

# Canada East – Background

**Population (circa 1860):** 1,112,000

**Urban centres:** Montreal (107,225)  
Quebec (59,700)

**Key figures:** George-Etienne Cartier (1814-1873)  
Alexander T. Galt (1817-1893)  
Thomas D'Arcy McGee (1825-1868)  
Hector L. Langevin (1826-1906)  
Etienne P. Taché (1795-1865)  
Jean Charles Champais (1811-1885)



By the 1860s, the Province of Canada (encompassing both Canada East and Canada West) is the most populous, the largest in size and the most powerful of the British North American colonies. Canada East is dominated by the lumbering industry and an agricultural economy. The colony's urban centre, Montreal, is the most populous city in British North America. It is, in fact, almost double the size of Quebec, the second largest city in the colonies. The wealthy lumber merchants are central members of the city's elite, along with a rising group of industrialists: owners of iron and steel plants, flour mills and steamship lines. This group, dominated by Scotsmen, have built grand mansions along the slopes of Mount Royal, in the centre of the city. Though English speaking Protestants make up only 15 percent of the colony's population, they dominate the commercial and political life of the colony.

It is the rural habitant, however, the French Canadian farmer, who makes up the bulk of the rural population. Living, by and large, along the shores of the St. Lawrence River, the French speaking, Roman Catholic habitant lives a traditional way of life, producing potatoes, rye, buckwheat and livestock.

A serious problem, magnified by the recent growth in Canada West, is the political deadlock in the Canadian Parliament. The inability to form a majority government led to three different administrations between 1861 and 1864. In 1864, however, the Great Coalition was formed. Made up of Conservatives, Clear Grits and Reformers from Canada East and Canada West, the Great Coalition called for, among other things, a federal union of the British North American colonies. Many feared the destruction of French culture in any union of the British North American colonies. But George-Etienne Cartier, the French Canadian member of the Coalition, believed that only in a federal union of the colonies would French Canadian culture survive and, in turn, flourish. In the new federal union, he argued, French Canadians would still control all matters concerning language, religion, civil law and education within the province.

The Grand Trunk is the colony's central railway line. With its headquarters in Montreal, and an impressive network of lines (including the Victoria Bridge, which spans the St. Lawrence and is the world's longest bridge), transportation is still hampered by two factors. Not only does the colony lack a year-round, ice-free port, but also one cannot travel from Canada East to the Maritime colonies without travelling through the United States. For six months of the year, Canadian imports and exports are carried on American railways, on American soil and, often, shipped in and out of American ports. The solution, in many Canadian minds, is an Intercolonial Railway. If the Intercolonial were built, it would run

through New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and end in Halifax. Canada East's commercial potential would be immense.

The Intercolonial Railway would also help in the defence of British North America. Great Britain's reluctance to defend the colonies has made closer ties between the British North American colonies crucial to security. The threat of Fenian raids along the Canada-United States border near Montreal, as well as the threat of American invasion during the Civil War, make an Intercolonial Railway necessary for mobilizing troops.