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British Columbia The Spoilt Child of Confederation: *Segment 2*



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In 1873, the Pacific Scandal saw the Conservative Party led by Sir John A. Macdonald lose the confidence of the House of Commons.

The Governor General of Canada, Lord Dufferin—Frederick Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, First Marguess of Dufferin and Ava, Canada’s third Governor General (1872 to 1878)—asked the Liberal Party under the leadership of Alexander Mackenzie, (Canada’s second Prime Minister), to form the new government. Mackenzie immediately called an election in which the Liberals were swept to power in January 1874 with a large majority.

During the election campaign, Mackenzie and the Liberal Party declared that the agreement of 1871 with British Columbia was “a bargain to be broken.” Liberals were determined not to increase the tax burden on Canadians and, at the same time, wanted the railway to be built by the government and not by private interests. But the Great Depression of 1873 gripped all of North America and

made it virtually impossible to finance a venture of this magnitude.

Mackenzie needed British Columbia to agree to an extension of the time limit for the start of construction. After all, had not Joseph Trutch in 1871 pledged to the Conservative caucus that British Columbia would not insist the railway commence construction within 2 years of entry into Confederation?

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When Mackenzie informed British Columbia of his decision to delay the start of construction, however, he discovered to his dismay that not only had British Columbia forgotten Trutch’s pledge, the new province was in no mood to compromise on the issue.

While Macdonald and the Conservatives probably could not have met the deadline for the commencement of construction of

the railway set out in the Terms of Union with British Columbia, he would not have alienated British Columbia as Mackenzie and his Liberals did. Pierre Berton wrote that they “saw the new province as greedy, shrill, and bumptious, prepared to wreck the economy of the nation for the sake of petty provincialism and real estate profits.”

Mackenzie was dismayed at the intransigence of the province, which remained adamant that Canada honour its agreement. Years later, after the railway had been built, the passionate feelings aroused in British Columbia over Ottawa’s treatment of the province during the early years after British Columbia joined Confederation—that is, the feelings of neglect and mistrust—continued to govern its relations with Ottawa, even to this day.

Meanwhile, in British Columbia in 1873, any attempt to seek a compromise of the agreement was quickly squelched. British Columbia’s second Premier (1872 to 1874), Amor De Cosmos, was the first, but not the last, casualty of the fury facing any politician who foolishly dared to suggest a delay in the start of construction of the promised railway.

In 1873, Macdonald, for political reasons, had designated Esquimalt as the western terminus of the transcontinental railway. His decision was highly popular with the denizens of Victoria who dreamed of Victoria becoming a great Pacific port to rival San Francisco. They now clamoured for construction of the Island portion of the railway to start immediately.

In 1873, 7 alternate railway routes across British Columbia from the Rockies to the coast were being surveyed, but the battle centred on only 2:

- the Mainland route from the Yellowhead Pass down the Fraser River to Burrard Inlet; and
- the Island route, which also started at the Yellowhead Pass but then travelled through the Cariboo to Homathco River and Bute Inlet, across Georgia Strait to the Island.

The latter route, according to Sir Sandford Fleming, the railway's chief engineer, would require work of a "most formidable character."

Miles of sheer cliffs along Bute Inlet had to be traversed; this involved 8 miles of tunnelling. The island-hopping across the Strait of Georgia entailed construction of bridging over six channels, linking islands where the rip tide flowed at 9 knots. Two of the bridges would have spans longer than any arches existing in the world.

By 1874, the Islanders were becoming agitated because nothing was happening with respect to the construction of the Island route. And as the economy of the province, especially in Victoria, continued to worsen, tempers frayed.

De Cosmos was forced out of office when he attempted to change the original Terms of Union in return for federal funding to build a drydock at Esquimalt. A pragmatic arrangement perhaps, but it was not appreciated by his fellow Victorians. A large crowd of protestors stormed the Legislature, obliging De Cosmos to hide from them in the Speaker's Room.

The irate members of the Provincial Legislature then passed a resolution that no change could be made in the terms of union affecting the railway without a vote by the general electorate. The province insisted that Ottawa respect and fulfil the terms of the bargain made when British Columbia joined Confederation. De Cosmos wisely resigned as Premier and withdrew from provincial politics.

De Cosmos quickly became involved in politics and became one of the most ardent supporters of British Columbia's joining Confederation.

De Cosmos was born William "Bill" Smith in Nova Scotia, son of United Empire Loyalists. Lured to California by the dream of striking it rich in the goldfields, once there he changed his name to Amor De Cosmos, "Lover of the Universe," or so he thought.

In 1858, he with other hopefuls followed the tales of gold riches and came north to Victoria. There he founded a newspaper and was the publisher of the *Victoria British Colonist*—it survives today as the *Victoria Times-Colonist*. De Cosmos quickly became involved in politics and became one of the most ardent supporters of British Columbia's joining Confederation.

He might have been the first Premier of the new province, but was passed over because his support of reform measures did not endear him to the more conservative elements of society in Victoria. During his time as Premier, he initiated liberal political reforms, such as refusing to hold cabinet meetings if the Lieutenant Governor (Joseph Trutch) attended; undertaking to expand the economy by promoting farming, fishing, and forestry; and establishing the nondenominational, free public school system. Nevertheless his provincial political career was short-lived.

Although De Cosmos' political career in provincial politics came to an inglorious end, he remained active in federal politics as a Member of Parliament from Victoria. In this capacity, he battled to have the terminus of the transcontinental railway in Victoria. He was defeated in the election of 1882, after Ottawa had decided to locate the terminus on the Mainland.

De Cosmos, a bachelor, had few close friends. He died in 1897 after being declared mentally incompetent, a sad end for one of the key figures in promoting British Columbia's entry into Confederation.

History has not been kind to him. Today he is remembered more for his eccentricities and erratic behaviour than for his political accomplishments. Yet, he remains one of the more colourful characters of the early days of British Columbia. He is buried in Ross Bay Cemetery in Victoria.

The next Premier, George A. Walkem, had been Attorney General under De Cosmos (Walkem was the third and fifth Premier, 1874 to 1876 and 1878 to 1882).

He also found himself embroiled in political turmoil over the agreement about the commencement of the construction of the railway.



Amor De Cosmos



George A. Walkem

Walkem, a lawyer who had been called to the Bars of Upper and Lower Canada, arrived in the Interior of British Columbia in 1862. He soon became involved in politics and was elected to the colonial Legislative Council from the Cariboo. Walkem continued to represent the Cariboo in provincial administrations until his appointment to the Supreme Court of British Columbia in 1882, where he served until 1904. He died in Victoria 4 years later and is buried in Ross Bay Cemetery.

Walkem was a shrewd politician. He chose not to align himself with other Mainland politicians. Instead he allied himself with the Island politicians and supported their demands that the western terminus of the railway be at Esquimalt because the only viable railway route to the Island had to pass through the Cariboo. His support gave the Island members a majority in the Legislature.

But Walkem's attempts to pressure Mackenzie's Liberals in Ottawa to start construction in British Columbia of the transcontinental railway ended in failure and almost lost him the 1875 election. In his attempts to revive the economy by engaging in expensive public works projects with money borrowed from the federal government, Walkem had increased the provincial debt.

But the economy continued to worsen. And although Walkem's government was re-elected, it was with a reduced majority.

The voters' grievance over his failure to resolve the railway issue continued to fester. During this period, Prime Minister Mackenzie could not ignore totally the feelings of British Columbians. A growing movement for British Columbia to separate from Canada troubled him. Although the loudest voices came from Victoria, the movement was gathering strength throughout the province.

In an attempt to mend matters, Mackenzie sent an emissary—James Edgar, former Liberal Party whip—to British Columbia to make an offer that, in his naivety, he considered generous. Mackenzie was willing to build a wagon road and a telegraph line, accelerate the railway surveys, and spend \$1.5 million on railway construction when the surveys were completed. And Ottawa would start immediate construction of the railway from Esquimalt to Nanaimo.

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But Mackenzie had no understanding of the discordant nature of British Columbia politics. The fight over the route the railway would take had further inflamed the traditional antipathy between the Island and the Mainland. Mackenzie's attempt at reconciliation was fated to fail and did so, when Walkem, after negotiating with Edgar for 2 months, questioned the authority of Mackenzie's emissary to negotiate on behalf of the federal authorities.

His critics described Walkem as a "fence-sitter or weathercock," and certainly this was the case with respect to these negotiations. Walkem waited until public opinion formed and realized that the acceptance of the offer would not be tolerable. The Mainland would be upset if construction started on the Island portion of the railway, whereas

Islanders worried that the Island portion would not be part of the transcontinental railway with Esquimalt as its terminus.

The repudiation of his emissary by the province infuriated Mackenzie, but the next step by the province gave him an apoplectic fit. The province decided to ask London to assist British Columbia with its grievances with Ottawa. Since the province viewed the agreement to enter Confederation as a tripartite agreement among British Columbia, Canada, and Great Britain, this seemed a logical step to take, at least from the province's perspective. ▲

To be continued . . .

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See also *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, at <http://en.wikipedia.org>.