

# Canada West – Background

**Population (circa 1860):** 1,396,000

**Urban centres:** Toronto (56,000)  
Hamilton (26,700)  
Ottawa (21,500)  
London (15,826)  
Kingston (12,400)  
Brantford (8,100)

**Key figures:** John A. Macdonald (1815-1891)  
George Brown (1818-1880)  
William McDougall (1822-1905)  
Alexander Campbell (1822-1892)  
Oliver Mowat (1820-1903)  
James Cockburn (1819-1883)  
William P. Howland (1811-1907)



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. Overwhelmingly Protestant and English speaking, Canada West's population is now greater than Canada East's and it is growing at a faster rate. As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find good farm land in a colony where over 80 percent of its residents live in the countryside. To prevent young farmers from moving to the American West, and to halt American expansion into the British North West Territory, many politicians and newspapermen—led by George Brown and his *Toronto Globe*—are calling for Canada to acquire, to settle and, ultimately, to govern the Western lands, presently controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company.

Another problem magnified by the recent growth 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 West and Canada East, the Great Coalition called for a federal union of the British North American colonies, "rep by pop" (representation by population), and the incorporation of the North West Territory into any Confederation. "Rep by pop," the central demand of George Brown's Clear Grits, would give Canada West the political power its increasing population deserves.

Agriculture and lumbering are the chief industries in Canada West. The wealthy wheat and lumber merchants form the core of the colony's elite. The key to Canada West's economy is the Grand Trunk Railway. The colony's already extensive rail network has made Toronto the commercial centre. Goods from all regions of the colony flow into the growing city, ready for export or to be shipped elsewhere within Canada West.

Trade, however, is hampered by two factors. Not only does the colony lack a year-round, ice-free port, but also one cannot travel from Canada West 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 Canada East, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and end in Halifax. Canada West'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 provinces crucial to security. The threat of Fenian raids along the Canada-United States border in the Niagara region and along the St. Lawrence River, as well as the threat of American invasion during the Civil War, make an Intercolonial Railway necessary for mobilizing troops.