

Confederation: For and Against

Confederation stirred emotions for many reasons, perhaps because it raised questions about identity—in particular, the question of a Canadian identity. In the following excerpts from speeches by John A. Macdonald and Joseph Howe, notice how identity is cleverly linked to other issues. What are some of these issues? Joseph Howe, a long-time Nova Scotia politician who had guided the colony to responsible government, strongly opposed Confederation.



Let us see what the Canadians desire to do. They are not, as we have shown, a very harmonious or homogeneous community. Two-fifths of the population are French and three-fifths English. They are therefore perplexed with an internal antagonism which ... must ever be a source of weakness. They are shut in by frost from the outer world for five months of the year. They are at the mercy of a powerful neighbour whose population already outnumbers them by more than eight to one ... on the opposite side of a natural defenceless frontier. Surely such conditions as these ought to repress inordinate ambition or lust of territory on the part of the public men of Canada.

[I]t is evident that a more uncompromising nucleus of a new nation can hardly be found on the face of the Earth, and that any organized communities, having a reasonable chance to do anything better, would be politically insane to give up their distinct formations and subject themselves to the domination of Canada.

... When franchises were conferred upon the people of the Maritime Provinces, and legislatures given to them, these could only be yielded up by voluntary consent, or be forfeited by misconduct. When self-government was conceded, it could never afterwards be withdrawn.

—Joseph Howe



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

The dangers that have risen from this system we will avoid if we can agree upon forming a strong central government—a great central legislature—a constitution for a union which will have all the rights of sovereignty except those that are given to the local governments. Then we shall have taken a great step in advance of the American Republic. If we can only obtain that object—a vigorous general government—we shall not be New Brunswickers, nor Nova Scotians, nor Canadians, but British Americans ...

In the case of a union, this railway must be a national work, and Canada will cheerfully contribute to the utmost extent in order to make that important link, without which no political connection can be complete. What will be the consequence to the city [Halifax], prosperous as it is, from that communication? Montreal is at this moment competing with New York for the trade of the great West. Build the road and Halifax will soon become one of the great emporiums of the world. All the great resources of the West will come over the immense railways of Canada to the bosom of your harbour.

—John A. Macdonald

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. In an organizer, list Joseph Howe's points against Confederation in one column and Macdonald's points in favour of Confederation in another.
2. How do Macdonald and Howe represent the presence of the United States? In a paragraph, describe who, in your opinion, used the American factor most effectively.
3. What does Macdonald say citizens of his proposed Confederation would call themselves? Would this be a selling point for French-Canadians? Explain your answer.