

## **Alexander Galt: The Stubborn Idealist User's Guide**

### **Historical Context**

In the years following the signing of the Act of Union of 1840, the activities of the House of Assembly of both Canadas was hampered by continuing regional rivalries. By the 1850s, George Brown and his fellow Reform party members — who formed the official opposition — demanded a redistribution of seats based on population, since the population of Upper Canada now surpassed that of Lower Canada by 300,000. (The Act gave Upper and Lower Canada an equal number of seats). On the other hand, Jean-Baptiste-Éric Dorion, a Conservative MP from Lower Canada in the government of John A. Macdonald strongly, opposed the measure, saying it would reduce the influence of French Canadians in the Assembly.

In 1858, Alexander Galt, an independent MP from Lower Canada, put forth the idea of a federal union — but it was rejected by most Parliamentarians as unrealistic.

Soon after, the Conservative government was toppled after a vote of non-confidence, and George Brown came to power — but he, in turn, was defeated after only three days. The Governor General, Sir Edmund Head, decided against calling an election. Instead, he asked Galt to form a government. Galt turned down the request, saying he did not have enough support. Instead, he recommended Georges-Étienne Cartier for the position. Cartier accepted and — knowing that he would have to form an alliance with Galt — undertook to promote the idea of confederation if Galt would agree to serve in his cabinet as Minister of Finance.

Cartier, to the surprise of many, made the federal project a part of his platform. Together, he and Galt travelled to England to present their demand for a federation. It was rejected, on the basis that Lower Canada did not seem ready to accept it. Bitterly disappointed, Galt pleaded his case one more time, arguing that without confederation, there was a threat that the United States could seize the British North American territories.

### **Research, Discussion and Writing Topics**

- Compare Galt and Macdonald's ideas on a federal state.
- Discuss the question of representation by population from an Upper Canadian and Lower Canadian point of view.
- Describe how Macdonald and Cartier hung on to power during this period of instability.

- Research the reasons the Colonial Ministry in London rejected the idea of a federal union.
- Do you believe that Galt's fear that Canada would be annexed by the United States was justified?

### Questions

- In 1858, what prevented the House of Assembly from functioning properly?
- What solution did George Brown suggest in order to break the impasse?
- Why were the Conservatives opposed to Brown's proposal?
- Why did Galt think that a federal union was the only conceivable solution?
- Why did Galt turn down the request to form a government?
- Why did Georges-Étienne Cartier need Galt's support? What did he offer Galt in return?