

CONFEDERATION—PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS.

INTRODUCTION.

A federal union of the British North American Provinces was first vaguely foreshadowed in 1784, at the time of the separation of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. It was looked upon then by practical men as a far-off possibility, and had been suggested, doubtless, as a counterpoise to the newly-established federation of the United States. Such a scheme has since, from time to time, been advocated by some of our ablest colonial statesmen. A proposal is recorded as having been made by the Hon. R. J. Uniacke, of Nova Scotia, who, about the year 1800, brought colonial union under the notice of the Imperial authorities. In 1814, the late Chief Justice Sewell, of Quebec, (who enjoyed the friendship of the Duke of Kent, father of Her Majesty the Queen,) addressed to His Royal Highness a letter on the subject of a union, strongly recommending it—a document to which allusion is made by Lord Durham in his Report on the Affairs of the British North American Provinces. In 1822, Sir John Beverly Robinson, at the request of the Colonial Office, submitted a scheme of a similar nature. In 1824, and again in 1827, the subject was mooted in the provincial newspapers. Robert Gourlay, writing from London, in December, 1825, recommends that:—

Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Cape Breton, New Brunswick and Lower and Upper Canada should be confederated: each to be as free within itself as one of the United States, and the whole to hold congress at Quebec. Each also to send two members to the British Parliament to speak but not to vote. A Convention to meet after a lapse of time, to review and amend the whole system of government. A supreme judicial court to sit at Quebec for the final determination of appeals, and the Governor-in-Chief to exercise clemency.

Many other details are included in his project, among which are, freedom of trade; assimilation of laws, canals, provincial army and navy; all to be gradually introduced, and religious equality to be established.* In 1838, the Right Reverend Dr. Strachan, Lord Bishop of Toronto, in a letter to Mr. Charles Buller, Secretary to Lord Durham, thus expresses himself:—

It will be a pleasure to me to contribute everything in my power to the prosperous issue of Lord Durham's administration; and if Mr. Pitt considered the constitution which he conferred upon the Canadas one of the glories of his life, what glory must redound to the statesmen who give a free constitution to the British North American Colonies, and by consolidating them into one territory or kingdom, exalt them to a nation acting in unity, and under the protection of the British Government, and thus not only ensuring their happiness but preventing forever the sad consequences that might arise from a rival power getting possession of their shores.

In Lord Durham's celebrated Report on Canada and British North America generally, His Lordship laid great stress upon the absolute necessity of a union, thus:—

On my first arrival in Canada I was strongly inclined to the project of a federal union, and it was with such a plan in view that I discussed a general measure for the government of the colonies, with the deputations from the Lower Provinces, and with various leading individuals and public bodies in the Canadas. But I had still more strongly impressed on me the great advantage of an united government, and I was gratified by finding the leading minds of the various colonies strongly and generally inclined to a scheme that would elevate their countries into something like a national existence.

Again, in reference to the influence of the United States as hemming us in on every side, His Lordship proceeds:—

If we wish to prevent the extension of this influence, it can only be done by raising up for the North American Colonist some nationality of his own, by elevating these small and unimportant communities into a society having some objects of a national importance, and by thus giving their inhabitants a country which they will be unwilling to see absorbed even into one more powerful. A union for common defence against foreign enemies is the natural bond of connection that holds together the great communities of the world, and between no parts of any kingdom or state is the necessity for such a union more obvious than between the whole of these colonies.

Colonial jealousies and dissensions prevented the accomplishment of Lord Durham's recommendations at that time, but there is no doubt that his Report was the means of preparing the public mind for the adoption of a measure similar in many respects to that proposed by his lordship. The author of "Hochelaga" and "The Conquest of Canada," writing in 1843, gives expression to his hopes in the following language:—

I should rejoice to see all the British North American possessions, Newfoundland included, united under a central colonial government and represented in a common legislature; each, however, still retaining its own assemblies for local and particular purposes.

In 1849, resolutions in favor of colonial union were passed by the British American League at Kingston. In 1851, Col. Arthur Rankin, in his address to the electors of Kent, strongly advocated the project. Afterwards, in 1856, that gentleman, when member for Essex, placed the following motion on the notice papers of the House:—

Mr. Rankin.—On Wednesday next (30th April 1856)—Committee of the whole on the general state of the Province, for the purpose of considering the subject of an Union of the British North American Colonies, with a view to an Address to Her Majesty to recommend the same to the consideration of the Imperial Parliament.

The motion was coldly received, the leaders on both sides of the House regarding it as visionary; Hon. W. H. Merritt, who cordially approved of Col. Rankin's motion, being the only notable exception. In 1854, the question was discussed in the Nova Scotia Parliament, Hon. Messrs. Johnston and Howe, the leaders of the rival parties, vying with each other in their advocacy of a measure which, in their opinion, would be the means of constituting a great nation, by combining the elements of strength and wealth which all the isolated Provinces possess. In 1858, the Hon. A. T. Galt revived the subject in the Canadian Parliament, and eloquently dilated on the benefits to be derived from a union of the Provinces; and when, in the summer of that year, he became a member of the ministry he insisted on its being made a cabinet question, with what success is shewn by the following paragraph of Sir Edmund Head, the then Governor General's speech at the closing of the session of 1858.

I propose in the course of the recess to communicate with Her Majesty's Government, and with the Governments of the sister colonies, on another matter of very great importance. I am desirous of inviting them to discuss with us the principles on which a bond of a federal character uniting the Provinces of British North America, may, perhaps, hereafter be practicable.

This was followed by a despatch (signed by Hon. Messrs. Cartier, Galt, and John Ross,) addressed to the Imperial authorities, which pointed to a federal union of the Provinces as a solution of the grave difficulties which presented themselves in carrying on the Queen's

*Murdoch's History of Nova Scotia.