THE GREAT COALITION

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by

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OTTAWA, CANADA
THE GREAT COALITION

On November 6th, 1867, the first session of the First Parliament of the Dominion of Canada met in the Parliament Buildings at Ottawa. The members had been returned at a general election in the previous September, and now assembled to debate and write the first statutes of Canada. In many ways it was a new beginning, and many elements in the new national context still remained to be explored.

Yet the situation was not really new. The Commons chamber in which they sat was familiar to some forty-eight percent of the members. Many had been in session there on the previous August in the last session of the Union Parliament. The clerks and writers, and the very form of the sessional papers were familiar. Nor were the political manoeuvres or the attitudes of members, a groping for a sense of direction in an unfamiliar political arena. The lines drawn between political parties in the House of Commons in 1867 had evolved over the course of a quarter century. It was the most natural occurrence when John Rose moved the House into Committee of Supply, on December 10th, and Sir John Macdonald seconded his motion. It was an equally familiar sight when A.A. Dorion rose to move an amendment strongly critical of the government. It had all happened before, many times.

For the general public, the recent general election that had returned these members to parliament had had little to distinguish it from half a dozen previous elections. The leading politicians were well known, the party organization in the ridings was essentially the same. An examination of the personnel and general motives of Canadian political parties shows no break in continuity at 1867. Rather, there is exposed a continuing evolution and development stretching from before 1854 to the days of the First World War.

When the Legislative Assemblies of the new provinces of Ontario and Quebec met first in the last days of December 1867, the members there too, found their political roots in the twenty-six years of experience under the Union of 1840. About twenty-seven of the members at Quebec and about fifteen percent at Toronto had been elected to the Canadian Legislature before. The quiet exultation in the early meetings of both these Houses arose particularly in contrasting their new found freedom of action with the restraints imposed by the old constitution.

For the public men of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick the experiences of 1867 appeared in quite a different light. Nova Scotia's nineteen and New Brunswick's fifteen federal members were
grafted, somehow like strangers, into the Canadian political arena. They left behind in Halifax and Fredericton two colonial capitals that for generations had been outposts of an empire centred on London, dealing with customs duties, maritime policies, coinage, militia and a large range of public business. After the proclamation of the Dominion of Canada these provincial governments found themselves confined with limited financial resources to coping with roads, schools, municipal affairs, and a narrowly restricted field of competence. Old long-established political party loyalties and enmities continued to operate at the provincial level in the Maritime Provinces and in electing federal members. But it was the alignment of political parties developed in the years 1841 to 1867 in the Province of Canada, that set the stage for the development of federal party alignments.

**Political Parties and Confederation**

The union of British North American colonies occurred in response to a large range of circumstances that included an international climate of opinion responding to German unification, an appreciation in British Government circles of the altered importance of dependent North American colonies in British imperial relationships, the impact of the United States as a major strategic factor in world power politics and a large and dynamic neighbour of British North American colonies, the many facets of commercial and financial activity in these colonies, and the social and political activity of the colonists themselves. The public affairs of the Province of Canada were but one element in a much larger historical fabric, yet all students of mid-nineteenth century Canadian history are agreed that political party activity in the united Province of Canada was intimately connected with the achievement of Confederation in 1867. Their evaluation and even their explanation of the role of parties has changed from generation to generation. The geographical and political loyalty of each historian has also coloured his view of the question.

A not uncommon Nova Scotian view sees Canadian party and racial rivalries pursued with great immoderation bringing the public business to a standstill in "deadlock." It was in seeking a resolution of their domestic political problems that the public men of that Province had gone out to involve other British North American colonies in a general union.

A French-Canadian explanation points out that the Union of 1840 was conceived to swamp French-speaking folk in a predominantly English-speaking, Anglo-Saxon political unit. In the ensuing quarter-century the conventions of the British constitution were
used to fend off the assimilation of French Canada. The government, begun as a legislative union of Upper and Lower Canada, was made to operate as a quasi-federal union. By the late 1850’s the pressure of an ever growing English-speaking population in Canada West made some adjustment of the constitutional arrangements inevitable. The correct adjustment in the 1860’s should have been the clear acknowledgment of the federal principle applied only to Quebec and Ontario. The provincial governments should have been allotted strong powers and the federal level limited to “some joint authority” dealing with matters that were clearly of joint concern to the two provinces. To supporters of this view the forceful advocacy by the Great Coalition of a general federal union of all British North America appears wrong headed. It seemed to them that political party advantage and the hope of financial gain must have been the principal motives of the Coalition.

The Clear Grit Liberals voiced clearly some of the sectional viewpoints of the Ontario region. They concentrated their attention on achieving sectional self-government unhampered by French-Canadian motives, but were not unanimous in their vision of the ultimate constitutional goal. A small minority saw their future in political union with the prosperous and dynamic United States. Few saw any great advantage in union with the Maritime colonies. Many envisaged Ontario’s future prosperity arising from the peopling and development of the prairie west.

Some of the basic facts about the Great Coalition are not questioned. The interaction of political parties in the Province of Canada had virtually ground to a halt in deadlock, in the winter 1863-1864. A coalition of leaders from the two major parties from Canada West and the principal French-Canadian party of Canada East concluded a temporary political truce in June 1864, in order to bring in a new federal constitution. This “Great Coalition” did take very active measures and was the “main spring” of the Confederation movement. To appreciate the nature and force of political motives in the creation of the Dominion of Canada one must seek an understanding of political developments in the previous generation. Some of the century old themes are not unconnected with Canadian national affairs today.

*Launching the united Province of Canada*

In 1840 the British government and its Colonial Secretary Lord John Russell were urgently seeking solutions to the political and administrative problems left by the abortive rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada. The public service in the two colonies was antiquated
and inefficient. The intensity of public feeling between Family
Compact and Reformers, and between Chateau Clique and Patriotes
had subsided into sullen lethargy, with many of the Reformers' and
Patriotes' leaders in exile. There was apparently no political party
in being that could give leadership in the orderly reconstructing of
public life. This lack of stable moderate political parties in both
colonies rendered Lord Durham's recommendations for the establish-
ment of cabinet government in these colonies unworkable. In
neither province was there evidence that the mass of the general
public knew the many political conventions that made cabinet
government work in Britain.

Charles Poulett Thompson, a senior British politician at the
height of his career, and possessing a wealth of experience in business
practice and political manipulation, was sent out to the Canadas as
Governor-General to restart and reorganize public life. It was
decided that the two colonies should be united in one legislature, each
being represented there by forty-two members. It was agreed that
the Governor should personally assume the initiative in ordering
affairs in the new united province, avoiding as much as possible the
use or recognition of existing political parties and groups. Both
Russell and Thompson believed that a programme of active and
effective practical measures firmly administered by the Governor
would rehabilitate public life and take public attention away from
intense factional strife and theoretical discussion of constitutional
issues. During his administration Thompson (presently Lord Syden-
ham) did succeed in his general aims. Basic reforms were instituted
in the public service, and the new representative system was success-
fully put in motion.

The Governor could not hope to extinguish from the public
memory a generation of activity by Lower Canadian British Tories,
Compact Tories, French-Canadian Patriotes or Upper Canadian
Reformers. Yet he set himself to act without them, and in spite of
them. For the 1841 election he personally sponsored a slate of
moderate candidates in Canada West who were set up to oppose
both Compact Tories and a reviving Reform party. Thus Alan
MacNab and J.S. Cartwright were excluded from the Governor's
circle as undesirable Tories while Robert Baldwin and Henry John
Boulton were suspect "ultra" reformers. In Lower Canada it was
decided to ignore the French-Canadians and by a careful delineation
of the boundaries of ridings and the location of polling places secure
the return of as many English-speaking, non-French members as
possible. In fact the Governor, in sponsoring "British" candidates
in Lower Canada, was reviving a British-Tory-merchant party there.
John Neilson, A.N. Morin and L.H. Lafontaine created a political party organization, with English as well as French members, to protest the Act of Union, which had been implemented without popular consent. Their efforts created a new French-Canadian party. Before Lord Sydenham’s death a political alliance was being forged between Baldwin Reformers of Canada West and the Lafontaine French-Canadians of Canada East with the aim of securing the practice of cabinet government in the Province.

Sir Charles Bagot, Lord Sydenham’s successor, was a man of very different experience, having had a distinguished career in the diplomatic service. On the meeting of the Legislature in 1842 he was faced by an altered political situation that could not be solved by the Governor’s personal initiative in a further programme of practical measures. A majority of the members of the Assembly were in sympathy with the aims of the Baldwin-Lafontaine Alliance and prepared to support those aims. Sir Charles dismissed three of the Executive Councillors that he had inherited from his predecessor, and installed Lafontaine, Baldwin and three of their colleagues in the Executive Council. Between September 1842 and Bagot’s replacement in March 1843 the Executive Councillors acted in consort one with another, and in complete harmony with the Governor in ordering the executive acts of the provincial government. Thus within two years of the starting of the provincial government under the Russell-Sydenham policies, French Canadians found themselves advising the Governor in his Executive Council, and the Council itself had a majority of members from the same political alliance that enjoyed the support of the majority in the Legislature. There was no official recognition of a change in constitutional practice, but something very close to cabinet government had been achieved.

The evolution of parties down to 1849

The British government was distressed by Sir Charles Bagot's initiatives that had come close to conceding the practice of cabinet government in a colony, and instructed his successor Sir Charles Metcalfe to avoid further concessions in this direction and to regain the initiative for the Governor in ordering colonial public business. The Executive Councillors soon sensed the new direction of official policy, and resolved to make a public issue of the fact that the Governor had refused their advice in appointing a Postmaster. When Sir Charles Metcalfe insisted upon his right to refuse their advice, all the political members resigned on September 30th from the Executive Council. On making their explanations to the Assembly, the "late councillors" were vindicated in their resignation by a majority of the Legislature.
It was a measure of the discipline within the Baldwin-Lafontaine Reform Alliance that their members stood firm in the crisis of the fall of 1843, and continued to preserve their unity through an election defeat in 1844 and through more than three years "in opposition" until their victory in the general election in the winter of 1847-1848. This united front was kept intact by various devices, a voluminous correspondence between the leaders and members, testimonial dinners, and political rallies.

In resolving the constitutional crisis, the Governor-General brought several men of moderate view, including D. B. Viger, a former Patriote who hoped to further French-Canadian national aspirations from within the executive, and D. B. Papineau, a brother of Louis Joseph Papineau, into his Executive Council. After an extended tour of the Province, an active correspondence with leading public men who might support his aims, an extended debate in the press about the issues, and the issuing of a series of carefully argued pamphlets by Egerton Ryerson supporting the Governor's stand, Sir Charles called a general election in the late summer of 1844. It resulted in a narrow victory for the Governor.

The three sessions of the Second Parliament in the period 1844-1847 seemed to provide an opportunity for the formation of some sort of Tory Alliance to oppose the Reform Alliance now in a minority. W. H. Draper, a leading barrister and a moderate Tory, was one of Metcalfe's first appointments to the Executive Council after the mass resignation of Reformers. He made valiant efforts to create an effective moderate Tory party, and recognized the potentialities of J. A. Macdonald, J. H. Cameron and William Cayley, all moderate Tories at the beginning of their political careers, by bringing them into the Executive Council. Draper's efforts to create a united Tory party were abortive for several reasons: Draper had no personal following in the Legislature, the Tory ranks were divided by faction, and an important element among the Governor's supporters in the House were simply moderates who opposed the policy and outlook of the Baldwin-Lafontaine Alliance and were not supporters of Tory principles. Draper's work in these years has earned him the credit of being the father of the Conservative party.

British policy about the institution of cabinet government in colonies was reversed in 1846, and the new favourable view was made known to Lord Elgin, the new Governor-General. These conventions were to be taken into practice on the first opportunity that presented itself. The precedent was set in Nova Scotia. The opportunity was created in the Province of Canada in 1848. The
general election of December 1847-January 1848 returned the followers of Lafontaine and Baldwin in a strong majority from both sections of the province. On March 10th, 1848, the Tory Executive Councillors resigned in the absence of majority support in the Legislature, and on the same day L. H. Lafontaine agreed to form a cabinet composed entirely from the Reform Alliance. In the legislative session of 1849 the conventions of cabinet government (responsible government) were in full operation with the Reform Party “in power” initiating a vigorous programme of legislation including the Rebellion Losses Bill, and amnesty for participants in the 1837-1838 rebellions, a Municipal Corporations Bill for Upper Canada, a University Bill and railroad legislation. The Tory opposition could still not discover a basis for united action, while a number of its members were implicated in the public unrest and the burning of the Montreal parliament buildings in late April. Later in the year the despairing Annexation Manifesto issued from many Tory hands. The Tory disunity and lack of direction manifested in the Second Parliament continued in further disintegration through the 1848 and 1849 sessions of the Third Parliament.

A period of realignment 1850-1854

In the months following the session of 1849 new currents of political activity became apparent among the government’s supporters and the opposition from both sections of the Province.

By-elections in Canada West returned W. L. Mackenzie, Caleb Hopkins and Peter Perry, all left-wing reformers in 1837. L. J. Papineau had been elected in 1848, and was now joined by Luc Letellier and the annexationist J. S. Sanborn, from Canada East. Although these members did not form a new disciplined party “of the left,” they did press for democratic and republican innovations in government, and gave a foretaste of the political views that were to be pressed vigorously in future years by Clear Grits and Rouges. The leaven of their advocacy drew other liberal-minded members to vote for some of their propositions. While these symptoms of a new left-wing radicalism were appearing from the session of 1850 onward, there was also a re-orientation under way among right-wing elements in Canada West. Since 1841 Compact Tory ideas and traditions had been at the core of the right-wing members from Canada West. Following the excesses of 1849 a new generation of moderate Tories began actively to challenge the older high Tories within the party. Draper’s young men were at the centre of this reappraisal of Tory goals, and with their generation the word “Tory” is progressively replaced by “Conservative” in describing the party.
In October 1851 both Lafontaine and Baldwin left the government, and leadership of the Reform Party. They were succeeded by Francis Hincks and A.N. Morin, who proceeded to reconstruct the ministry. To appease the more radical elements in the party who had been chafing at the moderation of the old leaders, L.T. Drummond and John Young from Canada East and John Rolph and Malcolm Cameron from Canada West, all advanced liberals, were brought into the cabinet. This cabinet reorganization was followed by a general election that returned the government with a little altered majority. The contests in the ridings at the 1851 general election had preserved the general character of duels between Reformers and Tories, but there were strong evidences that there was now an ultra wing and a moderate wing to the Reform party in both sections of the Province. One of many examples of this trend was evident in York North where Robert Baldwin, the late Reform leader, and Hugh Scobie, a Conservative, were defeated by Joseph Hartman, an ultra-Reformer.

When the Fourth Parliament met in 1852-1853 the eighteen Reformers from Canada West were found to be about equally divided between moderates and more advanced Reformers, and on the left were the two independents W.L. Mackenzie and George Brown. There was much more solidarity in the ranks from Canada East, twenty-three strong. However, LaTerrière, Marchildon and Sicotte stood out on the left wing of the party, and to their left again in opposition were the early Rouge members Jobin, L.J. Papineau, Valois and John Young. Despite these divisions the Hincks-Morin government survived the session.

Almost a year intervened before the parliament met again in June 1854. In the interval the public was agitated by speeches and press reports to insist upon a more vigorous and liberal policy. Hincks the government’s leader was away in Britain seeking loans and contractors to press on with railway building, and appeared to have lost touch with the political climate at home. When he did finally meet parliament he found himself in a minority of 9 to 29 in Canada West, and an overall minority of 30-47 in the whole House. His government did retain a slim majority of members from Canada East. What was most striking in this crisis of June 1854 was that the government was in a moderate middle-of-the-road situation with a significant opposition opposing it from both the left and right. Ultra-Reformers, Rouges and independents composed the left wing. On the right, twenty Tories and Conservatives from Canada West were joined by eleven Tories from Montreal and the Eastern Townships, and right-wing French Canadians.
Hincks called an immediate general election in the hope of securing a more sympathetic House, but was frustrated in this. There had been a redistribution of seats before the 1854 election that increased the composition of the Legislative Assembly from 84 to 130 members (65 from each section of the Province). When the alignment of the new House was tested on September 5th, in choosing a Speaker, the Hincks-Morin government found itself in much the same position as at the end of the previous session. It was still opposed from both left and right, and was in an overall minority, and a minority in Canada West. Clearly the Reform Alliance, first projected in 1840, which had served under Bagot, and first introduced responsible government under Lord Elgin in 1848, had now come to the end of its mandate.

In seeking the tactical reason for its difficulties in the politics of 1854, it should be noted that the Hincks-Morin government maintained the support of a majority from Canada East, and was not faced by a sudden resurgence of Conservative strength in Canada West. The change in its fortunes was due to its failure to maintain the confidence of the main body of Reform opinion in Canada West. While there was a growth of Liberal opinion and the first appearance of a significant Rouge group in Canada East, the government maintained its majority in that section. It was the new ferment of Clear Grit radicalism in Canada West that divided Reformer from Reformer until a point was reached where the moderate Reformers no longer commanded a majority in that section.

*The coalition of 1854*

The crisis of the Reform Party occurred on September 5th. Five days later a new basis of government had been found, and the membership of the cabinet from Canada West was considerably altered. Whereas the Hincks government was in a minority in that section of the province, the new government had the confidence of a majority. The principal items of the legislation that had been prepared by the Hincks-Morin government for the 1854 session, were taken up by the new ministry and pushed through to enactment.

The basis of the reorganization was worked out in negotiation between Hincks as leader of the moderate Reformers (Hincksite Reformers) and the Conservatives. The reconstructed cabinet was to have three Conservatives (A.N. MacNab, J.A. Macdonald and William Cayley) and two Hincksite Reformers (John Ross of the Legislative Council who continued in office from the earlier cabinet, and Robert Spence). During the next months it became clear that the reconstructed cabinet was being supported in Canada West by
all Conservatives and a large segment of Reform members. At the beginning of the Fifth Parliament (1854) there had been twenty-five Hincksite Reformers, with fourteen ultra-Reformers in opposition. By 1856 these proportions had been reversed. The moderate Hincksite Reformers in support of the government were reduced to about twelve as Reformers drifting into opposition, increased their numbers there to twenty-seven. Apparently the temporary expedient in 1854 of joining moderate Reformers and Conservatives to further effective legislation was turning out to be an uneasy alliance as the months of collaboration stretched out into years. The Conservatives, too, were having troubles with their Tory right wing. These were publicly manifested in 1856 when Sir Allan MacNab, the titular head of the party, was excluded from the cabinet, calling forth the temporary opposition of five Conservatives.

In longer retrospect the coalition of 1854 appears as a principal watershed in Canadian public life. The Baldwin and Hincks Reform Party was essentially moderate, and middle-of-the-road in orientation. In seeking to find a majority of members from Canada West in 1854, to support an administration, an alliance was established between Reformers of the centre and Conservatives of the right, leaving ultra-Reformers in opposition. In fact the long term effect of the coalition of 1854 was to split the Reform Party’s ranks and to divide future party alignments in Canada West into two major parties, one on the right and one on the left. Until the early 1870’s the Hincksite Reformers did not finally lose their identity in the great body of Conservatives, and continued to proclaim the ideal of coalition and maintain their identity as Reformers.

About six months after the formation of the Liberal-Conservative alliance the Lower Canadian wing of the government began to undergo a subtle transformation as G. E. Cartier and Joseph Cauchon entered the government on the retirement of Morin, Chabot and P. J. O. Chauveau. With the arrival of Cartier and Cauchon the Lower Canadian wing of the Liberal-Conservative alliance begins to have the flavour of a party of the right, and the title “Bleu” soon appears to differentiate it from the growing Rouge movement on the left.

*The dynamic year 1858*

The rearrangement of political groups in 1854 had ended fratricidal conflict within the Reform movement, and had set the various ultra-Reformers free to construct a cohesive discrete party of their own: the Clear Grit Party. The more advanced liberals of French Canada were in the same years creating their own distinct
party, the Rouge party. The general election of the winter 1857-1858 gave these newly forming parties a first opportunity to go before the electorate in their new guise, though neither the Clear Grits or Rouges nominated candidates in even a majority of ridings. Most ridings in Canada West saw a contest between candidates of the "left" and of "the right", but many were three-cornered contests between "left", "centre" and "right." The parties and the electorate were still not accustomed to the new polarity in political alignment. The stronger and more extensive Rouge advocacy in Canada East, for the first time really challenged the concept of one French-Canadian party, and offered in a number of ridings liberal French-Canadian candidates as an alternative to Bleu (Conservative) French-Canadian candidates.

The Clear Grits at this period were proposing a number of legal and governmental reforms including the extension of the elective principle in both municipal and provincial government, the reduction of the costs of government, amendments to judicial practice and the law that would bring a quicker less expensive justice to the common man and lower tariffs on items and foods of common daily use. They argued that public education should be available to all, and unconnected with any specific church. The Protestant voluntary principle should prevail, excluding any church from government aid or special privilege. These ideas expressed in part, a sectional viewpoint that fretted about Roman Catholic French-Canadian influence that seemed to lead government policy on the opposite tack. On the public platform this was "French domination." Some of the support for the Clear Grit movement came from the merchant community of Toronto and towns of Canada West who saw in the movement the championing of sectional viewpoints that conflicted with the interests of the Montreal business community apparently entrenched in the Liberal-Conservative Party.

By 1857 it was broadly understood that the population of Canada West exceeded that of Canada East by a significant margin, and that the discrepancy was rapidly increasing. Yet both sections were represented equally in parliament, and allowed Lower Canadian members to frustrate the enactment of highly desired Upper Canadian reforms. The remedy lay in constitutional change that would allow Canada West to be properly represented and achieve its legitimate goals by common democratic practice. This was all summed up in the slogan "Rep. by Pop.": let the people of Canada West be represented in parliament in accordance with the relative size of its population. The "Rep. by Pop." idea was first broadly urged in the 1857 general election, and thereafter was a never failing election cry at succeeding elections until the problem was solved.
The Rouge group in Canada East shared some of the same theoretical democratic and republican ideas that were at work among the Clear Grits, but their application of these ideas had nothing of the Protestant sectional bias of the Clear Grits. In Canada East they opposed the "establishment" allied with the Roman Catholic Church and the financial interests of the cities. They urged tariff reforms, planned colonization of the surplus population on new frontier lands within Canada East, and the local application of liberal ideas that were current in France. They disputed with the Bleu party the honour of embodying and continuing the Patriote tradition of 1837.

The results of the 1857 election showed the Clear Grits returned as the majority party in Canada West, but the Rouge party had only returned ten stalwarts to confront the thick ranks of Bleus. The opening session of the Sixth Parliament in 1858 witnessed a long and hard fought parliamentary battle, as the Clear Grits vigorously asserted the whole range of their reforming policies. Again and again the Macdonald-Cartier government voted them down, using the government's overwhelming majority in Canada East. To the minds of the Clear Grits' supporters their case was proven, Canada West was ruled by the smaller section, Canada Est.

In late July 1858 the tensions of the session came to a climax when the House attempted to determine the permanent location of the capital of the Province. It was an issue that cut across party lines at different angles depending upon the city designated as a prospective capital. The Macdonald-Cartier government resigned when its policy was not upheld by a majority of the House. In the decisive division a number of Bleu members voted against the government.

After various negotiations George Brown of the Clear Grits agreed to form a new government, and entered into negotiations with A. A. Dorion, the Rouge leader. On August 2nd a Brown-Dorion government was sworn into office. Its support comprised the 33 Clear Grits from Canada West, ten Rouge and another five liberal members from Canada East who crossed the House to come to their support — clearly not a majority. On August 4th, after 48 hours in office, the ministry resigned. Although the briefness of their period in office prevented them from articulating a clear policy, the members of the "Short Administration" had demonstrated that there was a basis of mutual understanding between Rouge and Clear Grit that would allow them to undertake to govern the Province. The forty-eight hours adventure in government-making and defeat re-emphasized for liberals of Canada West that "Rep. by Pop." was the only recourse in securing home rule for their section. The heat of acrimony raised by the "Double Shuffle", by which the Liberal-Conservative ministers returned

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to office without standing for re-election, and the refusal of the Governor-General to grant Brown a dissolution and new general election on August 3rd, increased the frustration of the Rouges and Clear Grits in their defeat.

On August 6th, 1858, the Cartier-Macdonald government, somewhat reconstructed, resumed the reins of power for another forty-five months in office.

*Deadlock*

The remaining sessions of the Sixth Parliament witnessed continued in-fighting, on the lines already drawn in 1858. The solidarity of the ministerial ranks began to fray at the edges under the constant hammering of the opposition. In the summer of 1861 a new general election was called when the prospect for Liberal-Conservative success seemed bright. No new major issue was in dispute.

The new Seventh Parliament was a disappointment to both sides of the house. In Canada West the Clear Grit contingent had decreased, leaving the Conservatives and their six Hincksite Reformer allies in a majority. Apparently the electorate was somewhat disenchanted when the Clear Grit advocacy of the last years had not brought practical results. In Canada East, by contrast, the ranks of the Bleu members, though strong, were somewhat thinned, while they faced the largest representation of Rouge members yet to appear: twenty-three in number. The results of 1861 were further unsatisfactory to government tacticians for there was less solidarity in party ranks, as more members than usual voted unpredictably on the many issues that came to division in the House.

These tendencies toward relaxed party discipline came to a head on May 20th, 1862, when a major government item of legislation, the Militia Bill, was defeated by a vote of 54-61 on its second reading. Eleven Bleu members had voted with the opposition. It was possible that the Cartier-Macdonald government might have been able to carry on, for the eleven members soon returned to their party allegiance in the next weeks. The defeat on the Militia Bill was, however, taken to be a vote in want of confidence, and the Cartier-Macdonald ministry resigned.

J. Sandfield Macdonald, a Liberal from Canada West, but by no means a dedicated Clear Grit, constructed a new cabinet that was intended to appeal broadly to members of the centre and left. In associating with A. A. Dorion he hoped to secure the support of the Rouges, while Sicotte, Evanturel and T. D. MacGee would enlist other liberal opinion in Canada East. William MacDougall and Howland
represented the Clear Grits. This new Liberal government seemed to have the prospect of achieving an alliance of major elements from both sections of the Province and forming a viable alternative to the Liberal-Conservative party of Cartier and J. A. Macdonald.

The Sandfield Macdonald government survived the rest of the session, and was not challenged by its opposition to any major vote in want of confidence. If tested in this way it would probably have been found to be in a minority of several members. The Liberal-Conservatives had little prospect of achieving a working majority if they had sought to regain power in these months, for six or eight members had crossed into support of the Liberal government on its formation. Clearly, Sandfield Macdonald and both his friends and his opponents all looked to some resolution of their current impasse in a new general election.

The initiative lay with the government and its leader. Just a year after taking office he reorganized his cabinet in preparation for calling a new general election. Some months previously A. A. Dorion had resigned, implying some lack of enthusiasm among the Rouge members for the government’s policy. Thereafter it had been in effect a Macdonald-Sicotte ministry. Now, in May 1863 Macdonald dismissed the moderate Liberals of Canada East from his cabinet and brought back Dorion, Holton, Thibaudeau and Letellier, all Rouges or advanced liberals. He then went to the polls.

The Eighth and last Parliament of the union period was elected in the midsummer of 1863. Fifty-eight per cent of the members of the new Parliament had sat in the previous House, an unusually large carry over. The election had disclosed several trends very clearly. In Canada West the Clear Grits and Liberals had an overwhelming success and returned forty members. In Canada East the Rouges and Liberals had hardly advanced, returning only twenty-four. The cabinet reconstruction had not effected its purpose. The opposition in Canada West, largely Conservatives, but with two (Hincksite) Reformers and one or two others, numbered only twenty-four or twenty-five. The Bleu party had recouped its losses of 1861 and numbered about thirty-eight. The House was now in a state of equilibrium between two major and two lesser elements that very nearly balanced each other. The balance of power in the opening session was held by just three or four uncommitted members and the results of one or two disputed elections.

The Macdonald-Dorion Liberal government survived a number of early divisions by majorities of two or three. Then because of minor changes in membership of the Assembly it began to be in a
minority of one or two. On March 29th, 1864, the Liberal Govern-
ment resigned. On the following day a new Liberal-Conservative
cabinet took office, including several of the J. A. Macdonald-Cartier
stalwarts. The titular head was the veteran E. P. Taché. Also
included were M. H. Foley and T. D. McGee, disgruntled moderate
Liberals whom Sandfield Macdonald had dismissed from office in the
previous May. This new ministry fared no better than its prede-
cessor, and soon found itself in a minority of two in the Legislative
Assembly.

This was the famous state of deadlock as it was reached in
June 1864. Canada West had spoken decisively in the 1863 election
by returning a large Clear Grit Liberal majority. Canada East had
declared equally strongly in the opposite sense in returning a large
majority of Bleus. Experiment had proven, after two general elections,
that any combination of parties and groups of the right or any similar
grouping of elements of the left were incapable of providing stable
government. The discipline within party ranks was now cohesive
enough to frustrate all attempts to entice members from their declared
political positions.

The Great Coalition 1864

In mid-March of 1864, before the Sandfield Macdonald govern-
ment was defeated, George Brown had spoken at length in the House
reviewing the Province’s constitutional difficulties, and had secured the
setting up of a twenty member select committee of the Legislature
under his own chairmanship, to enquire into and report upon the
situation and to suggest remedies. By coincidence this select committee
reported on June 14th, the same day that the E. P. Taché-J. A. Mac-
donald government was defeated in the House. The committee reported
“a strong feeling . . . in favour of changes in the direction of a Federal
system applied either to Canada alone or to the whole of the British
North American Provinces, . . .” Here once more was the idea of
federal union that had captured the imagination of thinking men in
many previous generations, and had been given more currency in the
preceding decade. Now, suddenly, it might be a practical solution
to current political problems. It was Brown who took the first step
in finding a solution to the latest ministerial crisis, by initiating
conversations with Conservative leaders that led to the formation of
a coalition of Clear Grit Liberals, Conservatives and Bleus pledged to
work together to bring in a federal system for Canada. Miraculously,
the latest in a series of political crises leading to an ever more inflexible
deadlock was resolved in an arrangement that released the parties
to exercise a new dynamism, not experienced since 1849.
The creation of the Great Coalition occupied the days between June 14th, and June 30th, 1864. The Taché-Macdonald government, immediately after its defeat in the House advised the Governor-General, Lord Monck, to call a new election. Concurrently George Brown approached J. H. Pope and Alexander Morris, influential Conservative back benchers, seeking conversations with a view to some alternative solution to the crisis. By Friday, June 17th, the Governor-General had stated his reluctance to call a new general election, while John A. Macdonald and Galt were having their first formal conferences with Brown. It was on Wednesday, June 22nd, that all the negotiating had been completed, the party caucuses consulted, and ministerial explanations made formally in the House. George Brown, Oliver Mowat and William McDougall were to replace three Conservatives in the cabinet, and constitute half the cabinet's representation from Canada West. The new coalition government would seek to solve the constitutional problems of Canada through the implementation of the federal principle applied if possible to a union of all British North America. If the larger federal union was not possible they would seek to create a federal union in Canada alone. The new ministers were sworn into office on June 30th.

At first glance the Great Coalition of June 30th, 1864, might appear to be a uniquely brilliant move in a, till then, uninspiring game of political chess. Political opponents at that time, and unsympathetic later commentators have suggested that political expediency was the principal motive. But they are wrong. The principals who entered the coalition did so at some considerable risk to their careers. The policy proclaimed by the coalition government pointed the way to the fulfilment of major long-term goals that had been pursued by the several political parties over the course of many years.

George Brown's personal situation was quite precarious, for he had taken the initiative in bridging the gap between the Clear Grit Liberals and their most ardent opponents. Of the three parties involved, the Clear Grits were least given to following uncritically in the wake of a determined leader. Although it is now established that the highest public concerns drove Brown to his action, it was very possible that his party might at any time disown him, leaving his public career in ruins. Any miscalculation in June 1864 or in the next eighteen months might seem to give the Conservatives or Bleus a political advantage, and lead to his undoing. From his point of view it was a hazardous business.

The general aims of the Clear Grit Liberals had been canvassed in 1857 and 1858. A great convention of the Reform Movement, held
in Toronto in late 1859, had, with Brown's strong intervention, hammered out a number of generally agreed goals. They would seek to implement the principle of representation by population, perhaps requiring the creation of some form of federal union. By these means they would secure control of their own destiny in Canada West, and the opportunity to benefit in opening the prairie west to settlement and economic development. As we have seen, the nature of the existing union frustrated the Clear Grits from achieving these aims by their own unaided efforts. The Great Coalition provided an agency by which these goals might be reached.

John A. Macdonald had reached a point in his career in June 1864, when he seriously considered leaving politics and returning to the private practice of law. There was a gambler's fascination about what new situation a next election might bring, but he had no bright vision of his or his party's future prospects. The Conservative party had been slowly losing ground in Canada West, and any affiliation with the Clear Grit opponents might lead directly to the extinction of the Conservatives, swallowed up in that other growing and aggressive party.

Yet the policy of the Great Coalition did open the possibility that a new constitutional arena might be created in which the Conservative party would have an important role. Many Conservatives were men of business who had long hoped to lift restrictions and set the economy of Canada West into a cycle of rapid development.

G.E. Cartier's entry into the Great Coalition was overshadowed by the possibility that the rank and file of his party would appraise his tactics as committing the French-Canadians to a full involvement with Anglo-Saxons in a situation where they would be a decreasing minority. The move to a general federation would mean giving up some of the security for language, customs and religion, that was built into the constitution of the Union. Even in the Great Coalition, the agency for change, Cartier and his French-Canadian supporters would be in a minority. He might be disowned by his people as a false leader. Today Cartier is not revered in Quebec as one of the great historic leaders of French Canada. It is considered that Dorion's policy of fighting the Great Coalition and all its works, was a much sounder policy in 1864 than the one pursued by Cartier.

The ideas of a general union of British North American colonies, and of realizing the economic potential of opening the prairie west had been pursued in 1857 and 1858 by the Liberal-Conservative government when positive action seemed likely to achieve some
success. Chief Justice William Draper had been sent to England in 1857 to uphold Canada’s claims to Rupert’s Land and the North-west before a select committee of the British House of Commons enquiring into the future of the Hudson’s Bay Company. In 1858 A.T. Galt had been brought into the Cartier-Macdonald ministry on condition that the government would press vigorously for British North American union. On a mission to England Cartier and Galt had these plans uncompromisingly vetoed by the Colonial Secretary, who believed that the union would not be acceptable to the Clear Grits, and would fall in the midst of bitter partizan wrangling. After this date the Liberal-Conservative tariff policy implemented by Galt, and the ministry’s assistance in projecting the Intercolonial railway and telegraph communications to Rupert’s Land indicate a readiness to sponsor policies that would strengthen Canada’s economic position and create communications linking Canada with British lands to the east and to the west. The years 1859-1864 offered few opportunities for heroic nation building projects. The policies of the Great Coalition coincided with the general direction of Liberal-Conservative aims.

It can be safely concluded that the principal motives that led to the creation of the Great Coalition were not personal aggrandizement or the seeking of short-term tactical success in the political battle. The Great Coalition was created to achieve large long-term goals that had been under active consideration in all three major political parties for several years. The Great Coalition was a brilliant inspiration that rescued Canadian public life from frustrating deadlock.

The fortunes of the Great Coalition

The discussion of the effectiveness of the Great Coalition ministry in achieving its goals belongs to the large theme of the creation of the Dominion of Canada. That theme has been developed elsewhere in this series of booklets, and in a number of larger studies. The Great Coalition itself was a political phenomenon, and its origins and formation have been presented here in the setting of the evolution of political parties and their changing alignment. It now remains a duty here to indicate the last developments before the implementation of Confederation in 1867.

The pact between Clear Grits, Conservatives and Bleus concluded in June 1864, was scrupulously honoured by all parties, who worked effectively as a team and achieved their goals. However, the memory of two or more decades of party contests and strife could not suddenly die away in the weeks after June 1864. No member of the pact had
thought of abating the full aspirations of his own party once the coalition had achieved its goals and all took care that their future prospects were not dimmed by present actions.

Although the Great Coalition was a temporary pooling of talent to achieve a limited aim, the day-by-day unfolding of the drama of its formation left the impression that the Taché-Macdonald government, though defeated in the House, had retained its continuity in office. The Clear Grits under George Brown were added, somehow, to a Liberal-Conservative government in being. In practical worldly affairs the weak are drawn to join the strong, and the weak unit is often absorbed by the strong unit. As the activity of the Coalition ministry was discussed publicly and defended in the House there was a tendency to treat their activity as the work of a “coalition party.” Thus the Clear Grits who entered the coalition from strength were under the threat of losing their identity in a new coalition party wearing a Liberal-Conservative image.

Brown became progressively more aware of the threat to his own and his party’s Liberal image implicit in their circumstances after June 1864. Once the principles of the federal union were safely past the Canadian provincial parliament it was possible for him to turn to the mending of his political fences. When on tour in the Maritime provinces in 1865, on confederation business, he made approaches to leading Liberals there with an eye to creating a federal Liberal Party. In late December 1865 he took strong exception to Galt’s handling of a mission to Washington to deal with the Reciprocity Treaty question. He took the occasion to resign from the cabinet, but continued to support any business in the House that bore directly on the achievement of Confederation.

A Clear Grit group was active as a separate entity in the last session of the Union parliament in 1866 and their motions and advocacy had again the ring and spirit of the party in the late 1850’s. They supported some of the motions proposed by the Rouge opposition. Thus, while three Clear Grit Liberals still sat in their places in the cabinet continuing the form of the Great Coalition, others of the same party were beginning to act in opposition to the government in non-Confederation business.

The Great Coalition did not end with a formal dissolution. In preparing for the first federal general election the (Clear Grit) Liberals held a party convention in Toronto that declared the coalition pact at an end, for its goals had been achieved in the creation of the Dominion. The convention listened coldly to the
explanations of the Liberals who still held cabinet office. A new Liberal election platform was worked out, and organizing activities were pressed on to field a slate of Liberal candidates in most Ontario ridings.

From the Liberal-Conservative point of view it was good politics to preserve as long as possible the idea that the federal government was identical to the non-party Great Coalition. In the first federal election most Liberal-Conservative candidates in Ontario were put forward as coalition or national candidates. The contests in Quebec federal ridings were little affected by the coalition idea, for the Rouges had opposed Confederation consistently. Here the contests lay between a Rouge and a Bleu candidate in about thirty-four ridings.

The Great Coalition had done most of its essential work by December 1865 when Brown resigned. After the proclamation of July 1st, 1867, no one could be required in honour to respect any continuation of the coalition pact. By the time of the second federal election in 1872 the Liberal-Conservatives had ceased to use "coalition" as a badge.
FIGURE 1  The alignment of political parties and groups 1841-1866 (somewhat generalized)
FIGURE 2 The political composition of the support for Executive Councillors 1842-1866 (somewhat generalized)
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

One of the earliest works to set down in detail the evolution of Canadian political parties in the quarter century before Confederation was J. C. Dent, *The Last Forty Years: Canada Since the Union of 1841* (2 vols., Toronto 1881). Though it is not critical, the narrative is readable and still most useful. It includes details of the forming of the Great Coalition.

Three major political biographies, the earlier O. D. Skelton, *The Life and Times of Sir Alexander Tillock Galt* (Toronto 1920), and the more recent D. G. Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician* (Toronto 1952), and J. M. S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe* (2 vols., Toronto 1963), are essential in unravelling the many strands of Canadian political evolution in the period. Unfortunately there is no comparable treatment of G. E. Cartier.


To some extent this booklet is an epitome of P. G. Cornell, *The Alignment of Political Groups in Canada 1841-1867* (Toronto 1962).