

Sir John A. Macdonald



Delegates sail from Québec City along the St Lawrence River and to the Charlottetown Conference in 1864, in this Heritage Minute.



Heritage Minute Learning Tool

Introduction

This learning tool complements **Historica Canada's** Sir John A. Macdonald Heritage Minute by exploring the role of Sir John A. Macdonald in the negotiations leading up to Canada's Confederation.

This guide was made possible with the generous support of TD Bank Group, whose commitment to Canadian history and story-telling has been celebrated.

Actors recreate the iconic black-and-white photograph taken in Charlottetown, PEI, of the delegates attending the Charlottetown Conference.



The Charlottetown Conference in 1864 was attended by delegates from the Province of Canada, including Sir John A. Macdonald, who met with the leaders of the Maritime colonies. While at the Charlottetown Conference, leaders heard Macdonald speak about his vision of a future union. The momentum from this conference continued into the Québec Conference and led to Confederation in 1867, with Sir John A. Macdonald as Canada's first prime minister.

The Heritage Minute's rendition of Macdonald's speech that helped win favour for Confederation at the Charlottetown Conference.



Extended Research

The Heritage Minute about Sir John A. Macdonald makes many references to important events occurring around the time of Confederation and after. See if you can pick out what they are when viewing the Heritage Minute. You can watch the Heritage Minutes here: www.heritageminutes.ca.

English Language Learners

English language learners may want to review the following terms to better understand the video: Confederation, bribe, delegation, objective, civil war, isolated, united, dare, methods, fortune.

Choose from the list of topics below and conduct investigations of your own to discover their importance. Each of these events has an entry in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*: www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca.

Topics

1. Construction of a transcontinental railway
2. Civil War in the United States
3. The Charlottetown Conference (you could also look at the Québec Conference which followed it)
4. Sir John A. Macdonald, his leadership methods and personality
5. George Brown and his ideas for Confederation (*hint*: look at representation by population)

- ◊ Delegates from the Province of Canada travelled together by steam ship over four days to reach PEI in 1864. Here, CGI (computer-generated-imaging) helps envision what this journey looked like.

Debate

In the study of history, there are many angles to debate and examine. This is no different in the study of Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald. Listed below are a series of resolutions to consider. You can debate them as a class or more formally in teams of two with a government side and an opposition.

Before beginning, watch the Heritage Minute once more. Note that George Brown and George-Étienne Cartier express concerns about the challenges of bringing about Confederation. How does Macdonald make a case for his scheme? Why do you think Macdonald is so keen?

If you are debating formally, each speaker should aim for a two-minute speech supporting his or her case. Speeches can be shortened to suit different learning styles.

English Language Learners

A possible modification for English language learners is to research the five Ws for the topic chosen (*who, what, where, when, why*).



- ◊ **Sir John A. Macdonald (Nov. 1883).**

This is one of several images of Macdonald that served as inspiration for the Heritage Minute costume designer. Photo by William James Topley, courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

Resolutions

Be it resolved that Confederation would have failed without the efforts of Sir John A. Macdonald.

Be it resolved that Sir John A. Macdonald deserves a major monument to recognize his achievements as part of the celebration of his 200th birthday in 2015.

Be it resolved that too much attention is paid to Sir John A. Macdonald in Canadian history at the expense of other important people, groups and events.

Be it resolved that Sir John A. Macdonald is more "National Scoundrel" than "Nation Maker."

- ◊ **John Dougall and Sir John A. Macdonald cartoon from 1885.**

John Dougall was the founder and editor of the *Montreal Witness*, known for its strong position on temperance. Macdonald was known for his drinking. Courtesy of the McCord Museum.



Perspective Taking

“But united... just imagine: to the east, the Atlantic provinces. Then Lower and Upper Canada, across the prairies, to the Rockies, and beyond. A new country, made one by a railway, from sea to sea.”

Confederation affected many people in Canada in the 1860s and beyond. In the Sir John A. Macdonald Heritage Minute, a map is unfolded that shows Macdonald’s dream of expanding Canada “from sea to sea.” Macdonald believed that a united Canada would offer protection from the upheavals taking place next door in the United States. How would Canada’s growth affect people across the country? Take some time to explore the perspectives of the groups noted below.

- Aboriginal peoples on the Prairies, including Métis
- Chinese labourers who helped build the railway
- French Canadians in Québec (formerly Lower Canada)
- Atlantic Canadians

Not everyone was in favour of Confederation. What are some feelings that people, in the groups listed above, may have had about Macdonald, Macdonald’s ideas, and the changes to government and borders? What about after Confederation, as Macdonald embarked on building a railway? What were some of the concerns expressed by Aboriginal communities? Some of this history remains a source of considerable controversy.



- ◆ The Confederation appeal to the Maritime provinces by the Province of Canada delegates was supported by all but Prince Edward Island. The filmmakers recreated Province House in Prince Edward Island using CGI; the scene was actually shot in an empty hockey arena in Ontario.

Task:

Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper of the time.

Write as though you were a member of one of the groups mentioned above. Use evidence drawn from *The Canadian Encyclopedia* and other sources to discuss why you are **for** or **against** Confederation and expansion.

Alternatively, you can write the letter directly to Sir John A. Macdonald, on behalf of your chosen group, **giving your support** or **protesting** these historic changes.

English Language Learners

As a modification, English language learners can make a list of reasons why each group **would** or **would not** support Confederation.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions in your group and then as a class:

1. Name some of the positive and negative aspects of both continuity and change in Canada during the Confederation era.
2. What were the key turning points (name specific events) of the Confederation era? If you had to choose the most significant turning point, what would it be?
3. What makes Confederation a key turning point in Canada’s history?



- ◆ Macdonald’s vision for a united country was ambitious and would take years to finally achieve. A CGI map helps to demonstrate his great plan.

Fun Facts

John A. Macdonald was the first Canadian to be awarded an honorary degree from Britain’s famous Oxford University. He also earned one from Kingston’s Queen’s University, a school he helped to found.

John A. Macdonald and his son Hugh were both elected to Parliament in 1891.

John A. Macdonald was famous for many of his quips, or funny comments, even if they came at his own expense. He said of the founder of the *Globe* newspaper, George Brown, that he “knows enough of the feeling of this meeting to know you would rather have John A. drunk than George Brown sober.”

Activity questions in this learning tool are based on the Historical Thinking Concepts created by professor Peter Seixas. For more information visit: www.historicalthinking.ca.

Fun Facts

When John A. Macdonald passed away, his political opponents spoke highly of him in the House of Commons. Liberal leader Wilfrid Laurier said of him: "Without any exaggeration . . . the life of Sir John Macdonald, from the day he entered Parliament, is the history of Canada."

John A. Macdonald won four consecutive elections with a majority government, a Canadian record.

When he arrived at the Charlottetown Conference, Sir John A. Macdonald signed the guest book as "cabinet maker," a reflection of his role as a leader who had to put together a workable cabinet to run a successful government.

Continuity and Change

The **Historical Thinking Concept** of identifying continuity and change is an important way to explore the past.

For example, we might ask in what ways contemporary Canada is similar to Canada at the time of Sir John A. Macdonald and in what ways it is different. The theme of continuity can be different for each Canadian. Change happens all the time. It can be fun to think about the moments when some of the greatest changes occurred in a specific period. We call these "turning points."

In groups, think about what you know of the time of Confederation and Macdonald's work towards it (1860s to 1890s) to help you complete the chart below.

Comparing the times of Sir John A. Macdonald to today

Similarities between the times of Sir John A. Macdonald and our times

Example: Then, the prime minister had to balance provincial and national interests. Today, the prime minister must do the same.

Differences between the times of Sir John A. Macdonald and our times

Example: All the politicians were men; today, women are politicians as well.

Why This Heritage Minute?

Discuss the following questions in small groups and then convene as a class to share your answers.

1. Sir John A. Macdonald's contributions to Canada were many. Why do you think the makers of the Minute chose to focus on the Charlottetown Conference and Confederation?
2. If you had to make a title for this Heritage Minute, what would you choose?
3. If you had to make a different Heritage Minute about Sir John A. Macdonald, what would your Heritage Minute be about?
4. If you were asked to make a Heritage Minute about a different person, group or event from this period, what would you choose?



◊ Sir George-Étienne Cartier and Sir John A. Macdonald can be seen standing together at the far right of this photograph from 1860. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.