

## Unit 11: Video 2 Transcript

**Q4: What was involved in the formation of the Province of Canada? When did it form?**

**A:** I wrote a book a few years ago, before I did my books on religion and the rebellions. It focused on the 1840s, the immediate post-rebellion period, which is a very important period because the rebellion—I mean the deadlock. The political deadlock leading up to the rebellions in both Upper and Lower Canada was holding back what we would call reform. This idea of state formation—particularly associated with Bruce Curtis, but he's picked it up from English historians, sociologists—is the idea that the state becomes increasingly involved at the local level in daily lives. Almost the way it is today where we regulate where you can smoke, and so on and so forth.

Before the 1840s, the state was a very distant, distant sort of force or whatever you want to call it. And you didn't have much in the way of local government. You just had the colonial government, often in Toronto or Quebec City. And once the deadlock between the Reformers and the Tories was broken by the rebellions, and Upper and Lower Canada were joined, and you began to move towards responsible government, which gave more powers to the Legislative Assembly. Then they were able to bring in reforms that created a state-supported school system funded by local taxes. And brought in a municipal system, a local governing council system, which was fundamental to building infrastructure, particularly roads, improving the transportation network. But also subsidized the railways, which started to be built in the late 1840s because you could tax local municipalities to bring the railway through their township or whatever.

Liberal historians have seen that as a progressive step, right. Towards modernization of the economy because—well, first of all, education becomes something that's more widespread. People are becoming literate and, therefore, able to participate, sort of, in the new economy and in politics more knowledgably. But the more radical view of state formation theorists is that this is all kind of a move towards increasing control over people's lives. That the state is somehow an entity into itself, which takes on a life of its own. And I'm not a supporter of that primarily because I find it frustratingly difficult to identify what the state is. Is it some kind of force? Or who is behind it? The older view might've been that the state is dominated by the bourgeoisie or whatever, and it certainly is. But in my point of view, when you get local government, at least at the local level, it's not the bourgeoisie from Quebec City or Montreal or Toronto that's controlling all of it. Because just as we're

having elections this week, there are certain things that—our local governments may not be all that powerful, but what they do has more direct impact on people’s lives often than what distant, or provincial, or colonial governments do.

And why were people given the right to vote for these things? Well, they initially—my book actually on the 1840s is a history—if you look at the municipal system, of how it starts off being quite centralized—because they didn’t really trust the local people to vote knowledgably or responsibly. But they resisted that. They would not pay taxes to a system that they didn’t see the immediate benefits from. So eventually, it becomes localized, particularly in Lower Canada, which I can speak of more knowledgably, to the township level. And then townships kind of coalesced to create counties, so you’ve got a two-level local system. But once you get it to the township level, and people see that the taxes that they’re paying are going to roads that run by their door that will allow them to get their farm goods off to a market somewhere, then they’re willing to pay for it. And I actually argue by looking at hundreds of petitions from the townships, that the local people were pushing this. That it is not something imposed from the top. It might’ve been the local notables, as we call them, who were behind it. But I don’t think they were forcing these people to sign these petitions. It was in their own self-interest that this would happen because the townships in particular, Eastern Townships in particular, cut off from major river arteries. They depend upon roads and so on. Prior to the railway era, prior to the era in which they had major leading roads, the only way they could get anything to market was in the wintertime via sleighs. And so you had to—all you could sell was very low bulk products. So they sold a lot of potash. They sold potato whiskey, and those are two of the major products that they could actually get to an external market.

So they were very keen on seeing local self-government. After all, they come from New England originally, where the town system of government is fundamental to the whole American governing system. And they tried to introduce it when they first moved into Lower Canada. And the government steps down on it, and forbids it, because they saw it as one of the causes of the American Revolution, too much local self-government.

Well, Durham comes along and he says not having local self-government is one of the causes of the rebellion because people—you need local government, municipal government, as kind of a training ground for people to vote responsibly at the provincial level. Because when they see that their vote actually has a direct impact on them, then they will become more responsible when they vote. So he flipped it completely around. And it’s

because of him that, when he was followed by Sydenham as the next governor, Sydenham brings in municipal government.

And I think the education system parallels, in a way, because the school councils were given the authority to raise taxes. And, in fact, they had to raise taxes or they would not get a grant from the central government. So if they raised 50 percent, the central government would give them an equivalent. So it was kind of a carrot, rather than a stick approach. And the result in Lower Canada was fairly phenomenal because you had almost among the habitants, the vast majority of the population, were illiterate up until 1840. Once the school system is—the state moves in and creates a locally supported school system, in which they actually begin to dictate the curriculum to a certain extent, expect teachers to have certain kinds of qualifications, and so on. You have a rapid rise in literacy.

That isn't to say that it was all light, in a sense, because the Catholic Church manages to maintain a lot of control over the school system. It doesn't completely control it, like everybody seems to think. Certainly the state, there was a ministry or a superintendent of education that had a lot of influence. But the Catholic Church does control textbooks, to a certain extent. And a lot of them become teachers because nuns, in particular, were very inexpensive to hire. And so as the 19th century progresses, what you see is—in English Canada, you see more and more women being hired, young women, because they can pay them less. In French Canada, it's women as well, but many of them in religious orders who didn't need a living wage, really. So that's another way that the church was able to maintain control over the education system, basically up until 1960, in many respects.