

Lord Elgin: Voice of the People User's Guide

Audience: High school history classes
Running time: 28:58

Historical Context

Lord Elgin's period of service as Governor-General of Canada (1846-1854) marked an important period in the country's constitutional evolution.

James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin, succeeded Lord Durham as Governor-General and shared his predecessor's views on ministerial responsibility. He was also in agreement with the views of Colonial Secretary Earl Grey (who happened to be Elgin's uncle). Grey had written that it was time to look for new methods of constitutional government for British North America, as that appeared to be the wish of its people — and Elgin held completely to that goal.

At the same time, Elgin hoped for the formation of two political parties in Lower Canada: one conservative (or Tory) and the other reformist (or liberal), each allied with its counterpart in Upper Canada. A clear-sighted and just man, Elgin did not want to irritate Canadians of any stripe. He considered the various efforts to "denationalize" French Canadians as a misguided political mistake.

Following the 1847 election, which saw the victory of a coalition of Lower Canadian Liberals and Upper Canadian Reformers, Elgin acceded to the wishes of the majority, inviting leaders Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine and Robert Baldwin to form a cabinet.

At the opening of Parliament in 1849, Elgin became the first Governor-General to deliver his throne speech in both English and French — thereby simply and effectively affirming the political equality of both peoples.

One of the bills presented to the House by Lafontaine during the 1849 parliamentary session inflamed old hatreds. It was the Rebellion Losses Bill, which would compensate Lower Canadians whose property had been damaged during the rebellion of 1837.

How would the ultra-Loyalist opposition react to the bill? Under pressure from Sir Allan MacNab, would Elgin use his veto power, or deny royal assent to the bill? Or would he sign the bill into law, recognizing that it expressed the will of the people as expressed by their elected representatives?

In the end, despite fierce Tory opposition, and despite all the threats and risks he faced, Elgin — a firm believer in the authority of Parliament — gave his assent to the bill. The gesture confirmed the power and authority of responsible government.

Research, Discussion and Writing Topics

- Distinguish between constitutional government, representative government and responsible government.
- What arguments did Solicitor-General Blake make when the Rebellion Losses Bill was brought before the house?
- What were Sir Allan MacNab's motivations for opposing the bill?
- List the arguments Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine made in favour of the bill.
- What principles guided Lord Elgin in making his final decision?
- What actions did the rebels take to show their disapproval for eventually paying compensation to the victims of the 1837 rebellion? Did they have another choices? If so, what might they have been?