

Charles Tupper – The Big Man Study Guide

Historical Context

Nova Scotian Joseph Howe, the voice his people for nearly 30 years, lost the colony's general election in 1863, ceding power to Charles Tupper. Tupper held that the only way the British North American colonies could survive was through a union. Howe, who had defended the notion of union in the past, felt that no union would be sustainable unless it was preceded by the construction of a transcontinental railway.

In 1864, Tupper suggested to the Nova Scotia Assembly that the colony send a delegation to Charlottetown to study the idea of a union between the Maritime provinces and Canada. This conference was followed by the Quebec Conference, which set out a plan for confederation. No plan, however, could be put into effect without first being approved by each individual legislature and by the British Parliament in London.

Nova Scotia's delegates to the Quebec Conference received a chilly welcome on their return home. All eyes were now on Joseph Howe, whose influence remained strong, and who remained firmly opposed to the plan for confederation.

Despite Howe's efforts, the agreement was approved by the legislature. On July 1, 1867, Nova Scotia entered confederation with the streets and houses of Halifax draped in black in mourning.

During the first federal election, Tupper had to face a population angry about the new constitutional formula. The election campaign was turbulent, with many spirited public debates. In the end, despite his oratorical skill and his practiced arguments, Tupper was the only pro-confederation member of Parliament elected in the province. The other 18 MPs supported Howe's anti-confederation stance. Howe himself was re-elected premier of Nova Scotia, more determined than ever to keep his province out of the Dominion of Canada.

Howe led a delegation to London in an unsuccessful attempt to convince Parliament to rescind the British North America Act. Tupper tried to convince him to give up what he saw as a hopeless battle. Realizing that confederation seemed inevitable, and considering that he might be able to be more useful to Nova Scotians as a member of the government, Howe agreed to accept a post in the Macdonald cabinet. Standing in a by-election, he surprised many by once again earning the support of his fellow citizens.

With his quiet, reasonable character, Tupper had won over his old adversary. Now, the two were colleagues and Howe recognized Tupper as a good man — a man with a big heart.

Research, Discussion and Writing Topics

- Discuss Joseph Howe’s views on responsible government and on confederation.
- Analyze the arguments put forward by Nova Scotians opposed to confederation.
- Hold a debate on the advantages and disadvantages of confederation for Nova Scotia.
- Write a biographical sketch of Charles Tupper.

Questions

- How did Tupper and Howe’s views differ on the question of a union of all British colonies in North America?
- What decision was made in Charlottetown?
- What problem awaited Tupper on his return from the Quebec Conference?
- What were the concerns of those who opposed confederation?
- What were the Nova Scotia results of Canada’s first federal election?
- Why did Howe go to London? Did he succeed in his mission?
- Why did Tupper consider it important to make peace with Howe?