

On July 1, Let's Recognize Canada's Past Achievements and Potential for Greatness

By Conrad Black

July 1 has come again and naturally raises thoughts, however cursorily, of what Canada has been in the 157 years since Confederation was launched on July 1 of 1867, as well as of what it might become.

In 1867, the United States had just finished defeating the South and ending the insurrection of the terrible Civil War in that country in which approximately 750,000 people perished of a population of 31,000,000. Five of the secessionist states were practically smashed to rubble and burned to ashes by the victorious Union armies of Generals U.S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman. As the Grand Army of the Republic slogged through the confederacy, its men sang the great anthems of the Union, including [Julia Ward Howe's](#) "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord," which ended with the uncompromising exhortation: "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free!"

Although Canada had had a splendid record of receiving and emancipating [40,000 fugitive American slaves](#), and had broken up a number of confederate conspiracies being hatched on our side of the border with the United States, when that terrible war ended, there was no shortage of righteous Americans who were sorely irritated at the scarcely disguised partisanship of the British government for the Confederacy. There was a considerable body of American opinion that wanted to repay the British by taking over Canada. They certainly had the army and the generals to do it.

It was in these circumstances, and somewhat for these reasons, that Canada was born as a confederation. The leaders of the different Canadian provinces, and in particular the currently much-defamed John A. Macdonald, seized upon the American

threat, domestically and in relations with Great Britain, to proclaim that only the creation of an autonomous country would have any chance of preserving British interests in the Americas and of defusing substantially justified American annoyance with Great Britain. On July 1, 1867, the defence minister, George-Étienne Cartier, had mobilized 50,000 soldiers and militiamen and stationed them at all border points to discourage attacks by Irish-American Fenians trying to start a war. Canada would not easily muster such a force today.



A statue of former Canadian Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald is pictured on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in a file photo.

At the [Washington conference in 1871](#), Macdonald led the delegates in resolving the various issues between the British and Americans and the Americans and the Canadians, and in debunking the American theory that the so-called Canadian Confederation was just a fraudulent bit of window dressing to try to convince the United States that there was an independent country on its northern border. Macdonald succeeded in all of those objectives, and this was the beginning of the recognition of Canada as an autonomous

country.

To bind the country together—since it was then a string of communities close by the American border that were not united by any particular shared interest, but just did not happen to be American—Macdonald promised a transcontinental railway. This would be one of the engineering and financial wonders of the world as, unlike American railways to the West Coast, much of it had to be run over the Canadian Shield, and not simply the great plains, requiring a road bed fixed into stone. In addition, it could not be financed in Canada's modest capital markets, or those of London and New York, which were crowded with the securities of American competitors to the new railroad.

It had to be largely funded by the federal government, and there was great parliamentary opposition to this. Macdonald only finally achieved approval by ostentatiously using the still unfinished Canadian Pacific Railway to transport troops to the West, to suppress the last of the [Riel Rebellions](#). It was the masterpiece of using two crises to solve each other: the railway was essential to save the country by swift transport of troops to put down a secessionist rebellion, and this success suddenly made it unstoppable politically, so the railway was finished (and the federal government made a huge profit on its investment).

These were the beginnings of the Confederation that we celebrate each July 1.

In these 157 years, Canada has grown from 3.5 million people to 40 million. It remains now, as it was at its beginning, the only transcontinental bicultural parliamentary confederation in the history of the world, and of all countries in the world with a population of over 20 million; our political institutions are exceeded in seniority only by those of the United Kingdom and the United States. And while the United Kingdom dropped the province of Ireland a century ago, and the United States had recourse to mortal combat on an immensely destructive scale to preserve its Union, Canada has had no significant blood-letting in the retention of its borders, and added the unsuccessful Dominion of Newfoundland [to its](#)

[jurisdiction in 1949.](#)

We can say on this anniversary, as on many previous ones, that Canada is a relatively pleasant place to live. Despite economic mismanagement and steady slippage in our comparative standing in per capita income, Canada remains one of the world's rich countries. Such a treasure house as Canada is—generously endowed with precious and br metals, forest products, agriculture of all kinds except some tropical fruit, energy of every type—would take an even more determined effort at colossal economic incompetence than we have been making for the last several years to dump us altogether out of our position as one of the world's rich countries.

It is also undoubtedly a comparatively high-tolerance and low-violence country. Perhaps because it has always been understood that Canada needed more people to populate such a vast territory, and to have a critical demographic mass adequate to avoid being completely overawed by the United States, Canadians have always been comparatively generous to newcomers.

While a good place to live, Canada remains a politically somewhat tentative country. Until the end of World War II, we were a dominion, a unique categorization devised by the father of Confederation from New Brunswick, the capable [Samuel L. Tilley](#), which meant in practice an autonomous country, other than to some extent in foreign and defence policy. Like so much else in Canada, it was ambiguous.

We are now, and have been for 75 years, a constitutional monarchy with a non-resident sovereign. Our Constitution has not been ratified by Quebec, and over time, the notion of a non-residential monarchy is problematic. Because it is difficult to distinguish an English-speaking Canadian from an American living close to his northern border, and because of cultural and economic and political influences of the United States in Canada, this country has always been unduly preoccupied with explaining, to itself, its existence as a society politically distinct from that of the USA.

These post-Cold War decades have been difficult for the Americans, and after America's overwhelming victory in the Cold War, it has been much less intimidatingly successful. Few Canadians are over-impressed with the United States now, though we wish it well, and this is the time when a good government, such as we have often had in Canada from both major parties, could build on this country's strengths and allow its individuality, which is generally obscured by national diffidence and taciturnity, to come to the fore.

This July 1 we can again celebrate one of the world's best countries, and one that could and should be on the verge of becoming one of its greatest countries. It is time to pull it together—to bury the spectre of Quebec separatism and bring Quebec into the Constitution. And it is time to stop being a ludicrous and exhibitionistic outlier in political correctness and wokeness.

Let Canada be Canada, and it will impress the world and astound ourselves.

First published in the [Epoch Times](#)