

The Charlottetown Conference and its Significance in Canadian History

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In the Legislative Council Chamber in the Provincial Building at Charlottetown late in the evening of September 8, 1864, the Honourable Thomas H. Haviland, at a luncheon in honour of the delegates to the Charlottetown Conference, concluded his speech as follows:

I believe, from all that I can learn that the Provinces will, ere long, be one great country or nation, from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Never before was there such an important meeting as this held in the history of British America; and it may yet be said that here, in little Prince Edward Island, was that Union formed which has produced one of the greatest nations on the face of God's earth.¹

Fifty years later, in the same room was erected a bronze tablet in commemoration of this Conference, on which the following inscription was engraved:

Unity is strength. In the hearts and minds of the delegates who assembled in this room in September 1, 1864, was born the Dominion of Canada Providence being their guide, they builded better than they knew. This tablet erected on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the event.²

The prognosis of T. H. Haviland was fulfilled. Prince Edward Island by virtue of the Charlottetown Conference has since been known in Canadian history as the Cradle of Confederation. The story of the preparatory arrangements, the day-by-day details, and the results of this important Conference will be the subject matter of this paper. Special emphasis will be placed upon the attitude of Prince Edward Island, the reluctant and disinterested host of the Conference.

The remote preparations for the Charlottetown Conference must be sought within the framework of the movement for a legislative union of the Provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Such a union was the hope of two very earnest young men, both of them governors of New Brunswick. It was first suggested by Sir Edmund Head when he was Lieutenant-Governor and was vigorously taken up by his two successors in that office, John Manners-Sutton and Arthur H. Gordon. It later fleetingly attracted other political men, Joseph

¹ Edward WHELAN, *The Union of the British Provinces* (Charlottetown, 1865), p. 7.

² Letter of Bartlett to Tupper, Oct. 14, 1914, Letter 1169, *Tupper Papers*, Public Archives of Canada.

Howe and Charles Tupper of Nova Scotia, Leonard Tilley of New Brunswick, and W. H. Pope of Prince Edward Island. But these men were unenthusiastic, and as will be seen, the whole movement, having few earnest advocates and enjoying little public support, eventually collapsed. Prince Edward Island was the least enthusiastic of all the Provinces; it saw the movement quite realistically as the annihilation of its cherished independence, and although it felt the question demanded its courteous consideration, its desire for the maintenance of its local government always precluded its treating such a Union with favour.

The subject of Maritime Union received its first serious consideration in the year 1864. The initiative came from Nova Scotia, promptly supported by New Brunswick. In February of that year the Administrator of the Government of Nova Scotia, requested the Governments of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island to appoint five delegates who would be authorized to attend a Conference to discuss the feasibility of a union of the three Provinces under one Government and Legislature.³ In due course the subject of Maritime Union came under discussion in the three legislatures. In Nova Scotia and New Brunswick no strenuous opposition was encountered. The Assembly debates revealed that the majority of the members approved of the proposed conference. It was only in Prince Edward Island that deep-seated opposition was encountered. There, the resolution to appoint delegates to attend such a Conference took on the aspect of a party measure and was vigorously opposed by the Opposition. Even its supporters were unenthusiastic. The need for being courteous to the request for a Conference was continually stressed. It was evident that Prince Edward Island was already out of step with the Mainland Provinces.

In April, 1864, the discussion on Maritime Union commenced in the House of Assembly of Prince Edward Island. The leader of the Government, Colonel J. H. Gray, led off the debate by proposing a resolution “for the appointment of delegates to consider the expediency of Maritime Union.”⁴ In his speech that followed he spoke rather disparagingly of his own resolution. “If,” he said, “the Provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were to be annexed to Prince Edward Island, great benefits would result to our people, but if this Colony were to be annexed to those Provinces the opposite might be the effect.”⁵ He concluded his remarks in a humorous vein.

Is Charlottetown or Summerside to be the capital of Cabotia or Acadia, or whatever the country may be called? Are we to be the Ottawa of the United Provinces, and are buildings to be erected here costing as in Canada, millions of dollars? Then again, when are the sessions of Parliament to be held? Are we to be required to keep our representatives at some Capital in one of the sister provinces, from autumn to spring or are they expected to clasp pole in hand and leap from iceberg to iceberg across the Northumberland Strait in the dead of

³ Doyle to Dundas, Feb. 8, 1864, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, P.E.I., 1864, Appendix A.

⁴ *Debates and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of Prince Edward Island for the Year, 1864*. p. 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

winter? All these questions would be required to be answered before I would be prepared to say whether it would be expedient or not to enter into the proposed union.⁶

It was evident that the leader of the Government was not enthusiastic about the prospects of union.

The most influential speech delivered in the debate was that of the Speaker, T. H. Haviland. He said:

I caution the Hon. members that if they sell their birthright they may expect their country to retrograde as Cape Breton has done since her annexation to Nova Scotia. We have at present the system of selfgovernment and self-taxation, and if there be some defects in the practical working of our institutions, it is 'better to bear the ills we have than fly to others that we know not of' ... 'The Tilleys and the Tuppers would fain have a wider field for the exercise of their talents and the extension of their sway, but it is our duty to protect the rights of those whose representatives we are, and what public man will not hesitate, ere he votes that our institutions shall become non-entities?''⁷

As the debate progressed it became evident that even the innocuous resolution proposed by Colonel Gray was in danger of being rejected. The members of the Assembly were greatly influenced by Haviland's speech. Tribute was paid to it by all the speakers who followed him in debate, and all the speeches that were given afterwards were either sceptical of or positively opposed to Gray's resolution. At length George Howlan, a member of the Opposition, moved a resolution, "that it was inexpedient under present circumstances to appoint anyone to attend a Maritime Union Conference."⁸

The Government, on account of this amendment introduced by the Opposition, felt obliged to make the original resolution to appoint delegates a party question. A defeat on it could have resulted in a vote of non-confidence in the Government. Consequently, the Government rallied its forces and the resolution was upheld on straight party a vote on a division of eighteen to nine.⁹ The debate in the Assembly revealed that all of the members, with the exception of W. H. Pope, were opposed to Maritime Union. It was clear, moreover, that the only reasons why the Assembly agreed to appoint delegates were because the issue became a party measure and the government believed common courtesy prevented it from refusing. The attitude of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to Maritime Union has been described as apathetic. The same could not be said of Prince Edward Island. The imminence of a fundamental constitutional change aroused opposition on the Island. It was felt that common courtesy demanded formal consent to a Conference on the project. But now that the resolution had passed, allowing delegates to attend such a Conference, the Island Executive

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷ *Assembly Debates*, 1864, pp. 35-36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹ *Assembly Debates*, p. 42.

Council began to insist that it must meet on the Island. This was not a good sign. It seems safe to assume that without Canadian intervention a Conference would never have been held.

Maritime Union by June of 1864, was all but dead of inanition. The problem of agreement over a place of meeting for the Conference had created a serious obstacle. The request of the Canadian government to attend the projected Conference was destined, however, to break the temporary stalemate into which the Union movement had fallen. The new Canadian coalition formed in June had promised to adopt immediate measures with a view to the union of all the British North American Colonies. On June 30, 1864, therefore, the Governor General communicated with the Maritime governments, asking whether a Canadian delegation might be sent to meet with the Maritime delegates "to ascertain whether the proposed Union might not be made to embrace the whole of the British North American Provinces."¹⁰ Without waiting for joint consideration of the Canadian request, each government returned its own answer. The three governments agreed that the Canadians would be welcome, but Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia insisted that their participation in the Conference must be unofficial. Prince Edward Island answered as follows:

While the Government of Prince Edward Island is fully sensible of the many advantages that are likely to result from the meeting of Representatives of Canada with those of the Maritime Provinces, and would cordially welcome their presence, a difficulty in recognizing in an official capacity Delegates from Canada at this Conference presents itself, since the Local Legislature has, in the present instance, authorized the appointment of a Delegation for the specific purpose of discussing the expediency of a Legislative Union of the Provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island.¹¹

But if the Canadians were going to be welcome at the Conference there must be one of them to attend, and as yet neither place nor time nor personnel had been determined.

Lieutenant Governor MacDonnell of Nova Scotia took the initiative in the matter. He wrote to the Lieutenant Governors of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island asking them whether they could not agree between themselves to a place and time of meeting. In deference to the previous insistence of the Island Government, he even suggested that he "could see some advantages in the selection of Charlottetown for that purpose."¹² Having made this move, he embarked on the Colonial schooner, *Daring*, on a visit to some of the outlying areas of the province. He arranged to have his mail forwarded, but no answer to his despatch arrived. Whether by design or as friendly gesture, he visited Charlottetown as a guest of George Dundas, the Lieutenant Governor. This visit

¹⁰ Monck to Dundas, June 30, 1864, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, P.E.I., 1865, Appendix E.

¹¹ Dundas to Monck, July 25, 1864. *Journal of the House of Assembly*, P.E.I., 1864, Appendix F.

¹² Macdonnell to Dundas. July 25. 1864. *Ibid.*

was productive of results as he was successful in moving the lethargic Dundas into action. He had scarcely left the Island before Dundas initiated telegraphic communications with Colonel Cole, the Administrator of the New Brunswick government.¹³

On July 25, 1864, Dundas asked Cole to “telegraph, if your Ministers approve Charlottetown, and first of September for Conference.”¹⁴ Cole replied that his Government was “willing to accede to His Excellency’s suggestion, that the Conference should be held at Charlottetown, on the first of September.”¹⁵ Now that the Conference was to be held on the Island, Dundas’s Government at once proceeded to make arrangements. A meeting of the Executive Council was held immediately after the reception of Cole’s telegram, and, the Honorables John Hamilton Gray, Edward Palmer, William H. Pope, George Coles, and Andrew A. MacDonald were selected as delegates.¹⁶ On July 28, 1864, Dundas informed Monck of the time and place of meeting and assured him that he would “rejoice to receive in Prince Edward Island, those gentlemen who may be delegated from Canada, to attend the Conference.”¹⁷ Thus, ironically, the final arrangements for the Conference on Maritime Union were largely made as a result of Canadian prodding. Yet it was fitting that the final initiative should come from Canada since the Conference was destined to be devoted mainly to a consideration of Federal rather than Maritime Union.

The reception accorded to the delegates to the Charlottetown Conference was in many ways a reflection of the Islanders’ lack of interest in the question of union. The first delegate from the mainland provinces to arrive at Charlottetown was R. B. Dickey, the Reform leader in the Nova Scotia legislative council.¹⁸ The rest of the Nova Scotia delegation reached Charlottetown on the *Heather Belle* on the afternoon of August 31st.¹⁹ They were not officially met on landing, but made their way as best they could to the Pavilion. “Not a soul belonging to the Government,” the *Examiner* bitterly commented, “was on the wharf to receive them, – there was not a carriage of any kind, – not even a truck to take their luggage to the hotels or boarding house; and they were suffered to find out, by rule of thumb, where they could get something to eat and a bed to lie upon.”²⁰ The New Brunswick delegation arrived on the *Prince of Wales* a little before midnight on the same day.²¹ They were met only by the Colonial Secretary, W. H. Pope, who afforded them a meagre reception. He directed them to the *Mansion* House where they

¹³ *The Protestant*, July 30, 1864.

¹⁴ Dundas to Cole, Telegram, July 25, 1864. *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cole to Dundas, Telegram, July 25, 1864. *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Minute of Executive Council, P.E.I., July 25, 1864, Provincial Secretary’s Office, Provincial Building, Charlottetown.

¹⁷ Dundas to Monck, July 28, 1864, *Assembly Journal*, 1865, Appendix E.

¹⁸ *The Islander*, Sept. 2, 1864.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *The Examiner*, Sept. 5, 1864.

²¹ *The Islander*, Sept. 2, 1864

found accommodation.²² On the morning of September first the Canadian government steamer, *Queen Victoria*, bearing the unofficial Canadian delegation, anchored in the Charlottetown harbor.²³ The news spread about that the Canadians had arrived, and W. H. Pope started out in a “flat-bottomed boat, with a barrel of flour in the bow, and two jars of molasses in the stern,”²⁴ to meet the Canadians. The *Queen Victoria* hoisted its flag. The indefatigable Pope presented the greetings of Charlottetown and Prince Edward Island. Shortly afterwards the Canadians came ashore. There was not sufficient hotel accommodation for them. Some of them stayed at the *Franklin*; but the majority of them remained aboard their ship.²⁵

The Prince Edward Island government received several strictures from the various Opposition journals for the discourteous reception afforded the delegations and for its failure to provide sufficient hotel accommodation. The government later attempted to justify itself by claiming that the Nova Scotia delegation had arrived early.²⁶ But the reason seemed to have been that a circus, the first circus to visit the Island, it was said, in 21 years was being held on the Island. “What is the cause of this wonderful migration,” a correspondent of the St. John *Telegraph*, inquired satirically at Summerside; “The circus, sir, the circus,” came the answer as the surging throng swept past him.²⁷ The circus not only attracted people all over the Island, it also apparently attracted nearly all the members of the Island government. At any rate the Ministers never effectively answered the charge that the circus accounted for their absence on the docks to meet the delegates. Moreover, the Opposition papers did not give too much credit to W. H. Pope’s official welcome to the Canadians. “The Secretary,” commented *Ross’ Weekly*, “made a respectful official visit along side the Canadian steamer, seated on an unclean barrel and in full command of an imbibing oyster boat propelled by a paddle and an oar. The Steward of the steamer, taking the Secretary for Bumboat said, ‘I say skipper what’s the price of shell fish?’ But William the Secretary opened not his shell.”²⁸ The government made an effort to explain its inability to find hotel accommodation for all the Canadians as due to the fact that a larger number had come from Canada than had been expected. The truth seemed to be that Charlottetown was full of visitors who had poured in to see, not the Conference, but the circus. The St. John *Telegraph* humorously, but truthfully, stated that the large influx on Charlottetown was not because “the whole Island population clamorous for a union were flocking to Charlottetown to enforce their views on the minds of the delegates, but because the inhabitants were travelling, many of them,

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *The Vindicator*, Sept. 7, 1864.

²⁵ *The Examiner*, Sept. 5, 1864.

²⁶ *The Vindicator*, Sept. 5, 1864.

²⁷ *The St. John Telegraph*, Sept. 9, 1864.

²⁸ *Ross’ Weekly*, Sept. 8, 1864.

a distance of sixty miles to see the circus."²⁹

The Charlottetown Conference opened officially on Thursday morning, September first. The delegates from the Maritime Provinces were as follows: Nova Scotia was represented by the Honorables Charles Tupper, William A. Henry, Robert B. Dickey, Jonathan McCully, and Adams G. Archibald; New Brunswick by the Honorables S. L. Tilley, J. M. Johnston, J. H. Gray, Edward B. Chandler, and W. H. Steeves; and Prince Edward Island by the Honorables J. H. Gray, Edward Palmer, W. H. Pope, George Coles, and A. A. MacDonald.³⁰ They had no sooner assembled and selected Colonel J. H. Gray, the Premier of Prince Edward Island, as Chairman, and Tupper and Tilley as joint secretaries, than a telegram was read announcing the imminent arrival of the Canadians. It was thereupon agreed that the project of Maritime Union should be postponed until after the Canadians had been given an opportunity to present their views on the larger union.³¹ The alacrity and unanimity of this decision manifested the lack of interest in Maritime Union and almost suggested a general sense of relief that an opportunity had been afforded for the postponement of its discussion. The Canadian delegates came ashore and joined those of the Maritimes in an official visit to Lieutenant Governor Dundas. In the evening the opening dinner of the Conference was held at Government House.³²

Next day, Friday, September 2nd, the Maritime delegates assembled in the Council Chamber at 10 o'clock. They came to the unanimous decision to admit the Canadians immediately to the deliberations, through courtesy, as visitors, with the privilege of stating their views.³³ Shortly after ten the Canadian delegates were admitted. George E. Cartier began the presentation of the Canadian case for Federal Union. The Canadian choice was prudent, for he was well-known in the Maritimes as a firm believer in provincial autonomy, and so would allay their fears of a loss of such autonomy in the larger union. He spoke for a considerable time, and then, for the rest of the session, a general discussion followed, with the Maritime delegates asking questions, and the Canadians attempting to supply satisfactory answers.³⁴ The Conference adjourned at three o'clock until the following morning at ten. This was the pattern that was followed for the remainder of the Conference. The next morning, John A. Macdonald made a long speech in favor of Federal Union concentrating on the necessity of a strong central government. His speech, the longest given at the Conference, lasted most of that day's session.³⁵ At three o'clock in the afternoon all the delegates adjourned to the *Queen Victoria* for a luncheon. They were there talking and drinking toasts until

²⁹ *St. John Telegraph*, Sept. 9, 1864.

³⁰ WHELAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

³¹ J. H. GRAY, *Confederation* (Toronto, 1872), Vol. 1, p. 30.

³² *The Vindicator*, Sept. 7, 1864. This paper provides us with a brief daily account of the proceedings of the Conference.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

late in the evening. Sufficient unity pervaded the meeting to justify the following toast:

If any one can show just cause or impediment why the Colonies should not be united in matrimonial alliance let him now express it or forever hold his peace. There was no response. 'Then' said one of the delegates, 'ere my days on earth which now are comparatively few, shall close, I may yet witness the conclusion of the ceremony and hear them pronounced man and wife.'³⁶

On Monday, September 5th, the Conference again assembled at ten o'clock. George Brown spoke at length on the principle of representation by population in the lower house and on sectional representation in the upper house. He was followed by Alexander Galt who delivered a long speech on the economic and financial aspects of the proposed federation.³⁷ It was evident that the Conference had almost ceased to be one for the consideration of a Maritime legislative union; it was in effect a Conference for the promotion of British North American Federal Union. And on Tuesday, September 6th, – before the Maritime delegates had devoted so much as a single session to the proposed Maritime Union – the Conference decided to adjourn on Thursday and proceed to Halifax.³⁸ On Wednesday, September 7th, the Maritime provincial delegates at last got down to the subject for which the Conference had ostensibly been arranged. A complete impasse, however, was reached by virtue of Prince Edward Island's attitude. And now the best chance of reaching an agreement had passed. The Conference began to perambulate. On Thursday, September 8th, the delegates went off on an excursion to the north shore of the Island; and that night the Conference concluded with an elaborate banquet and ball.³⁹

The Provincial Building, where the Conference had held its sittings, was hurriedly prepared for the festivities during the absence of the delegates. The Legislative Council Chamber was fitted up as a reception room. The legislative library served as refreshment room where copious quantities of tea, coffee, sherry, and champagne were available. The Assembly, where the dancing took place, was gaily decorated with flags, evergreens, and flowers, and with the most brilliant lighting effects that the superintendent of the local gas works, Mr. Murphy, could produce.⁴⁰ The early part of the evening was spent dancing. Mrs. Dundas and John A. Macdonald and Lieutenant Governor Dundas and Mrs. T. H. Haviland led off the first quadrille. At one o'clock the party withdrew to the Council Chamber where they found the table "literally groaning under the choicest foods,"⁴¹ the proposal and response to toasts continued until after three o'clock in the morning. All the delegates then repaired to the *Queen Victoria* which was to convoy the

³⁶ *The Globe*, Sept. 16, 1864.

³⁷ *The Vindicator*, Sept. 7, 1864.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *The Protestant*, Sept. 10, 1864.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

entire Conference across the straits to Nova Scotia.

The *Queen Victoria*, “the confederate cruiser” as the Islanders called her, was unable to stir for some hours. A dense fog which the Islanders assured the Canadians “had come over from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to do honor to the delegates from these Provinces,”⁴² delayed the departure until eight o’clock. At a little after midday they reach Pictou where most of the party disembarked and started on an overland journey to Halifax. At four o’clock, on Saturday, September 10, the Conference reconvened, the Canadians again sitting as visitors and taking an active part in the discussion. After a brief session the Conference was adjourned till Monday at ten. Between ten and eleven on Monday, September 12, the Maritime delegates were closeted by themselves discussing the bearings of the Maritime Union scheme on the larger plan presented by the Canadians. They did not come to any conclusion, and the Canadians were readmitted. After a joint session of some three hours a decision was reached in favor of the Canadian proposal for the speedy convocation of a formal Conference on the larger Federal proposal. John A. MacDonald told the Conference that the Executive Council of Canada “would advise the Governor General to invite the several governments to send representatives to a Conference to be held in Quebec on October 10, 1864.”⁴³ That evening the Nova Scotia government tendered a banquet to the delegates at the Halifax Hotel where numerous speeches were delivered in favor of Federal Union.⁴⁴

The Conference was in effect over. But since Charlottetown and Halifax had been honored, a courtesy visit had to be paid to New Brunswick. On Wednesday, September 14th, after a complete day of rest the delegates set out on their travels once more. They visited St. John and that evening the New Brunswick delegates entertained the visiting delegates at a public dinner in Stubb’s Hotel where more oratory in praise of Federal Union was delivered.⁴⁵ The next day the perambulating delegates visited Fredericton and paid a courtesy call on Lieutenant Governor Gordon. By late afternoon the delegates were once again back in St. John, and there the delegations separated. The Canadians left by special train for Shediac where they embarked upon the *Queen Victoria*. After the Canadians had departed the Maritime delegates, apparently troubled in spirit over their lack of attention to the project which they had been appointed to consider, again met to discuss Maritime Union. Nothing was agreed upon except to “adjourn until after the Conference to be called at Quebec, had formally discussed the larger question in all its bearings.”⁴⁶ On Saturday morning, September 17th, the Nova Scotia and Island delegates returned to their respective provinces, and the ambling Conference ended.

The Charlottetown Conference had met behind closed doors. Apart from the Island newspapers only one newspaper sent a reporter to Charlottetown, the St.

⁴² *The Islander*, Sept. 23, 1864.

⁴³ *Journal of the House of Assembly*, P.E.I., 1865, Appendix E.

⁴⁴ WHELAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-49.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Assembly journal*, 1865, Appendix E.

John Telegraph. Moreover, there was no official report of the proceedings, and the participants later disagreed in their interpretations of them. Nevertheless it is possible to assess the results of the Conference from five fairly official sources. These are: the confidential despatches forwarded by Lieutenant Governor Gordon to the Colonial Office on September 12 and 22, 1864; the statements made by some of the delegates at the Quebec Conference; the private papers of Edward Palmer and W. H. Pope; the speeches made at the three public banquets tendered to the delegates; and a newspaper article entitled "Confederation of British America," that was published in the Quebec newspapers on September 26th, and in the Toronto *Globe* on September 27th. This last article, generally agreed to have been written by George Brown, and commonly referred to as the "Quebec Letter," was the most important source, since it gave a comprehensive outline of the scheme of Federal Union that emerged from the discussions at Charlottetown.

The first definite result of the Conference was that Maritime Union was virtually shelved in the process of welcoming the Canadians and hearing their proposals for a Federal Union of all the British North American Provinces. Lieutenant Governor Gordon, who accompanied the New Brunswick delegates to Prince Edward Island and remained for two days, succinctly summarized the views of the Maritime delegates on Maritime Union.

The Delegates from Nova Scotia were unanimous in favor of an immediate Legislative and Administrative Union of the Lower Provinces, but were divided in opinion as to the advantages to be derived from the adoption of any wider scheme. Those from this Province were not all quite so warm in their advocacy of the Legislative union as those from Nova Scotia; but though some doubt or hesitation might exist on the part of individuals, no dissent was expressed from the opinion in its favor entertained by a majority of their colleagues. Those from Prince Edward Island were almost without exception hostile to the original proposal of a Legislative Union which the Conference was assembled to consider, but appeared not disinclined to the adoption of a Federal Union with Canada, provided their separate institutions were maintained as now existing.⁴⁷

The first serious consideration of Maritime Union took place on September 7th. Prince Edward Island, as Gordon noted, had on the first day of the Conference indicated its hostility to the project. The discussions on the seventh day revealed that such a union was unfeasible. The Prince Edward Island delegates insisted that their legislature must not be abolished; and no alternative scheme appeared to be possible that would give to the Island any significant voice in a united Maritime legislature. A complete impasse was reached when the Islanders actually insisted, as Tupper later stated, that they "make the capital at Prince Edward Island."⁴⁸ Considering the inaccessibility of the Island from the mainland during the winter when the legislative sessions were held, this insistence was tantamount to a refusal to unite with the mainland provinces. The stand taken by the Island

⁴⁷ Gordon to Cardwell, Confidential, Sept. 12, 1864, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, N. B. 1865, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Tupper to Harris, May 10, 1908, *Tupper Papers*, P.A.C.

delegates was certainly in conformity with the views that had been expressed in the Legislative debates of 1864. At Halifax and at St. John the impasse continued. The attraction of the large union together with Prince Edward Island's hostility to the smaller union soundly defeated the Maritime Union project. While the Canadians were indifferent as to whether the Maritimes entered individually or as a unit, nevertheless, the shelving of Maritime Union at the Charlottetown Conference helped the cause of Confederation. It removed the project of Maritime Union from the arena of discussion, and the Maritime delegates were henceforth fully preoccupied with the question of Federal Union.

A second very important result of the Conference was that it was unanimously agreed that a Federal Union of all the British North American Provinces would be advantageous if it could be based upon principles that were just and equitable to the several provinces.⁴⁹ The delegates even went so far as to agree provisionally on certain principles which should be incorporated in the larger plan. The proposals were not definitively settled but the general outline of a constitution appeared from the deliberations at Charlottetown. The Confederation according to the "Quebec Letter" was to consist of three sections, namely, Upper Canada, Lower Canada, and the Maritime Provinces, coming into the union either collectively or separately; and provision was made for the admission into the union hereafter on equitable terms of the North West Territory, British Columbia, and Vancouver. The whole country might have one name, Canada or Acadia. Each of the provinces was to have a Local Legislature and Executive, charged with the control of all local matters; and there was to be a General Legislature and Executive vested with the control of affairs common to the whole country. It was held as indisputable that the functions of the General and Local governments, and the subjects delegated to each, were to be clearly defined in the constitution, so as to prevent collision and give security for local interests – the whole to be embodied in an Act of the Imperial Parliament.⁵⁰

It was also generally agreed that representation in the lower house should be based upon population.⁵¹ Edward Palmer maintained in a public letter a few months later that the principle of representation by population had not been agreed to at Charlottetown. However, despite this assertion, the tenor of his letter suggests that there was a general concurrence on the principle. He wrote:

The Canadian Delegates, however, agreeably to their own wishes and with the ready concurrence of the conference, proposed a scheme for a Federal Government one principle contained in which was that representation for each province or colony should be numerically according to the ratio of population.

When the suggestion was thrown out I was one of the Prince Edward Island delegates, and I believe the only one who objected to it.

I stated emphatically to the effect I felt assured that not one man in a hundred throughout the Island would agree to the union almost under any terms;

⁴⁹ "Confederation of British America," Sept. 23, 1864, *Macdonald Papers*, Confidential, Vol. I, P.S., P.A.C. also in the *Toronto Globe*, Sept. 27, 1864.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

that the terms proposed would give us a nominal representation and that I never as one would consent to them; that in fact the authority and instructions under which the Island Delegates acted forbade me doing so. I was however, reminded that the question was not to be decided upon then but would come up formally in its proper course and at the proper time.⁵²

The principle of sectional equality for membership in the upper house was also approved.⁵³ The subjects committed to the Federal government were agreed to be as follows: “trade, navigation, currency, banking, general taxation, bankruptcy and criminal law, militia and defence, coinage, weights and measures, light-houses, sea fisheries, letters patent and copyright, naturalization, census, postal service, immigration, international works, etc.”⁵⁴ The Local Legislatures were to have control of education, public lands, civil and municipal law, roads, bridges, and harbours within the provinces, and also inland fisheries, prisons, hospitals and charities, agriculture and other matters of a purely local nature.⁵⁵ The “Quebec Letter” further stated that little or no difficulty presented itself on the subject of the Federal finances. On the consummation of the Union, all the debts and assets of the several provinces would be assumed by the Federal government.⁵⁶

In the light of this report and that of Gordon it is clear that the Charlottetown Conference did accomplish a great deal with respect to the future constitution of Canada. The agreement that a Federal Union was feasible and the broad outline of a constitution for such a union was indeed a major accomplishment. The adjustment of the details was destined to be a painful task but an important step had already been taken.

The third, and in many ways, the most important effect of the Conference was that the deliberations at Charlottetown had revealed that there was sufficient agreement on the principle of a Federal Union to justify the continuance of the discussion in a subsequent formal meeting at Quebec. The Conference provided an opportunity for the leading statesmen of the several provinces to become acquainted with each other and cemented personal relationships which are intangible necessities in any formal negotiation. Moreover, the broad agreements reached facilitated the completion of a Federal scheme at the Quebec Conference. John A. Macdonald, who may be regarded as the architect of Canadian Federal Union, made references to the Charlottetown Conference in the Canadian Confederation Debates in 1865 which can be regarded as very adequate analyses of the results of the Conference.

In his first speech in the debate on February 6, 1865, Macdonald stated that the Maritime delegates agreed at the Charlottetown Conference that a scheme of Federal Union was feasible. “So satisfactory to them the Maritime delegates were

⁵² Letter of Edward PALMER, “Observations,” *Palmer Papers*.

⁵³ *The Globe*, Sept. 27, 1864.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

the reasons we gave,” said Macdonald, “so clearly in their opinion did we show the advantage of the greater union over the lesser, that they at once set aside their own project, and joined heart and hand with us in entering into the larger scheme, and trying to form as far as they and we could, a great nation and a strong government.”⁵⁷ He went on to assert that the broad agreements reached at the Charlottetown Conference greatly facilitated the acceptance of the principle of Federal Union at Quebec. He said:

The result was, that when we met here on the 10th of October, on the first day on which we assembled, after the full and free discussions which had taken place at Charlottetown, the first Resolution now before this House was passed unanimously, being received with acclamation, as in the opinion of every one who heard it, a proposition which ought to receive and would receive, the sanction of each government and each people. The resolution is ‘that the best interests and present and future prosperity of British North America will be promoted by a Federal Union under the Crown of Great Britain, provided such union can be effected on principles just to the several provinces.’⁵⁸

Later in the same debate he claimed that if the Charlottetown Conference had not been held, Federal Union could have been delayed for many years.

By a happy coincidence of circumstances, just when an Administration had been formed in Canada for the purpose of attempting a solution of the difficulties under which we laboured, at the same time the Lower Provinces, actuated by a similar feeling appointed a Conference with a view to a union among themselves without being cognizant of the position the government was taking in Canada. If it had not been for this fortunate coincidence of events, never, perhaps for a long series of years would we have been able to bring the scheme to a practical conclusion.⁵⁹

Macdonald’s tributes to the Charlottetown Conference placed its importance as a prerequisite to Federal Union beyond question.

From these considerations we trust that you will agree that the Charlottetown Conference was a very important step in the formation of our Canadian nation. We regret, however, that few Canadian histories recognize its importance. Too often the Charlottetown Conference is referred to in histories of Canada as follows: “The Fathers of Confederation met in Charlottetown in September 1864, and there it was decided to have a formal Conference in Quebec in October.” We believe that such a cursory treatment of the Conference leaves a tremendous gap in our knowledge of the story of “Confederation.” Although the political baby, “Confederation,” was not born at the Charlottetown Conference, nevertheless we feel that the provision of the “Cradle” was of great significance and should be recognized as such in Canadian History.

⁵⁷ Speech of John A. MACDONALD, Feb. 6, 1865, *Parliamentary Debates on Confederation*, 1865. P. 25.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* P. 26.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* P.31.