many practical contributions to Confederation have long been understood. Although insisting the existing Union could be made to work, Cartier made federation of all British North America the policy of his government in 1858. He delivered a French-Canadian majority vote for Confederation. He presided over the founding of the Province of Manitoba, British Columbia’s entry into Canada, and passed the bill authorizing construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway – famously exclaiming “All aboard for the West!”

More than this, Cartier was the Father of Confederation who gave the original answers to what it means to be a Canadian, and what it means to be a French-Canadian within Canada. These ideas

are a greater legacy to Canada today even than his many practical contributions to Confederation. Cartier argued Canadians could form a civic nationality, regardless of national origin, language, or creed. Looking back on his career, Cartier would declare with pride, “I never appealed to prejudice.” Though his greatest interest in politics was to secure a future for his French-Canadian people, his legacy was an ideal of equal justice for all Canada. His speeches bring the dry bones of the Constitution to life, conjuring an early Canadian ideal which still has the power to unite.

One hundred and fifty years on from Confederation, with the world still riven by ethnic and religious conflicts, it is time for a renewed appreciation of the power of Cartier’s original Canadian ideal, and the man who articulated a sense of belonging that tried to overcome those very divides. ✦✦

## Rebel and *Patriote*

Cartier links Confederation with the struggle to achieve democratic, popular self-government a half-generation before 1867. “When I was a rebel, the country was very different, very different,” he would say in later life (Watkin 1887, 499). Cartier’s connection to the struggle for responsible government is crucial to understanding Confederation – the Canadian Constitution would never have lasted were it not rooted in the legitimacy of popular rule. Admittedly the electoral franchise still awaited significant expansion. But by 1848, Canada became one of the earliest democracies when Canadians secured a government in which the executive was accountable to the people. In the debate on the throne speech of 1864, Cartier observed he often kept political papers for posterity. Someone shouted, “Have you any of the year 1837?” Cartier shot back, “Yes, sir. We had troubles in Lower Canada in that year, to which you owe responsible government, which you are now desirous of overturning. I am not responsible for those troubles, but out of them you got responsible government, for which you never worked” (Scrapbook Debates, February 25, 1864).

Canada’s path to political liberty was different from the national experiences of traditional European nation-states. The privileged oligarchy in charge before responsible government was toppled by a coalition of French-Canadian liberals and Upper Canada Reformers – an extraordinary Canadian alchemy explored by John Ralston Saul (Saul 2010, 14). From an early date, building Canada has meant bridging cultural divides which formed the frontiers of European states, developing a political consensus around shared ideals instead of the imagined ties of a homogenous culture. A century ago, Stephen Leacock contended this arm-in-arm conquest of shared constitutional rights ended the wrongful dream of suppressing French-Canadian nationality, marking out a new path of alliance and cooperation on which “the future of the country has been staked” (Leacock 1907).

### Youthful rebellion

Cartier was willing to fight in both chapters of this struggle for popular government, first as a youthful rebel, then as a lawyer, politician, and statesman. As a young man, he was a follower of Louis-Joseph Papineau, the French-Canadian tribune and leader of the 1837 rebellion. In the election of 1834, Cartier worked on the campaigns of Papineau and Robert Nelson, another leading figure of the rebellion (Best 1969, 33). He was an active member of the *Fils de la Liberté*, a group of young *Patriotes* who clashed violently with the British Doric Club. Young Cartier composed patriotic songs including *Avant tout je suis Canadien* and *O Canada! Mon Pays! Mes Amours*, the latter for the first meeting of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society, of which he became a founding member (ibid.). Cartier was then apprenticed to be a lawyer, and an attestation of good character reveals

two strains developing in his life. It was signed by both Papineau and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, idols of his youth and later life (ibid., 38).

Without question Cartier was a *Patriote*, fighting at the battle of Saint-Denis where British troops under Colonel Charles Gore were routed. “The time has come to melt our spoons into bullets,” one *Patriote*, Wolfred Nelson, had declared. After defeat at Saint-Charles, Cartier went into hiding in a farmhouse outside Saint-Antoine, reputedly crossing the American border when the suitor of a servant in the house discovered him and threatened to give him up (ibid., 51-52). Although one biographer suggests the story was a plant to cover his escape, the press reported Cartier dead: “*La nouvelle de la mort du jeune George Cartier trouvé gelé dans les bois, est confirmé. C’était un jeune homme doué au plus haut point des qualités du cœur et de l’esprit, et devant lequel s’ouvrait une des plus brillantes carrières*” (Quebec City *Le Canadien*, December 27, 1837, 2).

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“Cartier was willing to fight in both chapters of this struggle for popular government, first as a youthful rebel, then as a lawyer, politician, and statesman.”

## In exile

By 1838, our future Father of Confederation had fled into exile, wanted for high treason alongside other luminaries of the rebellion.<sup>1</sup> From exile in Vermont, Cartier wrote to the Governor General’s secretary, saying he was greatly surprised to be included among the wanted list and asking for an assurance of safety should he return to Montreal. One biographer wryly remarks, “anyone who could write such a letter must indeed succeed in politics” (Best 1969, 58). Cartier returned to Montreal in mid-October, presumably receiving some dispensation, and to his law practice in 1839, marking the start of a new phase in his career. He had not given up the ideals of the rebellion, but now pursued them by politics and not by force of arms.

## The fight for responsible government

Still a young man, Cartier became a supporter of Sir Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, joining his struggle to achieve free constitutional government by peaceful means. The political context had changed. Lord Durham was sent to Canada in 1838 to investigate the causes of the revolt, and based on his recommendations Upper and Lower Canada were united by act of the British imperial government in 1840. The dominant feature of the new Constitution was its single legislature, with equal representation for Upper and Lower Canada, even though the population of Lower Canada was then significantly greater. Use of French in Parliament was shamefully forbidden (a ban later overturned), and Lower Canada was forced to assume responsibility for Upper Canada’s sizable debts. The Union was designed to create an artificial British-Canadian majority, to place English-speakers in the ascendancy. Durham declared that the new Constitution must put “an end to the agitation of national disputes in the legislature, by settling, at once and for ever, the national character of the province. I entertain no doubts as to the national character which must be given to Lower Canada; it must be that of the British Empire.”<sup>2</sup>

Structurally, the Union contained injustices that carried seeds of political change. First, although Durham recommended a popular government responsible to the elected legislature, power still resided with the appointed British Governor General and the favoured few named to his executive council. The illegitimacy of this system called an active resistance into being, led by LaFontaine and his Up-



per Canadian ally Robert Baldwin. Second, the misguided aim to suppress French-Canadian culture called forth a lively and patriotic resistance. The demand for popular government soon coalesced with French-Canadian demands for recognition. French-Canadian liberals worked arm-in-arm with Upper Canadian Reformers, becoming a powerful force in the Union government. The equal representation entrenched in the Act of Union would one day tilt against Upper Canada, when her growing population surpassed Lower Canada. This imbalance, combined with the distinct cultures brought together under the Union, became the basis of later demands to separate the provinces or remake the Union as a federation.

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“As a young lieutenant of LaFontaine, Cartier joined the fight for responsible government and to secure the French-Canadian way of life.”

As a young lieutenant of LaFontaine, Cartier joined the fight for responsible government and to secure the French-Canadian way of life. Campaigning for re-election in 1840, LaFontaine announced his intentions in his *Address to the Electors of Terrebonne*, a Canadian founding document calling for a coalition of Reformers, French and English, to achieve a government accountable to the people. Canadians already enjoyed social equality, argued LaFontaine, and as a consequence required political liberty. “The Reformists, in both provinces, form an immense majority,” wrote LaFontaine, “it is in the interests of the Reformists in both provinces to meet on legislative grounds, in a spirit of peace, union, friendship and brotherhood. Unity in action is necessary now more than ever.”<sup>3</sup> Because of the Union’s structure, the struggle for political rights encouraged a cross-cultural alliance uniting people of different national origin, language, and religion.

LaFontaine’s push for responsible government reflected a strategic choice to engage with the political process, and use the power of a united French-Canadian cohort in the legislature to convert the Union into an instrument for securing the rights of French-Canadians. In his farewell speech of 1851, LaFontaine declared the Union “contained in itself the means of giving to the people the control which they ought to have over governments, of establishing a real government in Canada.” He called for French-Canadians to maintain their unity as a political bloc under the system of responsible government. The first government in Canada embodying that principle was formed in November 1842, when Baldwin and LaFontaine, with their strong backing in the Assembly, were appointed to the executive council by Governor General Sir Charles Bagot. Cartier reported to LaFontaine that he and a friend “drank champagne to your health. We put our stomachs in unison with our hearts” (Boyd 1914, 87).

The record of LaFontaine is important to understanding Cartier, as the ideas and methods of the two leaders have often been taken to be consistent. After Cartier had assumed the mantle of French-Canadian leadership, the younger man said he took LaFontaine for “his model” (Scrapbook Debates, February 26, 1864). Both accepted the Union and tried to make it an instrument of French-Canadian power. “The author of the Union was mistaken,” LaFontaine had said in his farewell address. “He wished to degrade one race among our citizens, but the facts have shown that both races among us stand upon the same footing. The very race that had been trodden under foot now finds itself, in some sort by this Union, in a position of command today. Such is the position in which I leave the people of my race” (Leacock 1907, 355–357). The younger man continued LaFontaine’s strategy of a non-exclusive politics backed by French-Canadian power.

## Rediscovered speech foreshadows Confederation

During this troubled period, Cartier demonstrably knew it was necessary to summon a sense of belonging in his divided community, and that constitutional rights could unite Canadians across divides. One of Cartier's earliest surviving speeches, delivered when he was just 28 to a Montreal rally in April, 1843, foreshadows the ideal of political nationality he would later advocate in the Confederation Debates of 1865, fully twenty-two years later. Cartier told the crowd he "could not refrain from expressing a thought that came to him in contemplating the majestic assembly he was addressing, where French Canadian, English, Irish and Scottish members were gathered, without distinction of race or origin" (Montreal *La Minerve*, April 13, 1843).<sup>4</sup> In this gathering Cartier said he saw "clear refutation to the false political doctrine, impiety and blasphemy, if he might put it that way, which had long been and was still being preached, by men who are blinded by ignorance, malice and prejudice, by those who say it is impossible to find in this province men of French Canadian and British origin gathered in the same place to seek and obtain constitutional rights" (ibid.). Against those who regretted Canadians' different origins, Cartier said he saw this diversity "as a social and political benefit, rather than as a political misfortune, and that we should bless Providence" (ibid.).

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“During this troubled period, Cartier demonstrably knew it was necessary to summon a sense of belonging in his divided community, and that constitutional rights could unite Canadians across divides.”

Cartier was making arguments that set a Canadian pattern and would become familiar to generations of Canadians. With his declarations, Cartier was helping constitute the community, creating a sense of common country in a community recently fractured by an oppressive government and a violent uprising. "Canada was very fortunate to have in its midst two peoples owing much of their origin to the two great nations that are at the forefront of civilization, the French and the English, that the languages of these two great peoples were spoken without distinction and could easily be learned in this country," he said. This diversity had huge benefits for Canadians, whose minds would benefit from comparing their "political, philosophical, historical and literary knowledge and culture from two different sources and languages" (Montreal *La Minerve*, April 13, 1843). Here was a recognizably Canadian belief that diversity is strength, dating from 1843.

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“With his declarations, Cartier was helping constitute the community, creating a sense of common country in a community recently fractured by an oppressive government and a violent uprising.”

This little-known speech and the power of its ideals are at the heart of the invention of Canada. Although the speech survives only through the filter of the reporter's voice and has been translated

from the original French, it is an astonishingly precocious expression of principles that Cartier would advocate 20 years later at Confederation, and which would become central to Canada's way of life. Cartier's long-standing preoccupation with minority rights is present, as is his insight that in a diverse country like Canada, only measures based on even-handed justice could find support from all. The British minority in Lower Canada had nothing to fear from the French-Canadian majority, he said. French-Canadians "did not want exclusive rights and were ready, and had always been ready, to help and support any administration that treated them with justice and impartiality." The new Governor General, said Cartier, would find that "in all government and administrative measures based on justice and the equality of rights he will find among our French-Canadian compatriots, as in all others, British hearts in the full meaning of the term who only wish for the happiness and prosperity of the country" (Montreal *La Minerve*, April 13, 1843).

The struggle for responsible government was not yet won. In 1844 the LaFontaine-Baldwin government resigned when Governor General Charles Metcalfe refused to accept its advice. Cartier campaigned in the ensuing elections, still a private citizen devoted to his burgeoning law practice, but politically active. At the old battleground of Saint-Denis, Cartier said the events of 1837 were caused by the desire to rid the country of an "oppressive minority" rather than to separate the province from Britain.<sup>5</sup> He finished with a flourish that traced his path in life: "Electors of Saint-Denis, you showed courage on November 22, 1838, when, armed with poor-quality guns, spears, pitchforks and sticks, you defeated Colonel Gore's troops! I was with you and do not feel I was lacking in courage. Today, I ask you for greater and more reasonable proof of patriotic intelligence; I urge you to repel with your votes – an even more formidable weapon – those who wish to continue the oppression by denying you the benefits of responsible government. Yes, electors of this noble parish, do your duty, give a salutary example, and Lower Canada will be proud of you!"<sup>6</sup> ♦♦

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“*Fighting a rear-guard battle against Brown, Cartier's accomplishment was to make the Union work, and then to look beyond it.*”

## From Rebellion to Parliament

Cartier's parliamentary career opened with his election at the age of 35 to the assembly of United Canada in April 1848, in a by-election for the constituency of Verchères. With a French-Canadian grouping usually the largest in the Assembly, and the backbone of stable governments under the Union (Cornell 1962, 84), Cartier secured his place in power by seeking out Upper Canadian allies and working the government system from within. Two factors in this period were of greatest significance to Confederation. Responsible government was confirmed, such that there was no question at Confederation that the executive must be accountable to the people. Second, Cartier's long-running feud with George Brown began, Cartier rising to the French-Canadian leadership as he fought Brown's bid for representation by population. Fighting a rear-guard battle against Brown, Cartier's accomplishment was to make the Union work, and then to look beyond it. He abandoned its protections in 1858, committing his government to the federation of all British North America.



## Triumph of responsible government

The 1848 session of Parliament set important patterns for Cartier's later career. Taking in his first impressions, young Cartier witnessed the final triumph of responsible government under LaFontaine and Baldwin. The test case was the controversial Rebellion Losses Bill, a compensation measure for those who lost property in the events of 1837. Rebellion losses became a battle for the very identity of the province, with ultra-loyalist opponents claiming it rewarded rebels with pay. The Earl of Elgin, as Governor General, was urged to veto the legislation, when doing so meant ignoring the government majority asking for the bill, turning the issue into a test case for popular government. As the critical moment approached for Elgin's decision, violence broke out in Montreal along ethnic lines, and British troops were called out in a vain attempt to keep order. The Governor General was pelted with stones and rotten eggs, and Parliament set ablaze by the mob, but the bill was signed into law on April 25, 1849. The date marks the true beginning of Canadian democracy.

## French-Canadian leadership

Cartier's first session was also important because of a famous incident in LaFontaine's leadership, facing down a challenge by the aging Papineau just returned from 10 years' exile in the United States and France. In the debate on LaFontaine's speech from the throne, Papineau denounced the Constitution and those like LaFontaine who, he claimed, had bartered their freedom for the sake of power. LaFontaine's reply was devastating. "What," he asked, "would have been the consequences of the adoption of this conflict to the bitter end, that we are reproached with not having adopted? If, instead of accepting the offers made to them . . . the representatives of Lower Canada had persistently held aloof, the French-Canadians would have never shared in the government of the country. They would have been crushed" (Leacock 1907, 290–291).

LaFontaine's duel with Papineau was an object lesson in the risks of French-Canadian leadership, and the exchange must have left its impression on Cartier. Here was LaFontaine at the height of his power, his moderate leadership crowned with success, but still vulnerable to charges of betrayal. But LaFontaine got the best of this famous parliamentary joust, reminding Papineau that he only walked on Canadian soil because his government secured permission for him to return home. "Yet," said LaFontaine, "behold now this man obeying his old-time instinct of pouring forth insult and outrage, and daring in the presence of these facts to accuse me, and with me my colleagues, of venality, of a sordid love of office and of servility to those in power! To hear him, he alone is virtuous, he alone loves our country, he alone is devoted to the fatherland . . . But since he bespeaks such virtue, I ask him at least to be just. Where would the honourable member be today, if I had adopted this system of a conflict to the bitter end? He would be at Paris, fraternizing, I suppose, with the red republicans, the white republicans, or the black republicans, and approving, one after the other, the fluctuating constitutions of France!" (Leacock 1907, 291–292).

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“*I do not like coalitions, ... I am a party man. I like a Government which represents my sentiments and my principles.*”

George-Étienne Cartier

## A new Conservative alliance

On the plane of power politics, Cartier inherited LaFontaine's views on the controlling influence French-Canadians could wield in Union politics, as may be seen in his reactions to a fundamental

realignment in political parties that took place in 1854. Up to then, the French-Canadian contingent had largely backed the Upper Canada Reformers under Baldwin. This alliance secured responsible government, but reached its *fin de siècle* after the Upper Canada leadership passed to Francis Hincks, an ally in the cause of responsible government but beset by the oily scandals of railway politics. By 1854 dysfunction had set in, as the government failed to deliver on promises to reform the Upper Canada clergy reserves and the feudal seigneurial tenure of Lower Canada. Each was a classically Canadian issue, dividing the province along religious and linguistic lines. In the coalition of 1854, the Lower Canadians now took in the Upper Canada Conservatives on a platform to settle these questions. It was a coup for Lower Canada, and a seismic realignment in Canadian politics, credited as the origin of the Liberal-Conservative party later led by John A. Macdonald for decades.

Events marched forward and Cartier adapted to the new Conservative alliance. It was a compelling demonstration of the ability of the French-Canadian cohort to make and unmake governments, which Cartier must have absorbed. At first Cartier was not exactly effusive in his praise, valuing the clarity of party politics: “I do not like coalitions,” he said, “I am a party man. I like a Government which represents my sentiments and my principles” (Boyd 1914, 111). Cartier had entered politics as a liberal, and only after the coalition did the French-Canadian contingent begin to take on the conservative tinge of its new Upper Canadian allies, gradually evolving into the *Parti bleu*. For Cartier, it was important there was really no coalition in Lower Canada; it was Upper Canada that had to make peace with the French-speaking province. At an 1855 election rally in Verchères, held when he was first appointed to cabinet, Cartier rejected charges he had sold out to the Tories. “There are no more Tories, according to the previous definition of that term,” he said. “The old Tories have softened their stand and given up the outmoded views they once held. In the alliance we have made, Sir Allan MacNab is the one who came over to the Lower Canadian majority. Moreover, the Lower Canadian majority has not relinquished its position. A statesman does not have the right to refuse the support offered to him.”<sup>7</sup>

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“No one knows John A. Macdonald better than I do, and I have the greatest respect for him. It is, perhaps, fortunate that two men got together, one from Upper Canada, the other from Lower Canada.”

George-Étienne Cartier

## Cartier’s “twin brother”

The 1854 coalition also brought Cartier into association with John A. Macdonald for the first time, the birth of one of the greatest political friendships in Canadian history. Cartier’s new friendship was the foundation of his later success. In subsequent years Cartier would call Macdonald his “twin brother,” saying he trusted his sincerity. “No one knows John A. Macdonald better than I do, and I have the greatest respect for him. It is, perhaps, fortunate that two men got together, one from Upper Canada, the other from Lower Canada, and that they were of one mind on the administration of public affairs in the United Province of Canada.”<sup>8</sup> By 1855 he was a government minister, and by 1857, had emerged as leader of the French-Canadian contingent in the legislature, shaping its influential course in government. By maintaining this alliance with Upper Canada Conservatives through Macdonald, the Union government could be responsive to French-Canadian needs. As one biographer justly remarks, “No other French-Canadian politician of the Union period succeeded as did George-Etienne

Cartier in looking after the needs of his own people, often requiring him to engineer the passage of legislation that was vastly unpopular as far as the members for Canada West were concerned” (Best 1969, 201–202).

Amid the conflicts brewing in the province, Cartier’s record as a government minister set a pattern for the rewards of pragmatism in Canadian politics. Seigneurial tenure was dismantled, laying the foundation for the genuine democracy of an ownership society. Lower Canada’s civil law was codified and translated into English – Cartier calling this an “act of justice” toward the English-speaking inhabitants of the province. The civil law was extended into the Eastern Townships, and the judiciary was decentralized. Cartier contributed to economic development as the Grand Trunk Railway’s man, its lawyer in Lower Canada and its sponsor in politics. Railways meant influence, progress, unity, and wealth. As Cartier once exclaimed: “What would Montreal be without the Grand Trunk?”<sup>9</sup> It was an era before blind trusts and conflict-of-interest rules. Touted at stump speeches again and again, these practical accomplishments were a key part of Cartier’s brand. Achieved under the Union, they were a foundation of his later bid for greater union under Confederation. ◆◆◆

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“A division of powers could restore constitutional peace to Canada, by supplying a circle of immunities in which the portion would be protected from the whole.”

## Battle Against Rep by Pop

### The Cartier-Brown feud

Our story now turns to Cartier’s feud with George Brown, and his battle against representation by population. As detailed in *George Brown: The Reformer*, the claim that French-Canadians effectively governed all of Canada – privileged by more votes in the Assembly than their population merited – underpinned Brown’s drive for constitutional reform. Cartier supplied the means of resistance to rep by pop, not just by force of numbers but also by force of argument, contending that the true basis of the Union was equality. What gives life and interest today to Cartier’s battle against representation by population is its significance as a proxy for the necessity of federalism in Canada. In time, Brown and Cartier’s conflict gave way to the federalist insight that division could supply unity, that a division of powers could restore constitutional peace to Canada, by supplying a circle of immunities in which the portion would be protected from the whole. Only federalism could bring the majority leaders of each section of Canada together.

In this clash with George Brown, Cartier earned a reputation for never mistreating an enemy by halves. Cartier may have been below average in stature, but he was a bristling political pugilist, bulldog-like, every bit a fitting opponent for Brown. They quarrelled over symbols like the incorporation of the *Collège Ste-Marie* in Montreal, its religious affiliation clashing with Brown’s secular ardour. Cartier minced no words: “We despise the opinion of those who view these institutions as does the member for Kent [Brown], and his brawling supporters in Upper Canada” (Toronto *Globe*, Novem-



ber 16, 1852). Brown was a “fanatic agitator,”<sup>10</sup> and his demands for rep by pop rooted in a desire to “dominate.”<sup>11</sup> This was politics with brickbats, and Cartier was as combative a politician as you could get. “I can say, on behalf of all members from Lower Canada, save one, that Lower Canada will adopt other political institutions before it falls under the yoke of a man like the honourable member for Toronto (Mr. Brown).”<sup>12</sup>

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“*The core of Cartier’s case against representation by population was that it would destroy the influence of French-Canadians in the legislature.*”

The core of Cartier’s case against representation by population was that it would destroy the influence of French-Canadians in the legislature. Under a single legislature, rep by pop would shift the balance of power west, to the growing western peninsula that was the base of George Brown’s power. A vote-rich Upper Canada meant governments would be made and unmade in the west, and Lower Canada’s language, laws, and institutions would all be put at risk. “Did Upper Canada conquer Lower Canada?” asked Cartier, in June 1858. “If not, by virtue of what right can it request representation by population for the purpose of governing us?”<sup>13</sup> There was an asymmetry to Cartier’s position though: he was essentially saying he wasn’t prepared for his people to suffer the same fate as Upper Canada, governed by an executive disproportionately chosen by others. But Cartier had the status quo on his side, and he made clear French-Canadians were not about to give up their position of advantage – as a minority of the population holding fully-half the seats in the Assembly, and electing a powerfully united group year after year. “We are standing before a reality; we have equal representation and are defending it! . . . We are working actively and with conviction to maintain an article of the constitution whose suppression would be the first phase in a period of disorder and calamity. We seek to consolidate the prosperity of Upper and Lower Canada, and will reject any measure whose adoption would undermine that prosperity. We have always been and remain enemies to fanaticism and prejudice.”<sup>14</sup>

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“*Lower and Upper Canada are linked by the Saint Lawrence, by railways and canals. And each of the two sections is absolutely necessary for the prosperity of the other.*”

George-Étienne Cartier

## Benefits of Union of Upper and Lower Canada

As Upper Canada Reformers began to despair of change, demands to split the provinces began to crop up, and Cartier turned to the practical benefits of the Union to shore up his case for the status quo. It began with geographic and economic realities: “Lower and Upper Canada are linked by the Saint Lawrence, by railways and canals. And each of the two sections is absolutely necessary for the prosperity of the other . . . The population of Upper Canada, were it to consult its real interests,

would not for a moment think of opposing the Union's existence."<sup>15</sup> The case was also tinged with more than a little pride, both for Lower Canada itself, and for the promise of United Canada together: "Upper Canada was a mere back country. It was a very fine country, but very far back. Lower Canada, on the other hand, possessing maritime advantages, conferred a greatness upon Upper Canada which would be taken away by a dissolution."<sup>16</sup> Cartier linked the economic case for Union to relations with the United States, arguing loss of the Saint Lawrence trade route would jeopardize the free passage of Canadian goods through that country, once the Americans realized they had a bottleneck. Cartier's conclusion was stark: "The people of Upper Canada could not be independent of Lower Canada." It was a neat reversal of later arguments cautioning against independence for Quebec.

In exchange for these benefits, Cartier often stressed his desire to make the Union work, framing the demand for rep by pop as an abstraction invented by self-serving politicians to further their ambition: "This was nothing but a pretext. There was no grievance. The Union Act was worked now as it was worked at the beginning, and it was a mere pretence on the part of Upper Canadians to say they were tyrannised over, or that they laboured under what was called French domination."<sup>17</sup> When exploiting this line of argument, Cartier would recall that Lower Canada had accepted the Union, when she had had a far greater population than Upper Canada.<sup>18</sup> Since the difference in population was not as great as in 1840, Upper Canada had no right to complain now that positions had been reversed. Cartier made a virtue of upholding the Constitution, when its legitimacy was ebbing away. Facing calls to split the Union, there was righteousness in making a go of it: "Ever since the Union of Lower and Upper Canada, my policy has been to make the Union work. And I will pursue the same goal, as long as Upper Canada does not render that process impossible through unjust demands."<sup>19</sup> After a decade of George Brown's campaign for constitutional reform, in 1861 Cartier still declared: "I believe the Union can still function well for another ten years."<sup>20</sup>

Cartier was also not above unloading on the opposition with some favourite but patently specious rhetoric. He would deny that Lower Canada's population was less than Upper Canada's, or predict that the imbalance would be rectified by a spurt of growth along the Saint Lawrence.<sup>21</sup> He would argue that representation by population was a slippery slope, leading inexorably to universal suffrage and "mob rule." He played the waiting game for the 1861 census, saying change was premature, but when the results showed an excess of population in Upper Canada, still he refuted any need for change. Once in the heat of debate he overstepped the mark, with words the *Globe* seized upon with malevolence: "The *codfish of Gaspé Bay* ought to be represented as well as the 250,000 Grits of Western Canada. (Oh! Oh!) . . . would any one say that 250,000 Clear Grits in Upper Canada were worth 250,000 Frenchmen?"<sup>22</sup> Brown's broadsheet ensured Macdonald paid an electoral price in Upper Canada, but the manufactured outrage probably only helped Cartier's fortunes in Quebec.

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“The long rear-guard struggle against rep by pop was no mere partisan scrap with Brown; it was a defence of the rights of Lower Canada.”

## Equality under the Union

What elevates Cartier's speeches, and gives them life today, is the ideal of equality he articulated for relations between Upper and Lower Canada. The long rear-guard struggle against rep by pop was no mere partisan scrap with Brown; it was a defence of the rights of Lower Canada. It was a contest not just to preserve the existing Union, but also to shape the political institutions of any future constitu-

tional deal. Cartier met Upper Canada's demands for majority rule with the principle of equality between the provinces: "I will simply say that the Union, in my view, rests on the principle that the two provinces coexist with equal powers, and that neither should dominate the other in Parliament."<sup>23</sup> This was a federalist belief that the two historically separate provinces deserved an equal share in executive powers.<sup>24</sup> The Union, Cartier argued, "was not created with the idea that the population of each province would always remain the same," and could carry on "without this parity."<sup>25</sup> "In every circumstance," he could say with justice, "I have passionately defended the representative equality on which the Act of Union rests."<sup>26</sup>

Seen in its true perspective, Cartier's battle against rep by pop was a great national debate that set Canada on the road to federalism. By convention and practice, the Province of Canada was "a half-acknowledged federal state," with two co-premiers, two sets of cabinet ministers, parallel government institutions, two systems of law, and two languages (Creighton 1952, 183). The Union may have been conceived with the object of anglicising Lower Canada, but the political unity of French-Canadians had won them a controlling influence in its institutions. The equal representation designed to suppress French-Canadians now supplied the means to resist English-Canadians who still dreamed of a homogeneous English-speaking province. Cartier assumed a posture of absolute immovability on rep by pop, and blunted Brown's bid to dominate the Union, eventually forcing the Upper Canadian leader to modify his demands. After the collapse of Brown's two-day government of 1858, there was a surge of opinion in Upper Canada that the Union must be dissolved. What happened next was a surprise. Cartier became prime minister, and his government announced its support for the federation of all British North America. ♦♦♦

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“After years of determined opposition to representation by population, opening up the Constitution meant abandoning the Union's protections, and great personal risk to his leadership of the French-Canadian party.”

## The Cartier-Macdonald Government

### Road to federalism

**V**irage is French for a complete change in direction, and Cartier's new policy was just such an unexpected turn. After the fall of the Brown-Dorion government, Cartier announced support for the federation of all British North America, as part of his government's program. After years of determined opposition to representation by population, opening up the Constitution meant abandoning the Union's protections, and great personal risk to his leadership of the French-Canadian party. Why risk his popularity in Lower Canada, when the easiest political course might have been opposition to the bitter end? Considering the influence French-Canadians enjoyed under the Union, why adopt the cause of federation and the addition of several new English-speaking provinces?



In the first instance, growth in George Brown's power put pressure on the Union's structure, and on the Macdonald-Cartier system drawing on electoral support from both Upper and Lower Canada. The 1857 election left Macdonald with a minority in Upper Canada. The government also needed a policy to meet Brown's demands, and stave off calls for dissolution of the Union. Federation had been the price of Alexander Galt's admission to cabinet: earlier in 1858, the independent member from Sherbrooke had introduced federation resolutions into Parliament. When the legislature was prorogued after Cartier formed his government, the Governor General made this announcement: "I propose, in the course of the recess, to communicate with Her Majesty's Government, and with the Governments of the sister colonies, on another matter of very great importance. I am desirous of inviting them to discuss with us the principles on which a bond of a federal character, uniting the Provinces of British North America, may perhaps hereafter be practicable" (Scrapbook Debates, August 16, 1858).

A dispatch was duly sent, and Cartier, Galt, and John Ross, president of the executive council, travelled to London in October to confer with the British government. The contemporary press and political class reacted with disbelief, a reaction shared by officials in the British government, seeing the 1858 federation initiative more as self-serving manoeuvre than any far-seeing commitment to a great-souled vision. Reception of the new policy was poisoned by Cartier's "double-shuffle" scheme to avoid a series of by-elections, by moving his ministers first into new portfolios, then back into their old ones, denying the people their traditional by-election vote to approve or reject a new government minister. British officials referred to the "general air of lunacy which hangs over the whole proceedings."<sup>27</sup> They questioned the motives of the new Canadian cabinet, which seemed to have backed federation as "a mode of getting out of the inextricable scrape in which they seem involved by the present union" (quoted in Creighton 1952, 278).

## A manoeuvre or a trick?

The sincerity of the federation policy of 1858 remains a classic question of Canadian history. Many contemporaries believed it was a convenient device to head off the constitutional question, too quickly dropped to have been seriously proposed in earnest. Skeptics and believers alike seem to agree that no persuasive evidence exists to prove Cartier's genuine intent. As Desmond Morton explains, "No record remains to explain his position; only what he did exhibits his views." H.B.M. Best notes that before the formal initiative, there was no record of Cartier's opinion on the federation of British North America (Best 1969, 164–165), and no public reaction on the few times it had been discussed in the legislature (ibid., 176). "The enigma, at least with respect to Cartier's real views about federal union," writes Robert Andrew Hill, "remains undocumented and unresolved" (Hill 1966, 143). These conclusions may be overwrought, however, as they discount Cartier's public speeches, and rely on an artificial distinction between the 1858 federation initiative and the well-known coalition of 1864. Although the 1858 proposal languished after meeting British resistance and indifference among the other colonies, this setback is at least as likely to show evidence of an idea encountering friction, rather than the makers of the plan being dishonest in intention. An idea in abeyance is not necessarily "dropped."

In this climate of speculation, historians vary in the generosity they ascribe to Cartier's motives. Oscar Skelton, Alexander Galt's biographer, argued the government's real purpose was to postpone another vote on the seat of government question (Skelton 1920, 238–239). J.M.S. Careless insisted immediate political advantage was determinative (Careless 1959, 283). Desmond Morton was balanced but still lukewarm, stating he was aware of the skepticism among the majority of Canadian historians, concluding it was "of course a manoeuvre, but it was not an insincere trick. It was too great a matter to be so treated" (Morton 1964, 18). Morton argued Cartier could see that federation "might be the way to save all – the Grand Trunk, the credit of Canada, his government, and even the rights of the French" (ibid., 65). Best extends the thought, and is probably nearest the mark, arguing Cartier must have decided if all change to the Union was resisted, Brown might marshal the votes to break through, and representation by population would swamp the French: "Would it not be better to build

a new system, including all the safeguards possible for its own people, and at the same time solving some of the economic and political problems that beset all British North America?” (Best 1969, 188).

The allegation that Cartier’s support for federation in 1858 was insincere is ultimately not persuasive, suggesting the necessity of a change in approach. In an important essay, Ged Martin questions the claims of centennial-era historians offering an interlocking scientific explanation for failure in 1858 and success in 1864 (Martin 1989). Martin argues it is time to abandon this “cantilever” approach to causation, and instead asks the question why the *idea* of Confederation, rather than other solutions, came to the fore. “The starting point for explaining Canadian Confederation . . . must be the idea itself” (ibid., 25). This is sound advice, for there is ample evidence Cartier’s newfound support for federation was rooted in the idea of federation itself.

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“*In a federation, Cartier argued, a wider Canadian balance of power would protect the smaller provinces against injustice.*”

## Cartier on the advantages of federalism

Speaking in the 1865 Confederation Debates, Cartier expressly explains his support for Confederation in 1858 in terms of the advantages of federalism. As he explained it, he had always opposed representation by population so long as the provinces remained under one government. Had rep by pop been passed, the result would have been “constant political warfare” that would have been “unremitting” (Canada 1865, 54). One section of the province would have governed the other against its will, an injustice to Lower Canada, and the sectional conflict bedevilling the province would have intensified. Cartier addressed himself directly to Upper Canadians. If Brown wished to maintain the peaceable government of the country, rep by pop was not the answer: “It would have given rise to one of the bitterest struggles between the two provinces that ever took place between two nations” (ibid., 54).

In a federation, Cartier argued, a wider Canadian balance of power would protect the smaller provinces against injustice. “In 1858 he first saw,” said Cartier, recorded by the parliamentary reporters in the third person, “that representation by population, though unsuited for application as a governing principle as between the two provinces, would not involve the same objection if other partners were drawn in by a federation. In a struggle between two – one a weak, and the other a strong party – the weaker could not but be overcome; but if three parties were concerned, the stronger would not have the same advantage; as when it was seen by the third that there was too much strength on one side, the third would club with the weaker combatant to resist the big fighter. (Cheers and laughter.)” (Canada 1865, 54–55). The message was clear: there was a balance of power in favour of federation.

French-Canadians would be protected by the division of powers, Cartier maintained. Even if outnumbered, they would be secure under a federal government wielding powers where French-Canadians shared common interests with Canadians of all the other provinces. A fair share of influence in a new federal government was a fair exchange for substantial self-government for Quebec ringed round by the division of powers. The federal government would deal with questions of national, not local interest, and could pose “no danger to the rights of either French Canadians, Scotchmen, Englishmen or Irishmen” (Canada 1865, 55). Confederation would guarantee “the freedom of French Canadians

to exercise their privileges in the province of Quebec” (ibid., 55). They were the majority in their own province, and, Cartier said, had “nothing left to fear.”<sup>28</sup>

Cartier was notably keen to claim parentage of the 1858 federation initiative in his 1865 Confederation speech, and at least one source suggests he claimed a larger share of the credit than history awards to John A. Macdonald. On the evening of July 1, 1867, he reportedly told a colleague, “As chief of the Liberal-Conservative party for the Province of Quebec I have rendered the same justice to all, without distinction of race or religion. It was in that spirit that when I formed my Cabinet in 1858 I adopted the project of a Federal Union of my friend Galt and made it my own project, and I went with Ross and Galt to England in 1859 to have the idea accepted by the English Government. John A. had nothing to do with that” (Boyd 1914, 279).

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“*Cartier’s conversion to the cause of federalism was a crucial building block of Confederation.*”

The 1858 initiative fizzled out. But, similar to what took place under the Brown-Dorion government – as discussed in *George Brown: The Reformer* – a real advance had been made in terms of ideas. Cartier’s conversion to the cause of federalism was a crucial building block of Confederation. Terms broadly similar to the 1867 deal had been set out in broad strokes and won his support. This was no mere political gamesmanship: all was at stake, the very existence and future of the French-Canadians. Cartier’s change of heart was caused above all by *ideas* – that federalism could unlock the representation issue, that Quebec could find allies to balance Upper Canada in the new federation, and that a division of powers and creation of a new province could assure a large measure of self-government for French-Canadians, together with an important role in a federal Canada. Federalism was at the heart of the invention of Canada. *Ça, c’est l’essentiel.* ♦♦♦

## Forming the Great Coalition

There was no act of greater significance to Confederation than the joining together of George Brown and George-Étienne Cartier in the Great Coalition of 1864. In the course of Brown’s 15-year campaign for constitutional reform, one man became undisputed champion of the indignant west, the other ruled in government as leader of the French-Canadians. By 1864 both sides had mooted the possibility of a federal solution to Canada’s constitutional struggle. Cartier signed the 1858 federation dispatch admitting “very grave difficulties” governing the Union in accordance with the conflicting wishes of its inhabitants, and calling for federation of all British North America. Across the partisan and provincial divide, Brown’s Reform Convention of 1859 had called for a federation of Upper and Lower Canada, and its key resolutions were debated in the legislature in 1860. Federalism had the potential to join the two vital men whose support was essential to remake the country. But Cartier continued to oppose Brown until a very late date, often mocking him in the House. They had played the part of implacable foes for nearly 15 years. Cartier’s speeches show that before the power of federalism joined these two crucial men, partisan politics set the stage for Canada’s founding.



## Continuing antagonism with Brown

Several encounters in early 1864 illustrate the continuing antagonism between the two men, as well as Cartier's appraisal of the limitations of his opponent's politics. On February 25, speaking in the debate on the speech from the throne, Cartier contrasted his political approach to Brown's, saying "that honourable gentleman acquired his position in Upper Canada owing to the prejudices against Lower Canada. I have often said so, and regret it is true, as that honourable gentleman possesses great ability and energy, and could have made his way without creating prejudice in Upper against Lower Canada" (Scrapbook Debates, February 25, 1864). By contrast, said Cartier, "there was no French Canadian occupying a seat in this House who commanded so much the confidence of Protestants and all other denominations as myself. (Cheers.)"<sup>29</sup> The sniping continued on February 29, with Cartier teasing Reformers for abandoning their old cause of rep by pop. Cartier had been out of power since 1863, after defeat on Macdonald's Militia Bill, but crowed it mattered little, when the government had adopted his own position as the price of taking power (Scrapbook Debates, February 29, 1864). Liberal premier Sandfield Macdonald had always opposed rep by pop, and the Reformers were badly divided.

Brown tried to interrupt Cartier, exposing himself to a sarcasm-laden attack. "No doubt that honourable gentleman, at the next elections in Upper Canada," declared Cartier, "would agitate the country from north to south with this cry; but the people would understand it was uttered for the purpose of humbug and for mere party objects. (Cheers.) . . . His immense news-sheet, at one time filled with eloquent appeals about the rights of Upper Canada, and the hard treatment it suffered at the hands of Lower Canada, was now taken up, throughout its whole extent, with details of the American war, or lengthy explanations of the Schleswig-Holstein difficulty, but not a line, not a word scarcely about those questions which, in the eyes of the honourable member and his friends and supporters were once the most important in the whole range of Canadian politics. (Laughter and cheers.) It was really humiliating to see such a leading Canadian politician as the honourable gentleman (Mr. Brown) reduced to such a position – supporting a Government and upholding its principles, but not daring to say a word about his own."<sup>30</sup> The attack was delivered with a dose of humour, Cartier saying he was sure his honourable friend had nothing to do with the *Globe's* attacks on him. But Brown had left it to his newspaper to abuse "that confounded little Frenchman Cartier."<sup>31</sup>

## Opposes the Brown Committee

A month later, Cartier opposed Brown's historic motion for an all-party committee to make recommendations on potential constitutional changes – noteworthy opposition at such a late date. With a new non-partisan tone, Brown cleverly cited Cartier's 1858 dispatch on federation as justification for his initiative, but Cartier did not rise to the occasion. The *Globe's* report of the debate simply records that Cartier spoke against representation by population, and promised to vote against the committee (Toronto *Globe*, March 14, 1864). Macdonald also opposed Brown's motion, urging a single national government rather than a federation, at which Cartier broke in with a brief but significant interjection: "That is not my policy" (ibid.). When the debate resumed on May 19, just a month before the emergence of the coalition, Cartier continued to oppose the committee destined to recommend federation (Scrapbook Debates, May 19, 1864). He ran through the same old arguments against rep by pop that had sustained him for years, though he did take note of Brown's new temperate tone.<sup>32</sup> To everyone's surprise, the committee was secured, reporting back to the House on the very day the Taché-Macdonald government fell, June 14, 1864: "A strong feeling was found to exist among the members of the committee in favour of changes in the direction of a federative system."<sup>33</sup>

## Swearing friendship with an old opponent

Whatever the details of the coalition negotiations which ensued, in terms of political realities, the union of Brown and Cartier was essential to the future of Canada. After the first meeting of Macdon-

ald and Galt with Brown on June 17, Cartier met his Upper Canadian counterpart the following day, in the meeting room of the Executive Council. “The ardent Bleu leader, it was said, looked carefully to see that the Rouges Dorion and Holton were not in train behind his old western enemy, then heartily embraced him and swore friendship” (Toronto *Globe*, June 20, 1864). This new alliance united the majority leaders from each side of divided Canada, on the basis of a federal solution to the ills of their common country.

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“*At this moment I happen to be in the Government of Canada allied to a gentleman who for fifteen years has been my great opponent in Upper Canada – I refer to the Hon. George Brown.*” (Cheers)

George-Étienne Cartier

Speaking later to delegates at the Quebec conference, Cartier tackled the unexpected nature of his newfound alliance, presumably acutely aware of the political risk he had taken: “Now, without revealing anything, you all know that at this moment I happen to be in the Government of Canada allied to a gentleman who for fifteen years has been my great opponent in Upper Canada – I refer to the Hon. George Brown. (Cheers.) Now, when a great matter of public policy came before us, though that gentleman and myself had been pitted against each other, he for Upper Canada, and I for Lower Canada, yet we resolved to try whether we could not concur in a great scheme of Confederation, either of the Canadas, or of all the Provinces. I must say this, gentlemen, that in none of my most important political decisions did I ever take the advice of any one. (Cheers.) . . . with regard to my political alliance with Mr. Brown, I must say that he has kept faithfully to his work. I don’t know what you [Brown] have to say of me, but for my part I have such an amount of self-esteem that it matters not what amount of good or bad you say. (Laughter.)” (Whelan 1865, 118).

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“*A line was drawn under 15 years of hardscrabble political conflict, setting the stage for the birth of a new Canadian ideal.*”

The contest between Brown and Cartier would shape the contours of the constitutional settlement of 1867, and the contrasts and commonalities between the two men are striking. Both were strong sectional leaders. Brown had disrupted the Union, Cartier had tried to make it work. Brown pursued his opposition strategy while Cartier ruled in government. Brown demanded rep by pop, and Cartier resisted, until Brown was forced to change his demands, and try instead for federation. Like the Tories of 1854, the Reformers of 1864 had to make peace with French Canada, and come to Cartier with terms the French-Canadian leader could accept. If rep by pop must come, it would be with the restoration of a separate legislature for Quebec. On these terms a line was drawn under 15 years of hardscrabble political conflict, setting the stage for the birth of a new Canadian ideal. ♦♦♦

# A New Political Nationality

Cartier now made his greatest contribution to Confederation: to articulate an idea of Canada to bridge the ethnic, religious and linguistic divides among its fractured population. For to found a country is not only an act of statesmanship; it is also an act of imagination, never more so than in the scattered colonies of British North America, divided by geography, language, ethnic origin, and religion. Nations are not made by constitutions alone: without a sense of belonging among its scattered communities, Canada would be nothing more than a geographical expression. The throne speech of 1865 declared the Great Coalition's intent to found a New Nationality. Unlike the American Founding Fathers, Cartier could not assume the existence of a national community; he literally had to invent it (LaSelva 1996, xii). Cartier rose to the occasion, conjuring in his public speeches a recognizably Canadian and startlingly modern identity, a political nationality to which all could belong, regardless of national origin or religion. The keystone was Cartier's speech in the 1865 Confederation Debates, held to ratify the Confederation resolutions agreed to at the Quebec Conference of October 1864.

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“*Cartier's message was that nations were made differently than in ancient times, not by ties of blood, but by ties of community.*”

“The question for us to ask ourselves was this,” declared Cartier: “Shall we be content to remain separate – shall we be content to maintain a mere provincial existence, when, by combining together, we could become a great nation?” (Canada 1865, 58–59). Cartier's message was that nations were made differently than in ancient times, not by ties of blood, but by ties of community. “Then the first weak settlement increased into a village, which, by turns, became a town and a city, and the nucleus of a nation. Nations were now formed by the agglomeration of communities having kindred interests and sympathies” (ibid., 60). This latter remark was perceptive and highly significant. The 1860s were a crucible of nationalist movements: the Italian *Risorgimento* and the unification of Germany were taking place, but against the backdrop of shared language, culture and traditions. It was a time of forming of nations, but considering Canada's divided population, some unifying idea other than pre-existing national affinities would have to be found. Cartier's foremost achievement was to supply that idea.

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“*Now, when we were united together, if union were attained, we would form a political nationality with which neither the national origin, nor the religion of any individual, would interfere.*”

George-Étienne Cartier

Some had objected to the idea of a new nationality, said Cartier, drawing breath before uttering words that many Canadians still recognize today, and are often cited as the core of Canada's national-

ity: “Now, when we were united together, if union were attained, we would form a political nationality with which neither the national origin, nor the religion of any individual, would interfere. It was lamented by some that we had this diversity of races, and hopes were expressed that this distinctive feature would cease. The idea of unity of races was utopian – it was impossible. Distinctions of this kind would always exist. Dissimilarity, in fact, appeared to be the order of the physical world and of the moral world, as well as in the political world. But with regard to the objection based on this fact, to the effect that a great nation could not be formed because Lower Canada was in great part French and Catholic and Upper Canada was British and Protestant, and the Lower Provinces were mixed, it was futile and worthless in the extreme” (Canada 1865, 60).

## Diversity is Canada’s strength

So far from being a weakness, Cartier argued Canada’s diversity would be its strength, that each of its constituent elements would benefit from proximity to other points of view, that a healthy competition could develop greater patriotism for our shared country. “In our own Federation we should have Catholic and Protestant, English, French, Irish and Scotch, and each by his efforts and his success would increase the prosperity and the glory of the new Confederacy. (Hear, hear.)”<sup>34</sup> Cartier said he “viewed the diversity of races in British North America in this way: we were of different races, not for the purpose of warring against each other, but in order to compete and emulate for the general welfare. (Cheers.)” (Canada 1865, 60). The old, misplaced dream of assimilating the constituent populations of Canada was dead and buried, the federal structure of the 1867 constitution would finish it forever. “We could not do away with the distinctions of race,” said Cartier, “We could not legislate for the disappearance of the French Canadians from American soil, but British and French Canadians alike could appreciate and understand their position relative to each other. They were placed like great families beside each other, and their contact produced a healthy spirit of emulation. It was a benefit rather than otherwise that we had a diversity of races” (ibid.).

This argument was startlingly different, more speculative and philosophical in tone than many of the other speeches offered in the Confederation Debates, and different from the workmanlike directness of many of Cartier’s speeches. It was above the political, and rose to the constitutional, constituting Canada with an idea that was ahead of its time. Surprising as this was, the speech was also an affirmation of Cartier’s long-held beliefs. It extended the ideas of his idealistic speech of 1843, delivered in the gloomy aftermath of the 1837 rebellion, when he argued that Canadians, regardless of their differences, could secure their political rights together.

## Federalism makes Canada possible

What made Canada possible was federation, Cartier again impressed. The idea of a single national government was unattainable, because it could never represent the varied interests of the provinces. No other option remained but federalism, when the question was how to unite the provinces and at the same time preserve the “particular rights and interests” of each (Canada 1865, 60). Some argued diversity meant federation was impossible, noted Cartier, “on account of differences of races and religions,” but this view was mistaken. “It was just the reverse. It was precisely on account of the variety of races, local interests, &c., that the Federation system ought to be resorted to, and could be found to work well (Hear, hear)” (ibid.). Confederation would produce a happy balance between the regions and the wider whole: “a strong central or general government and local governments, which would at once secure and guard the persons, the properties and the civil and religious rights belonging to the population of each section” (ibid., 62). Federalism made representation by population possible, because the powers granted to the federal government held no danger to Canadians of any origin: “In the exercise of the functions of the General Government, no one could apprehend that anything could be enacted which would harm or do injustice to persons of any nationality” (ibid., 55).



The second key to Canadian nationality, continued Cartier, was the protection of minority rights. This protection had a double aspect: the mutual vulnerability of the English-speaking Protestants, subject to the power of a French-Canadian majority in Quebec, and the French-Canadians, subject to the power of an English-speaking majority at the federal level. In these circumstances, Cartier argued public opinion would act as a moderating influence, because a violation of the rights of any one community would be condemned as a violation of the rights of all. With minority communities across Canada, neither the federal government nor any province could attempt injustice. “Whether it came from Upper Canada or from Lower Canada, any attempt to deprive the minority of their rights would be at once thwarted. Under the Federation system, granting to the control of the General Government these large questions of general interest in which the differences of race and religion had no place, it could not be pretended that the rights of either race or religion could be invaded at all” (Canada 1865, 60).

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“*The risk Cartier faced in trying to carry Confederation was ... that more radical elements would accuse him of betraying his people and his country.*”

## A new – and contested – ideal

Cartier’s speech had traced the outlines of our new national ideal, but the Confederation Debates also make clear it was a contested one. The risk Cartier faced in trying to carry Confederation was the same LaFontaine had faced securing responsible government – that more radical elements would accuse him of betraying his people and his country. With his typically pugilistic approach, Cartier tackled his critics head on, calling them “those self-styled nationalists who accused him of bartering fifty-eight counties in Lower Canada to John Bull, and his honourable colleague beside him (Hon. Mr. Brown)” (Canada 1865, 60–61). Another opponent, Cartier said, “had come out once more on the political stage for the purpose of opposing this villainous scheme, which was intended to destroy the nationality and religion of the French Canadians – all brought about by that confounded Cartier! (Laughter and cheers)” (ibid., 61). Cartier argued all moderates supported the federation plan, and it was only extremists who opposed it. One of the strongest arguments in favour of Confederation was that extremists on both sides opposed it, while it had the support, Cartier claimed, of all moderate men (ibid., 62).

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“*Cartier must have sensed his vulnerability, that his reputation, his credibility, and his political fortunes had been staked on Confederation.*”

Making these arguments, Cartier must have sensed his vulnerability, that his reputation, his credibility, and his political fortunes had been staked on Confederation. Unlike in Upper Canada, there had been no coalition in Lower Canada, and Cartier still faced formidable *Parti rouge* opponents ready to marshal any argument to hand, none more powerful than the risks posed to Lower Canada’s language, laws, and institutions. If his political career was to continue, French-Canadians had to accept

that federalism and a new provincial government could secure their way of life. The record shows political opponents contested his new ideal from the very start. Some arguments showed mere partisanship, but others were profound, and remain controversial to this day. ♦♦

# Facing His Critics

## Antoine-Aimé Dorion

**A**ntoine-Aimé Dorion, leader of the Lower-Canada liberals, launched his first attack against Cartier on February 16, arguing Confederation was premature and that its structure would fail to protect French-Canadian institutions (Canada 1865, 245–269). Dorion admitted he had introduced a proposal to federate the two Canadas in 1858, and under the Brown-Dorion government of the same year had supported representation by population with checks and guarantees. However he denied ever supporting Confederation of all the provinces, and maintained that he wanted a “real confederation,” with the largest share of power given to the provinces, and only delegated authority given to the central government (ibid., 250). Confederation was a legislative union in disguise, Dorion accused, or a step leading inexorably to one, considering several centralizing features: the federal veto power, Lieutenant-Governors appointed by the federal government, the paramountcy of federal laws, and the appointed upper house selected by the federal government. Dorion also landed plainly political blows: Confederation was just a scheme to keep the government in power — “a device of men who are in difficulties, for the purpose of getting out of them” — (ibid., 252) and a device to line the pockets of railway speculators — “their object was to have another haul at the public purse for the Grand Trunk (laughter) . . . The Grand Trunk people are at the bottom of it” (ibid., 251).

Dorion’s most piercing criticisms revolved around the allegation that Confederation offered no adequate protection to Lower Canada’s institutions, and his withering rhetoric struck a chord of fear. “A million of inhabitants may seem a small affair to the mind of a philosopher who sits down to write out a constitution. He may think it would be better that there should be but one religion, one language and one system of laws and he goes to work to frame institutions that will bring all to that desirable state; but I can tell honourable gentlemen that the history of every country goes to show that not even by the power of the sword can such changes be accomplished. (Hear, hear)” (Canada 1865, 263–264). Dorion was sounding a defiant note of *survivance*, and all Canadians who admire the French fact in North America should recognize here a classically Canadian clash: “I cannot with a joyful heart give up the imprescriptible rights of the people who have sent me here to represent them. I cannot consent to a change which is neither more nor less than a revolution, a political revolution it is true, but which does not the less, on that account, affect the rights and interests of a million of inhabitants, the descendants of the first settlers in America, of those who have given their names to the vast regions which they discovered, and whose careers have been rendered famous by so many heroic traits . . . We are about, on their behalf, to surrender all the rights and privileges which are dearest to them, and that without consulting them. It would be madness – it would be more, it would be a crime” (ibid., 694).

## Henri Joly

Dorion’s colleague Henri Joly, the member for Lotbinière, continued the barrage on February 20. Joly shared Dorion’s concerns that Confederation was a legislative union in disguise (Canada 1865, 350–351), but also reasoned a federation would tend to produce discord and instability, citing the inherent instability of federations<sup>35</sup> and the absence of homogeneity among the Canadian population (ibid., 347–349). He sarcastically proposed the rainbow as the emblem of Canada (ibid., 354) claiming

Confederation would have “the outward form of a giant, with the strength of a child” (ibid., 353). The mere proposal of Confederation had surfaced underlying distrust, argued Joly, painting a bleak picture of Canada’s future: “when the different provinces shall meet together in the Federal Parliament as on a field of battle, when they have there contracted the habit of contending with each other to cause their own interests, so various and so incompatible with each other, to prevail, and when, from repetition of this undying strife, jealousy and inevitable hatred shall have resulted, our sentiments towards the other provinces will be no longer the same; and should any great danger, in which our safety would depend upon our united condition, arise, it would then perhaps be found that our Federal union had been the signal for our disunion” (ibid., 352).

Like Dorion, Joly maintained Confederation offered no adequate protection for French-Canadians, and that it was wrong to give up the safety of the Union: “Now they are strongly entrenched in their citadel, and they are advised to raze the walls in order to secure their safety” (Canada 1865, 361). The aspirations of French-Canadians all centred on the “maintenance of their nationality,” persevering in the face of adversity for a century after the fall of New France. Suddenly there was discouragement, said Joly: “our aspirations are now only empty dreams; the labours of a century must be wasted; we must give up our nationality, adopt a new one, greater and nobler, we are told, than our own, but then it will no longer be our own” (ibid., 362). Have we not already struggled against destiny and triumphed, he asked: “Let us not give to the world the sad spectacle of a people voluntarily resigning its nationality” (ibid.).

## Attack on Cartier’s leadership

Finally came a direct assault on Cartier’s leadership, reminiscent of Papineau’s attack on LaFontaine. Cartier had made a corrupt bargain with George Brown to maintain his grip on power (Canada 1865, 357), accused Joly, and would be cast aside “like a worn-out tool” once representation by population had been passed (ibid., 358). Cartier was like a banker, said Joly; having won the trust of the population, the deposit he accepted was “the fortune of the French Canadians – their nationality.” The analogy continued to its cutting conclusion: “That fortune had not been made in a day; it was the accumulation of the toil and the savings of a whole people in a whole century. To prolong the ephemeral existence of his administration a few months, the Attorney General has sacrificed, without a scruple, this previous trust, which the unbounded confidence of his fellow-countrymen had confided to his keeping” (ibid.) Cartier interrupted, demanding to know what he had received in pay for this. “A salary of five thousand dollars,” came the reply. “That is not enough for me,” Cartier shot back (ibid.).

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“Defending Cartier, Langevin defended the new Constitution, federalism forming the core of his argument that the rights of French-Canadians would be protected.”

## Allies come to Cartier’s defence

Cartier had allies in the House, however – Hector Langevin tendered his defence on February 21, vaunting not just Cartier as leader, but also the Canadian way of life he had come to represent (Canada 1865, 362–392). “We need only look back into the pages of history to learn how greatly nations are moved by the creation of a new people,” said Langevin. Confederation was “destined to make us rank among the nations of the earth” (ibid., 363). Much had changed since the rebellion of 1837 and the Union of 1840, Langevin pointed out. French-Canadians’ language had been forbidden,

they had been considered inferior, but with steady pressure and support from Upper Canadians, the position had greatly changed. Canadians were now “in the midst of a great revolution, but a revolution of which peace is the guiding spirit” (ibid.). Lower Canada could now “take part, on a footing of equality, in negotiating a treaty with the Lower Provinces” (ibid., 364). One thing was certain, said Langevin, we could not remain as we were (ibid., 366).

Defending Cartier, Langevin defended the new Constitution, federalism forming the core of his argument that the rights of French-Canadians would be protected. Matters relating to the rights of the different sections would fall under control of the provincial governments, he said. The added votes for Upper Canada in the federal Parliament had nothing to do with Lower Canada’s local affairs, religious matters, or nationality: “this Legislature will only be charged with the settlement of the great general questions which will interest alike the whole Confederacy and not one locality only” (Canada 1865, 368). The aim at the Quebec Conference had been to do justice to all, he said – races, religions, nationalities, interests – and federal union would form a bulwark against injustice by uniting diverse interests as one. “Under Confederation there will no longer be domination of one race over another, and if one section should be desirous of committing an act of injustice against another section, all the others would unite together to prevent it” (ibid.). French-Canadians would also benefit, he said, by joining one united people: “we should form but one nation, one country, for all general matters affecting our interests as a people” (ibid., 369). Canada had not gone to the Quebec Conference, he said, “to frame a feeble and unjust Constitution, destined, from the very fact, to last but a day” (ibid., 370–371).

## Preservation of distinctive ways of life

Ultimately, the nature of Canada’s new nationality would pose no threat to the French-Canadian way of life, Langevin argued. “What we desire and wish is to defend the general interests of a great country and of a powerful nation, by means of a central power.” Confederation was not assimilation – quite the opposite, it would preserve distinctive local ways of life across the country, including in the Maritime Provinces that also wanted to preserve their identities. “We do not wish to do away with our different customs, manners and laws,” said Langevin, “on the contrary, those are precisely what we are desirous of protecting in the most complete manner by means of Confederation. Under the new system there will be no more reason than at present to lose our character as French or English, under the pretext that we should all have the same general interests; and our interests in relation to race, religion and nationality will remain as they are at the present time. But they will be better protected under the proposed system, and that again is one of the strongest reasons in favour of Confederation” (Canada 1865, 372–373).

## French-Canadian power and justice

Langevin also refuted Dorion’s claims about the vulnerability of French-Canadians to the new central government, and of British-Canadians to the French-Canadian majority in Lower Canada. French-Canadians would have their 65-member “phalanx” in Parliament, said Langevin, and would unite to throw out any government that attempted an act of injustice. In such a case, French-Canadians would find support among the other provinces, “who would have every reason not to allow our rights and privileges to be infringed, lest they should one day experience the same treatment themselves in regard to their own” (Canada 1865, 376). There was no cause to fear federal vetoes of provincial legislation as Dorion suggested, for French-Canadians harboured no intentions of injustice to the English minority that might provoke the veto’s use (ibid., 377). Langevin reassured the English-speaking minority, accusing Dorion of appealing to “national passions and the prejudices of race” (ibid., 384). Experience in Lower Canada showed a reassuring record of fair play: “Did not the French-Canadian majority always exercise liberality towards our fellow-countrymen whose origin and religion was different from ours? Thank God, our race is not a persecuting race; it has ever been liberal and tolerant” (ibid.). The basis of Confederation, he said, was justice to all (ibid., 380).



## Cartier – defender of the rights and institutions of Lower Canada

The defence now became more personal, as Langevin delivered the classic vindication of Cartier and his decision to take French-Canadians into Confederation. Cartier might well be a banker, as Joly suggested. But Cartier had repaid his deposits with interest: under Cartier's leadership, the seigneurial tenure had been extinguished, the administration of justice reformed, and the civil law codified and translated (Canada 1865, 391–392). Not satisfied with this, Cartier had accepted a still more sacred trust, said Langevin: "In the midst of a terrible crisis his country confided to him all its interests, all its rights, all its institutions, its nationality, its religion, in a word everything it held most dear. The Honourable Attorney General received the whole trust into his safe and faithful keeping, and when called upon to render an account, he exhibited all those interests, rights, institutions, our nationality and religion, in fact everything that the people held dear, and restored them guaranteed, protected and surrounded by every safeguard, in the Confederation of the British North American Provinces" (ibid., 392). Cartier had been a faithful banker, said Langevin, and was "blessed from one end of the province to the other."

Langevin now invoked the memory of LaFontaine. Criticized in his own day as a sell-out, he was now deeply venerated after death. "When that eminent citizen held the position occupied today by the Honourable Attorney General, the opposition heaped upon him the same reproaches, the same insults that are now offered to my honourable friend. He was accused of being a traitor to his country; it was broadly asserted that he was selling his fellow-citizens, and that he was the enemy of his race. Nevertheless, that defender of the rights and institutions of Lower Canada had but one ambition, namely, to secure for his fellow-countrymen the splendid position they have ever since occupied. He let the disaffected continue to assail him, and before descending into the tomb, he had the happiness of seeing his patriotic efforts and the purity and nobleness of his intentions acknowledged; and when his mortal remains were carried to their last resting place, all classes of his fellow-citizens were eager in doing honour to that great man, and all united in blessing the memory of one who was no longer accused of being a traitor, but whose name was universally admired to be deserving of a place among the very highest in parliamentary history" (Canada 1865, 392).

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“*Cartier had inherited the dilemmas and the duties, the trust and the responsibilities, of discharging the leadership of his people.*”

It would be the same for Cartier, declared Langevin, in a conclusion which paralleled LaFontaine's famous joust with Papineau, and which must have been in Cartier's mind as he looked on. Cartier had inherited the dilemmas and the duties, the trust and the responsibilities, of discharging the leadership of his people, and Langevin claimed that like LaFontaine he would be vindicated: "During his whole life, like Sir Louis Hyppolite LaFontaine, the present Honourable Attorney General for Lower Canada has devoted himself to protecting and promoting the material and religious interests of his fellow-countrymen, and he has now crowned his gigantic labours by the important share he has had in the framing of the new Constitution, which is destined to govern one of the greatest empires in the world, a Constitution beneath which all races and all religions will find protection and respect. He will have his reward, and like his predecessor, his name will go down to posterity as one of the greatest benefactors of his country" (Canada 1865, 392).

By a vote of 91 to 33, the Quebec Resolutions were approved on March 11, 1865, including majority support from the representatives of Lower Canada (Waite 1963, xviii). ♦♦

# Burnishing the New Canadian Ideal

Cartier took his case to the country, continuing to burnish the new Canadian ideal in public speeches right down to July 1, 1867. Although little is known of Cartier's contributions to the *in camera* meetings at the Charlottetown and Quebec Conferences,<sup>36</sup> many of Cartier's speeches survive, and they suggest an important role shaping Canada's new nationality. Everywhere he went, Cartier reassured minority communities their rights would be protected. As he said in a speech at Saint-Hyacinthe, on return from a mission to London: "To you, my French Canadian and Catholic compatriots, and to you, my English, Irish and Scottish compatriots, I say, be not alarmed!

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“*Everywhere he went, Cartier reassured minority communities their rights would be protected.*”

The Constitution Act we managed to get ratified in England protects the rights and privileges of the minority and the majority. Under Confederation, the rights of each and every citizen will be fully protected. With this system of provincial governments and a central authority, individual interests and general interests will always find protectors, as well as a chamber in which to defend them. Everything depends on our patriotism.”<sup>37</sup>

## One great living whole

At Charlottetown (Whelan 1865, 9–10) and Halifax (*ibid.*, 23–27), Cartier spoke at the grand banquets held to entertain the provincial delegates, giving a holistic view of our new national community. He spoke of the provinces forming parts of one great living whole: “I am now speaking by a sort of metaphor – a great British American nation, with the fair Provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia as the arms of the national body to embrace the trade of the Atlantic. None could make so fair a head as Prince Edward Island. This national body will then want a trunk, and we in Canada having the ‘Grand Trunk,’ can afford to be the trunk to the nation. The two Canadas will stretch with their toes far out to the West, and bring as much as possible of the Western territory into the Confederation” (*ibid.*, 25). Cartier also reassured wary Maritimers fearing the loss of autonomy. “Gentlemen, you must not be afraid of us who come from Canada because we represent a country greater in respect to population and territory. Don’t be afraid of us, – don’t tell us to go back with all our offers of no avail – don’t tell us as it was said formerly of others: *Timeo Danaos, et dona ferentes* [Beware Greeks bearing gifts]. Let me assure you that the promises we make are made in all sincerity and good faith – in urging union upon you we believe we are doing that which will be for your happiness and prosperity (Cheers.)” (*ibid.*, 27).

## Reassurances to the English-speaking minority

His speeches were filled with reassurances to the English-speaking inhabitants of Quebec, who would become a minority under the power of the new provincial legislature. Promises were made, with a personal guarantee. “As a French Canadian, and as a Catholic,” said Cartier, he “would never consent, so long as he was a Minister of the Crown, that any injustice should be done, either constitutionally or otherwise, to his fellow-citizens belonging either to the Protestant religion or to his own religion – (loud cheers) – nor would he consent that his countrymen, the French Canadians, because they happen to be of a different race and religion from the people of Upper Canada, should be injured on that account (Renewed cheers.)” (Whelan 1865, 27).

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“*I am now speaking by a sort of metaphor – a great British American nation, with the fair Provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia as the arms of the national body to embrace the trade of the Atlantic.*”

George-Étienne Cartier

## Strength in diversity

The French-Canadian leader also often compared Canada to Great Britain, suggesting Celtic diversity had been a spur to national greatness. This was a theme that reached back to Cartier’s declarations from the earliest days of his return to Canada after the 1837 rebellion. “Let us look to England at this moment, and we find that although the union of the three kingdoms was called a legislative union, distinct nationalities and religions existed. Would any one conversant with the history of the glory of England on land and sea like to drop or subtract from that glory the portion of it won by the bravery, courage and persistence of the worthy son of Scotland? – Cheers – Was there a man who would like to see dropped or subtracted all the glory that had been acquired to England through the eloquence and courage of the sons of Erin? – Loud cheers – He really thought that England would never have achieved the wealth and the reputation she had gained had it not been for the different nationalities of those islands. Every one hailing from England knew that the question of races was of no consideration there . . . Well, then why should it be attempted to create difficulty in the formation of a nation because we were of different races and religions?” (Whelan 1865, 27)

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“*Cartier often reminded audiences of the special duties of a politician in Canada to unite, and never exploit differences to divide.*”

## Duty of leaders to unite; and equal justice to all Canadians

Cartier often reminded audiences of the special duties of a politician in Canada to unite, and never exploit differences to divide. At a banquet in Montreal in October 1866, he explained he had duties to all Canadians, irrespective of religious faith: “As you know, I am a Catholic: I love my religion, and think it the best; but even as I profess myself to be very Catholic, I believe that my duty as a public

man is to respect the sincerity and religious beliefs of others. I am also French Canadian, as are a great many of those I see around me. I love my race; I most assuredly have a natural predilection for it; but as a politician and citizen, I love the others as well.”<sup>38</sup> In May 1867, he told another Montreal audience that Canada’s diversity defined certain duties: “It is true, Gentlemen, that I am Catholic and French Canadian, and I have never forgotten the duties those two titles impose on me. But I have long held the principle that politicians in Lower Canada should not only devote themselves to the interests of their coreligionists; in a country consisting of different races who hold various beliefs, all rights must be protected, and all faiths respected. Canada must be a country, not of licence, but of liberty, and all liberties must be protected in law. (Applause.)”<sup>39</sup> At a banquet in honour of Alexander Galt held the same day, he again pressed home the special duties of a politician in Canada: “How could someone possibly aspire to become a statesman worthy of the name, in our country, without being fully resolved beforehand to render equal justice to all races and creeds?”<sup>40</sup>

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“*In a country consisting of different races who hold various beliefs, all rights must be protected, and all faiths respected. Canada must be a country, not of licence, but of liberty, and all liberties must be protected in law.*”

George-Étienne Cartier

## Alliance of francophones outside Quebec; Confederation a tree of many branches

To the francophone community of Upper Canada, Cartier sent a message they were rejoining a wider family within Confederation. Speaking at a meeting of the Ottawa Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society in May 1867, Cartier said Franco-Ontarians were now placed on an “equal footing and live in harmony with the citizens of a different origin who make up the majority.”<sup>41</sup> Confederation would “put you in contact with Lower Canada, inside our federal Parliament, which, on the other side of its boundary, will extend a hand of friendship and protection to French groups throughout every province. Nova Scotia and New Brunswick will bring back members of our family that were previously separated from us. Under this regime, therefore, our alliance will be stronger than ever, allowing us to combine forces and lose nothing of our privileges.”<sup>42</sup> He cautioned his audience, however, that the rights of minorities were not secured by zealotry, but rather by the golden rule: “Let us remember that our duties also belong to the citizen. Confederation is a tree whose branches, while extending in many directions, are tied firmly to the main trunk. We, Franco-Ontarians, are one of those branches. It is up to us to understand this and to work for the common good. The patriot, of course, does not combat with a spirit of fanaticism. Though he safeguards what he loves, he wishes for his neighbour to be protected from attack just as he is. This tolerance, gentlemen, is essential, and it is through it that we associate ourselves to this great undertaking, for which our ambition rightfully claims a share of the honour.”<sup>43</sup>

## Protection of minority rights

Speaking in the Quebec legislature in 1869, Cartier reflected on his pride that the promises he made before Confederation to protect the rights of the English-speaking Protestant community had been fulfilled. He spoke in terms showing that the protection of minority rights has been a central principle of Canada since its founding: “It was not a question of majority or minority; it was a question of fairness. It was not about knowing who was strongest, but who would be most fair, by allowing everyone



the freedom to pray God as they see fit. I remember that, back then, some people used to say: ‘Why give Protestants in Lower Canada benefits that Protestants in Upper Canada won’t give Catholics?’ To which I would answer: ‘Let us do what is right. If we believe our compatriots should enjoy full religious freedom, then we should give it to them. It will be up to others to follow our example and do their duty.’ We had to treat Protestants with the greatest openness, so that Catholics could then tell Protestants: ‘That is what we’ve done.’ Besides, each individual must have full religious freedom, and minorities must be treated like individuals in this regard.”<sup>44</sup>

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“*I have never appealed to prejudice ... instead, as a politician, I proposed and enacted measures that were very unpopular in their day, but which have benefitted the country.*”

George-Étienne Cartier

## Principles in politics – “I have never appealed to prejudice”

As he neared the close of his career, Cartier often spoke of his principles in politics, in terms which still have the power to inspire today, and deserve place among the ideals of the Canadian political tradition. “I have never appealed to prejudice,” he said in 1869, “instead, as a politician, I proposed and enacted measures that were very unpopular in their day, but which have benefitted the country. I do not follow popular prejudice; I consult and will only ever consult my own conscience.”<sup>45</sup> At an 1871 banquet in Sherbrooke, he continued in this vein, with an instruction to his successors: “Throughout my twenty-five year career, I have always acted according to the principle that I must never be led astray by racial or religious prejudice. I have never stopped telling French Canadians that they should be tolerant and generous, and that they should never take unjust advantage of numerical superiority. (Applause.) I hope they will continue to follow that advice, which is worthy of them, and that my successor will follow that example after I have left the political stage.”<sup>46</sup> ♦

“*I have always acted according to the principle that I must never be led astray by racial or religious prejudice.*”

George-Étienne Cartier

## Principles of Canadian Statecraft

**I**n view of Cartier’s record, a revisionist history could plausibly present Confederation as the unfolding of his grand design. Some have inappropriately reduced Cartier’s role to the acceptance of a proposal made by others – in the words of J.M.S. Careless, a contribution that was “fundamentally passive” (Careless 1959, 146). Cartier’s own words suggest he saw himself fulfilling a decidedly more active role in Canada’s founding. To the citizens of Montreal, just weeks before Confed-

eration, he said, “Canada will become a nation, stretching from one ocean to the other . . . With all the resolve and all the energy I could call on, I walked towards the goal I wanted to reach, and I did reach it.”<sup>47</sup> On the level of practical politics, we see Cartier heading the most consistently powerful political group in Canada, working to restore lost liberties to the province of Quebec, and to array the other colonies around her to afford scope to French-Canadians’ ambition. Thought-provoking as this approach may be, there is a still better view.

Above the level of practical politics, Cartier’s declarations represent timeless, transferable principles of Canadian statecraft. Diversity being a permanent condition of Canadian politics, Cartier supplied original answers to the abiding Canadian question – how to reconcile diversity with unity. Cartier spoke of an unwritten Canadian Constitution “found in the laws of justice and fairness.” His career was the definitive example of what it means to be Canadian, and his declarations rise to a philosophy of government that is distinctively Canadian: do what is just, respect the beliefs of others, never give into prejudice, and above all, to be Canadian. He not merely shaped the Canadian ideal, he created it, by expanding the boundaries of what a nation could be. That is his ultimate claim to be *the* Father of Confederation.

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“*With all the resolve and all the energy I could call on, I walked towards the goal I wanted to reach, and I did reach it.*”

George-Étienne Cartier

Canada remains a contested ideal, a country where nationality itself implies certain political commitments. At the centennial decade, serious doubts remained about national unity, and questions were sometimes raised whether Canada could survive without a unified national culture. As a new anniversary approaches, we should recognize anew the worthiness of Cartier’s dream, that we might continue his patient work, to unite Canadians, to overcome prejudice, and to make Canada a home for all Canadians, regardless of national origin, language, or religion. Canada does have a strong, distinctive, and unified national culture, the origin of which can be traced in the life and career of George-Étienne Cartier. ♦



# About the Author



**A**lastair 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*.

Alastair is admitted to the Bar of the State of New York.

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# Endnotes

- 1 Archives de la province de Québec, *Événements de '37-'38*, No. 11, pp. 4-9.
- 2 Durham, *Report on the Affairs of British North America*.
- 3 Address to the Electors of Terrebonne, *L'Aurore des Canadas* (28 August 1840).
- 4 This is the first in a series of new English translations of Cartier's speeches, appearing in the footnotes below, done by Jean-Paul Murray, of Chelsea, Quebec. The original of this speech appears in Appendix XII to Best, 1969. The remaining French originals footnoted below appear in the 1893 edition of *Discours de Sir Georges Cartier*, edited by Joseph Tassé, published by Senécal & Fils at Montreal. The author extends his sincere thanks to the translator for his tremendous effort and authentic voice.
- 5 Speech, *Ministerial Responsibility*, Saint-Denis, September 24, 1844.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Speech, *Verchères Election*, February 14, 1855.
- 8 Speech, *Banquet Hosted by the Citizens of Ottawa*, October 17, 1865.
- 9 Speech, *Banquet Hosted by the Citizens of Montreal*, October 30, 1866.
- 10 Speech, *Verchères Election*, February 14, 1855.
- 11 Speech, *Representation by Population*, Legislative Assembly, June 9, 1858.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Speech, *Representation by Population*, March 28, 1862.
- 15 Speech, *Representation by Population*, April 5, 1861.
- 16 Legislative Assembly, April 4, 1851, reported in *Globe*, April 11, 1861.
- 17 Speech, *Representation by Population*, April 11, 1861.
- 18 Speech, *Representation by population*, April 5, 1861.
- 19 Speech, *Representation by Population*, March 28, 1862.
- 20 Speech, *Representation by Population*, April 5, 1861.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Speech, *Representation by Population*, April 11, 1861.
- 23 Speech, *Representation by Population*, March 21, 1861.
- 24 Speech, *Representation by Population*, April 5, 1861.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Speech, *Representation by Population*, March 28, 1862.
- 27 Herman Merivale to C.G. Lewis, 23 September 1858.
- 28 Speech, *Announcing Candidacy for the House of Commons*, August 19, 1872.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.

- 33 *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada (1864)*, pp. 383–384.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 “The weakness of the central power is not the fruit of the Federal system; it is its root, it is itself.” Canada 1865, p. 350.
- 36 “Almost unbelievable” how little, in the view of H.B.M. Best. See Best 1969, p. 298.
- 37 Speech, *To the Citizens of Saint-Hyacinthe*, May 17, 1867.
- 38 Speech, *Banquet Hosted by the Citizens of Montreal*, October 30, 1866.
- 39 Speech, *Response to Address by the Citizens of Montreal*, May 17, 1867.
- 40 Speech, *Banquet in Honour of Alexander Tilloch Galt*, May 22, 1867.
- 41 Speech, *To the Citizens of Ottawa*, May 25, 1867.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 *Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne*, Quebec Legislature, November 23, 1869.
- 45 Speech, *Acquisition of the North-West Territory*, April 15, 1869.
- 46 Speech, *Banquet in Honour of J.H. Pope*, November 9, 1871.
- 47 Speech, *Response to an Address by the Citizens of Montreal*, May 17, 1867.

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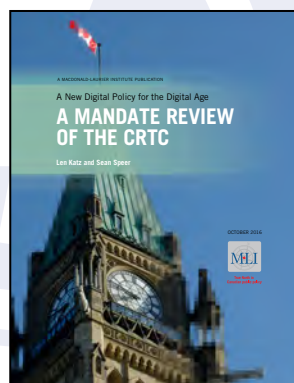
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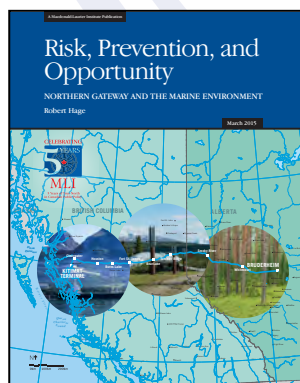
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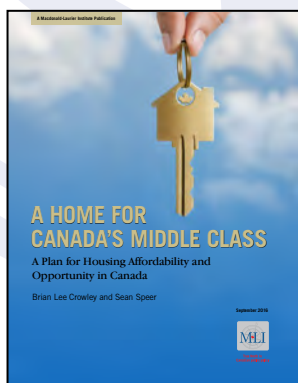
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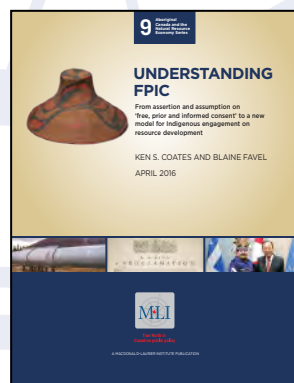
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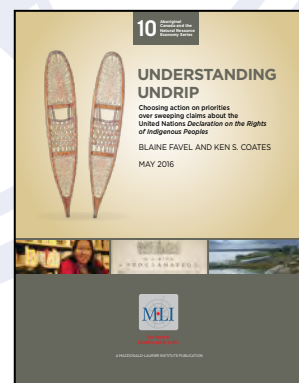
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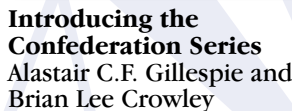
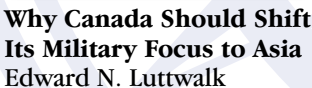
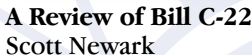


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