As the colonies attained self-government the Colonial Office stepped aside from its responsibilities to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples, dissipating the influence of the APS and other humanitarian organisations that were now compelled to campaign on a multitude of fronts in their attempts to influence settler governments. In the local legislatures the language was more extreme and the atmosphere less forgiving, with images of ‘savagery’ and ‘swamping’ being evoked more frequently as the proportion of the population that was Indigenous continued to decline. As they moved towards a more democratic franchise, settlers intent on containing – if not eliminating – any residual Indigenous rights sought to construct a political system that institutionalised the new nations as White.

In post-confederation Canada the franchise was seldom an issue for debate. The need to bring together disparate colonies, the financing and construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the establishing of systems of governance in the old Hudson’s Bay territories were the issues which preoccupied the government in Ottawa in its early nation-building years. Its exercise of responsibility for Indigenous people was closely related to those issues as well, negotiating a series of treaties which, under the immediate premise of giving access for the railway, laid the basis for the immigration that would populate what were to become the prairie provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan (see Map 5.1). The Indigenous peoples, struggling with a severe decline in the buffalo which had been central to their survival, had little choice but to agree to surrender the bulk of their land in return for a secure reserve and the superintendence of the Indian Department which was meant to provide the educational and agricultural materials necessary for them to adopt a ‘settled’ life.

The Canadian colonies entered into confederation without a uniform national franchise, choosing instead to allow anyone who had
the vote at the provincial level to participate in national elections. Provincial franchise qualifications remained disparate. Only British Columbia had embraced – what to Canadians was – the American principle of manhood suffrage. In the other provinces a mix of property and income qualifications ensured that most White males were able to participate. Although only British Columbia excluded Indigenous men from voting on the basis of race, both Ontario and Manitoba excluded those who continued to receive annuities from the Crown, and no province recognised land held in common as a basis for qualification. Given that provincial franchises were so neatly calibrated to local conditions, federal parliamentarians were reluctant to move towards a national franchise for fear that disparities in property values between the different provinces could see substantial numbers of their constituents disenfranchised. When the issue was finally debated, in the 1880s, it was to destabilise not only such local accommodations but the issue of the citizen status of women and Indigenous peoples itself.

5.1 Canada in 1912
The debate over the national franchise

In 1883, long-serving Canadian Prime Minister Sir John Macdonald introduced a Bill to establish a uniform federal franchise, the first of three introduced in successive years. Committed to the preservation of the property qualification, Macdonald’s first Bill proposed the enfranchisement of single women and widows with property. This provision was carried over into the Bill presented to the House in 1885, but at this point Macdonald introduced a new focus for contention: the decision to include Indigenous people, whether or not they had embraced enfranchisement under the provisions of the Gradual Civilisation Act, in the legislation’s definition of ‘persons’.

This was not the first occasion on which race and gender had been linked in debates about the franchise. When the British Columbia provincial parliament had debated the Bill which disqualified Chinese and ‘Indians’, Dr William Tolmie gave notice of his intention to move an amendment to admit women to the suffrage. Although only three members voted in favour of the amendment, the issue gave rise to more debate than did the disenfranchisement clauses. Female suffrage, Tolmie argued, ‘would allow woman to take her proper place and help man to make the world better . . . [and] would make those growing up amongst us more capable of fulfilling their duties’. Placing women at the forefront of the colonial project, W. A. Robertson, the only other member who spoke in support, added that ‘woman had been the equal of man in the past, and her courage and judgment were equal to his’. Macdonald, however, was far less committed to the cause, advancing his limited version of female suffrage as an experiment that could be revoked if it led to dispute and quickly abandoning the measure when it became clear that it could not gain the necessary support. The opposition to female franchise was centred in Quebec, but the proposal was lost when members from other parts of the country advised that they intended to vote against the proposition out of consideration for the feelings of their French-speaking colleagues. With the Toronto-based Canadian Women’s Suffrage Association only two years old and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union just in the process of organising a national structure, there was no evidence of grass-roots agitation to encourage Macdonald to persist.

The proposal for Indigenous enfranchisement had a much higher priority, and was to generate far greater debate. With the mutually exclusive nature of Indian status and Canadian citizenship in place across the nation, even Macdonald’s close supporters were surprised by his move to include Indigenous people in the national franchise. In one of the few articles published in support of the proposal, the pro-government Montreal Gazette sought to expose the illogicality of the
argument, advanced by the opposition, that Indigenous people should not vote because they did not pay taxes and were unable to read and write.

There are, doubtless, a number of Indians without these scholastic attainments, but they are not, unfortunately, the only class in the country who have the misfortune not to be able to read and write, and it would be an invidious and unfair distinction to deprive the Indian simply because his skin is dark of the franchise, while giving it to white men lacking the educational test the opposition desire to apply to the Indians.8

The voice of the opposition was far more strident. In an argument echoed across the nation, the Halifax Morning Chronicle accused Macdonald of abandoning ‘all the principles that have hitherto governed the subject of franchise’ in order to ‘enfranchise a class of men’ who

despite all the advantages of [having] an advanced civilization . . . within their reach . . . are still, in most cases, savages, and, whether savages, semi-savages or civilized, are directly subject to the oversight, control and paternal authority of a special officer of the state and receive from the state the ordinary means of livelihood.9

The vehemence of the contemporary debate has not been reflected in the subsequent historiography. Repealed in 1898, the 1885 uniform national franchise has been treated as, at best, a temporary aberration, a diversion in the process by which Canada attained [White] manhood and, later, universal [White] suffrage on a province-by-province basis.10 With an Indigenous rebellion in the north-west and the continuing scandal surrounding the Canadian Pacific Railway loan to attract their attention, few historians have examined what Liberal frontbencher Sir Richard Cartwright described as ‘a gallant and desperate struggle against a most outrageous piece of tyranny’.11 It was the proposal to vest power in revising barristers which Cartwright saw as tyrannous but his Party vehemently opposed every aspect of the Bill in what would become the longest continuous sitting that the House has ever experienced. By the time it was passed, the legislation offered the franchise only to the minority of Indigenous men living in the older provinces of the east, and internal disputes within Indigenous communities meant that less than half of them exercised the privilege. Yet the debate and its aftermath are worthy of greater consideration, providing a unique insight into the racial anxieties of members on both sides of the House and the gendered and racial constructs which underlay nineteenth-century Canadian definitions of citizenship and democracy.

Macdonald’s reasons for advocating this change remain unclear. His opponents accused him of political expediency, the desire ‘to
strengthen himself in Ontario to such an extent that he can defy the smaller provinces[,] including Quebec'.

‘Has it really come to this’, one opposition member asked, ‘that the Government can no longer trust to the white man? Have they lost confidence in the breed? . . . Are they now going to put their confidence in the Indians?’ Nor were his supporters confident of the wisdom of the move. ‘We had better move carefully with the franchise bill’, a Conservative supporter wrote, reasoning that should you pass it it will destroy us, and make us most unpopular – and give the Grits [Liberals] a great advantage over us – let the Indians go – we can carry the country easy enough without them much easier than with them – their [sic] help will turn many against us and hurt our cause.

Apologising for his inability to attend a Party meeting on the subject, Montreal member Désiré Girouard was even more blunt: ‘I cannot support the Indian clause of the Franchise Bill. I would be stoned in Lachine if I did so.’

Yet, despite the lack of support from such colleagues, the hostile ‘indignation meetings’ across the country and threats to his life, Macdonald persisted, declaring later that the passage of the Bill was the greatest triumph of his life.

Both Macdonald’s biographers and later historians have resorted to a more sophisticated version of the political expediency argument to explain his persistence, suggesting that the 1885 legislation is best understood in terms of his opposition to the principle of manhood suffrage. As a Conservative, he believed that only those who had a stake in the country should have the right to vote, designing the Bill to enfranchise groups that would support this principle. But why would Macdonald consider Canadian Indigenous peoples to be one such group, given the rapidity with which he had abandoned the cause of propertied women? Miller has suggested that his commitment to assimilation provides part of the answer. The architect of the Gradual Civilisation Act, Macdonald had enthusiastically pursued assimilation throughout his long period as superintendent-general of the Indian Department, a post he held alongside the prime ministership from 1878 to 1885. As superintendent-general he had the contact with Indigenous leaders that most of his parliamentary colleagues lacked, and was clearly aware that the enfranchisement provisions of the Gradual Civilisation Act had failed to persuade Indigenous people to abandon their old patterns of life. Speaking in 1880 he had conceded that you cannot make the Indian a white man . . . You cannot make an agriculturalist of the Indian. All we can hope for is to wean them, by slow degrees, from their nomadic habits, which have almost become an instinct, and by slow degrees absorb them or settle them on the land.
There is a sense in which the decision to extend the franchise can be seen as an extension of Macdonald’s policy of undermining the band councils that continued to exercise authority within the reserves. Legislation in 1884 had introduced the principle of election for positions of leadership that had previously been hereditary. Within that context the admission of Indigenous people to the national franchise could be seen as a further dissipation of autonomy. If that was the case, however, it was not acknowledged at the time. Rather, Macdonald was criticised for breaking the link between voting rights and the abandoning of Indian status which had been central to the Canadian policy of assimilation, giving ‘to the ignorant Indians, who choose to remain on the reserves and to evade the duties of citizenship, the right to vote’.

While it was on this issue that the Liberals claimed to base their opposition to the proposal, the coincidence of the debate with the northwest rebellion provided an opportunity for members on both sides of the House to expound their notions of the connections between race, savagery, civilisation and citizenship. With troops from the eastern provinces being despatched to defend settlers on the prairies from rebel attack, the House was in an anxious mood. In an inflammatory speech in response to the confirmation that the Bill included ‘Indians’ in its definition of ‘persons’, David Mills accused Macdonald of allowing the rebel leaders to ‘go straight from a scalping party to the polls’. Once this link was established it became easy to label all Indigenous people as rebels. ‘Where are the Indian electors who are about to be invested with the sacred functions of the franchise?’ asked John Charlton:

They are making the night-sky of the North-West lurid tonight with the conflagrations of the dwellings of the settlers, and subjecting their wives and daughters to a fate worse than death. These are the bloody, vindictive barbarians that are to be invested by this Bill with the power of controlling elections of the North-West Territories, when they are accorded representation in this House.

The Toronto Globe’s headline put it more concisely: ‘Pagan Indians Enfranchised; Many Volunteers Disenfranchised’.

A mouthpiece for the opposition, Toronto’s Globe argued that Indians should not be regarded as citizens. Rather they were ‘people separate and distinct from all the other people in Canada, aliens in almost every sense of the word, allies rather than subjects of the Queen’. This separate status, it argued, left them ‘amenable to criminal jurisdiction but outside of the operation of the civil law . . . profoundly indifferent to all that electors should feel an interest in’. Within the parliament members, reluctant to engage with what was essentially a restatement of the argument for separate nation status, explored instead contesting
definitions of ‘the British subject’ in order to justify their opposition to extending the franchise to Indigenous peoples.

Macdonald opened the debate by locating the ‘Indian’s’ qualification to vote in his status as a propertied British subject, forcing his opponents to respond by articulating the ways in which the Indigenous subject differed from the settler. Interestingly, no one questioned their propertied status, focusing instead on the Indigenes’ inability to freely exercise the privileges usually associated with property. In opposing the Bill the Liberals argued that Indigenous peoples were children at law, exempt from taxation, unable to enter into contracts and dependent on the government for their support, arguments that were, at least theoretically, non-racial. However this special status had political implications, given Macdonald’s position as superintendent-general, the guardian and protector of these children at law, making it easy for opponents to claim that it was he who would control the Indigenous vote.

Opposition leader the Hon. Edward Blake pointed out the contradiction inherent in Macdonald’s position: ‘You declare in your law that they are not fit for freedom; that they must be guarded, protected, subjected to disabilities, kept in a state of tutelage . . . [yet] you propose to give them votes which they are not free to exercise’. In response, Macdonald sought to position this special status as indicative of difference rather than inferiority:

The annuities paid to the different bands are their own moneys, and they go to them as their right. Their lands have been sold; the proceeds have been funded at a certain rate of interest, which the Government pays; and the Indian has the same right to his annual payment out of that fund as if he were a shareholder in a bank receiving a dividend . . . The Indian contributes to the revenue just as well as the white man. He buys taxed goods, he wears taxed clothes, he drinks taxed tea, or perhaps excised whiskey.

Both sides in the debate professed to be ‘actuated . . . by the same desire to give British subjects, red or white, if they have the property qualification, the right to vote’; but they differed on how this was to be brought about, the Liberals continuing to insist on the full enfranchisement offered through the Gradual Civilisation Act. Where Macdonald explained the overwhelming Indigenous rejection of such enfranchisement in terms of their attachment to the traditions of their clans – a characteristic, he believed, they shared with his Scots ancestors – his opponents saw it as a refusal to accept the responsibilities of citizenship. They had long argued that the solution to the dilemma posed by the ‘educated Indian’ was to eliminate the ‘protection’ under which Indigenous peoples lived:
The solution of the Indian problem can only be found in wiping out the distinction which exists between the races, in giving the red man all the liberties and rights enjoyed by the white man, and entailing upon him all the responsibilities which attach to those rights and privileges.35

Yet to demand enfranchisement—assimilation as a condition of citizenship was, as ex-Indian Department official Simon Dawson, Conservative member for Algoma, pointed out, to shut out of participation ‘men of intelligence and property’, themselves employers of White labourers ‘who could record their votes while they were deprived of that privilege’.36 Drawing upon his experience, Dawson had long accepted the Indigenous leaders’ view that the maintenance of tribal bonds was ‘the first protection of the Indian, and the abolition of that system would lead to the demoralisation and eventual destruction of the race’.37

The supposed distinction between subject and citizen status was an uneasy vehicle in which to contain the racial anxieties that Macdonald’s proposal had aroused. Although anyone born in Canada was classified as a British subject, there was considerable doubt as to whether all subjects had equal entitlements. In a contribution from outside the House, Indian leader Dr Oronhyatekha, son of the Reverend Peter Jones, pointed out that ‘qualifications that would enable him to vote in London [Ontario] . . . [became] null and void if he changed his residence to a reserve and lived among his own people’.38 To Ottawa-based Sidney Fisher, the suffrage was ‘one of the privileges of British subjects, whatever their color . . . provided they possess the same property and qualifications’, which ‘Indians’, he asserted, did not. ‘Before semi-civilised or uncivilised Indians are enfranchised, every white man of full age, and being a resident, should have the right to vote.’39 The liberties of the British subject, his Ontario-based colleague James Somerville argued, ‘have been handed down to us by those who in other fields of action had to spend their blood to secure them . . . it is an insult to the white population of the entire Dominion that this concession should be made to savages’.40 ‘Has he the love of country, and the pride in British institutions, which any man should have who exercises the right of suffrage?’ asked John Charlton. ‘Indians’, he argued, did not have the intelligence required of the voter: ‘alien’, ‘foreign’ and ‘unassimilable’, they

have no element, characteristic or qualification that will fit them to exercise the sacred right of the suffrage, which is the privilege and right of a free man . . . it is derogatory to the dignity of the people and an insult to the free white people of the country to place them on a level with the pagan and barbarian Indian.41
When the debate spilled over into the press the language became even less guarded. In an editorial headed ‘Barbarian Voters’, the Toronto Globe declared: ‘No intelligent white man who knows the Indian can believe that the right of voting at elections, and swamping the votes of any section of the people of Canada, should be given to them.’ It would be wrong to assume that Macdonald’s views on race were any more advanced. In justifying his decision to exclude from the franchise any man of Chinese descent, Macdonald argued: ‘he has no British instincts or British feelings or aspirations, and therefore ought not to have a vote . . . I used the word Chinaman to designate a race . . . The Australians exclude the Chinese from Hong Kong as well as other Chinese.’ In such an environment Simon Dawson’s attempts to contest the general definition of ‘Indian’ as barbarian fell upon deaf ears.

Those who spoke in favour of the Bill did not contest such notions of difference. Rather they suggested that the granting of the franchise should be seen as ‘an infinitesimal’ part-payment of the debt owed to the Indian people for the appropriation of their lands. ‘Here are Indians . . . formerly owning the whole of this country’, Macdonald argued, ‘prevented from either sitting in this House, or voting for men to come here and represent them’. The Indigenous franchise, Senator Plumb later argued, was a restitution of a basic right, recognised at the time of colonisation but later unjustly removed. While opposition members were prepared to acknowledge that there had been an Indigenous civilisation in North America, they located it firmly in the past, identifying its contemporary descendants as a degraded race retaining none of the fine qualities of their self-governing forebears. The government’s insistence on maintaining their special status was to blame for this degradation, evidence of which was freely offered during the debate. ‘Some of the Indians to whom this privilege of voting will be accorded’, claimed Manitoba representative Robert Watson, ‘are those who participate in the most disgusting customs and who traffic their females with the whites for purposes of prostitution.’ Senator Scott was more concise: ‘They wander over this country seeking whiskey where they can get it – they are poor, wandering and begging people.

The concept of citizenship, a status with responsibilities that had to be earned, was no easier to delineate than was subjecthood. William Paterson, whose Brant constituency included most of the Six Nations’ Reserve, argued that its residents did not have the status of citizens:

A negro or a German may come to Canada and become a citizen, on taking an oath of allegiance, and can manage his own affairs. But the Indian is not allowed to manage his own affairs . . . A citizen can buy and sell freely. The Indians in some Provinces are not allowed to do so.
If they were to enjoy the privileges of citizenship, he insisted, they had to become citizens, accepting ‘all the responsibilities which attach to those rights and privileges’. His colleague John Platt, from Prince Edward Island, was even more blunt: ‘The hon. member for Algoma told us of an Indian who is worth $10,000, but who has not the franchise because he receives an annuity from the Government. When that Indian prizes a vote above the $8 a year he can get it.’

The mere possibility of equality aroused fears which were grounded in considerations of race. ‘Are they citizens or are they not? Are they on an equal footing with white men?’ asked the Ontario-based Liberal George Casey. ‘The right hon. gentleman says they are independent – as independent as the workingmen . . . I do not think that the workingmen will relish that statement.’ Many of these ‘workingmen’ were threatened by disenfranchisement under the property qualifications of the Bill which, at $300 in cities, $200 in towns and $150 in rural areas, were higher than those operating in any part of the country other than Quebec. Arthur Gillmor responded on behalf of his working-class constituents on Prince Edward Island, who had previously been able to qualify by contributing four days’ work on the roads, or its monetary equivalent, claiming that 300,000 ‘white men’ nationwide were about to be disenfranchised, to be replaced by ‘a number of poor aborigines, who have no idea of our constitutional system, and occupy a position altogether different to that of the workingman’. Members from Quebec, where few faced disenfranchisement, were even more direct. ‘Indian suffrage’, declared Côme Rinfret, ‘is an encroachment on the privileges of free men, and of white men . . . it is an encroachment upon the rights and privileges of the civilized electors of the Dominion at large’. His Montreal colleague Philippe Casgrain added: ‘Our system is working well; until now we have had no occasion to complain, and I believe that everybody would prefer the vote of one white man to the votes of five Indians.’

The speed with which Macdonald had abandoned the female suffrage proposal added White women to the working-class men who could be construed as being demeaned by Indigenous enfranchisement. While supporters could taunt Liberals favouring women’s suffrage that arguments based on Indigenous dependence could similarly apply to women, gender was more commonly used to denigrate the proposed reform. The possibility that the Bill, unless amended, would enfranchise the ‘squaw’ was raised on several occasions. One member argued that, because the term ‘Indian’, as defined in the Indian Act, included any person legally married to an Indian, any move to enfranchise Indians would include also women married to Indians. More commonly, the White woman, ‘who possesses everything required for the
franchise, except sex’, was counterposed to the ‘naked, untutored barbarian’ in debates over suitability to exercise the privileges of full citizenship.60 ‘It is a monstrous proposition’, John Platt declared, ‘that we should . . . refuse the same franchise to the women of this country and give it to the low and filthy Indians of the reserves’,61 a view echoed by Ontario member William McCraney, who read into the record a letter from a woman:

To think of such wretches as some of these scamps daring to get up and publicly question the ability of women and property to exercise the franchise, or expressing his doubt as to whether or not they would exercise it for the public good, while the fact is it is almost a profanity for some of them to mention the word woman. As well might a mud-puddle question the right or ability of pure water to cleanse or refresh and invigorate. As well might the vilest and most ignorant Hottentot or Indian question the ability or a right of an Oxford professor to exercise personal liberty aright.62

When it became clear that Macdonald was committed to the Indigenous franchise a fear spread through the House as individual members tried to ascertain the impact it would have in their electorates. The prime minister, the Globe declared, intended ‘to swamp the votes of white men in several constituencies by the votes of the ignorant’.63 If 3,000 ‘Indians’ in Ontario were enfranchised, that

would be one in five of the whole Indian population, a much larger proportion than will obtain amongst the whites. As the Indians are located in a few of the constituencies their power as electors will be much more felt than if they were scattered all over the country . . . the Indian vote would control ten or a dozen elections.64

‘If a band of 40 or 50 Indians came up to the polling booth in Manitoba and attempted to kill the votes of an equal number of white men’, Robert Watson warned the House, ‘it would raise a rebellion in that country.’65 In New Brunswick the 1880 Census had recorded less than 1,500 Indigenous people, yet local representative George King was still alarmed. ‘If there were Indians in my constituency I would have to appeal to them, rather than the honest farmers and lumber men who supported me in the last election’, he complained. More importantly, if the ‘50,000 or 60,000 Indians in British Columbia’ were enfranchised, their votes would altogether ‘swamp those of the white people in the Maritime Provinces’.66

Whatever the rhetoric, there were few members who could envisage a situation in which more than a small minority of highly assimilated First Nations’ peoples would enter into the political life of the country. The Globe ridiculed the prospect, supplying a model for future campaign speeches:
Great Chief in Ottawa give all. Great Chief make sun shine, rain fall, grass grow. Great Chief send fish in river. Great Chief mighty man and say you no vote Chief John Joseph you no get wampum, no get corn, no get meat, no get blanket, no get wigwam. You starve, you beg, you die. Vote Chief John Joseph, all good, all right. Vote white man Mills, great Chief send fire, wind, hail death!67

The prospect of ‘these people coming here, and speaking their own tongues’, filled the House with alarm.68 The suggestion of opposition leader Sir Richard Cartwright, that ‘under certain circumstances and in certain conditions . . . it might be in consonance with the spirit of British institutions that the 130,000 Indians in Canada, who undoubtedly have interest not precisely similar to those of the white men, should be allowed to send delegates, or even representatives here’ – perhaps a reference to the separate representation offered to Maori – fell on deaf ears.69

Midway through the debate Macdonald sought to allay the growing alarm by announcing that he had always intended to exclude from the proposed franchise those Indigenous people living west of Lake Superior.70 More than 70 per cent of Canada’s Indigenous population lived in the west, where they clearly would have had the potential to outvote the settler population in the more remote rural electorates. Yet their abandonment at this point served only to prompt opponents of the Bill to exaggerate the risk posed to White hegemony by the remaining bands in the east. The settler population of the older provinces, the Globe assured Macdonald, ‘do not desire to be governed by a majority obtained by the votes of ignorant Indians’, whose votes ‘would be numerous enough to swamp the votes of honest whites in many constituencies’.71

Implementing the Indigenous franchise

Despite the continued opposition of two of Macdonald’s own supporters, the Bill passed in its amended form, but it was not received with universal acclaim. Its passage was greeted enthusiastically by Mississauga leader Dr Peter Jones:

What a grand thing it has been for my people already! We, who for so many years have laid, as it were, dormant – a nonentity in the political world, are suddenly made the subject of a three months discussion on the floor of the Dominion House! Are praised by one side, abused by the other! The Press of every City and Town has discussed us, pro and con, and not a rural paper in the country but what has ‘had its say’! And now, in the end, you have won, and the opposition have not a leg to stand upon. Again I say, even if we did not vote you have done us a grand service by
introducing this long discussion by which the people of Canada have become so well informed as to our position; and the part of the Bill, which makes the Indian a ‘Person’, should be written in letters of Gold!72

Similar letters arrived from Party agents working among the Iroquois of Sault St Louis73 and from Montreal assuring the ‘Ottawa Chieftain’ that ‘the young men of our party, whom you are about to enfranchise, are not slow to appreciate the true value of those efforts that you are constantly putting forth to better their social and political status’.74 The people of the Six Nations, Ontario’s largest Indigenous reserve, were less enthusiastic. ‘They are very fickle’, Indian Department Superintendent Jasper Gilkison warned. ‘Some of the leading men are full of the independent idea as allies, and, that they have the right to frame their own laws, without the rule under Dominion Legislation.’75

Once the Act became law, expediency overcame any residual objections, as representatives of both major Parties moved quickly to win the allegiance of potential voters. The task of determining whether Indigenous people satisfied the property qualification was left to those officiating at the polls. Despite pressure to compel the new voters to seek location tickets, the precursor to enfranchisement under the Gradual Civilisation Act, officials in Ontario resolved to ‘describe the voter’s property on which he votes, as part of the Indian Reserve named, occupied and possessed by the said voter, or such better description as he can give’.76 The Act prescribed penalties for Indian agents who attempted to interfere in the operation of the franchise on their reserves but Conservative Party organisers pleaded for leniency.77 ‘Dear Sir John’, wrote one party worker, ‘I feel confident it would be detrimental to Mr McNeill’s interest in North Bruce and I suppose similar cases, if any stringent measures were resorted to, that would not allow the Indian agent at Cape Croker, to sow good seed among the Indians there’.78

From his home on the reserve, Peter Jones wrote lengthy letters to Macdonald, accusing Paterson, the sitting Liberal member, of siding with ‘the older chiefs [who] are opposed to Enfranchisement – the franchise – or any change which may endanger their position’, and urging Conservatives to actively enlist the support of educated younger band members.79 Paterson had clearly been active on the reserve, implying that band members who accepted enfranchisement would lose the privileges attaching to Indian status.80 Convinced that it was the loss of privileges rather than the threat to sovereignty that lay at the base of Six Nations’ opposition, Conservatives urged Sir John to allay these anxieties. In a letter to the chiefs Macdonald sought to position his Party as the natural recipient of the Indigenous vote. Accusing his opponents of spreading misinformation on the reserve, he reiterated
that enfranchisement under the Act did not require Indigenous people to abandon their ‘Indian’ status, as the Gradual Civilisation Act had demanded.

I can assure you that an Indian will . . . stand exactly in the same position in all respects the hour after he may vote as he stood the hour before he voted . . . I shall regret to see them rendering my efforts on their behalf fruitless from the unfounded fear that in exercising the rights of the franchise they would injure themselves.  

When the letter was not collected Macdonald delivered the message in person. He received a very gracious welcome, and accepted the invitation to address the Council, but was unable to overcome their opposition. ‘The Chiefs have considered all that has been spoken to them’, the acting-chairman replied; yet ‘in regard to the Franchise Measure, they could but repeat their former decision of not receiving or recognizing it’.  

The Six Nations’ community was left divided. The chiefs’ requests that ‘their people . . . abstain from attending political meetings, and also from giving votes at any Election’, were never completely honoured, and those who chose to exercise the franchise were neither as mercenary nor as easily led as the major parties had assumed. A Liberal victory in a by-election in the area, in September 1886, was hailed by the Globe as evidence of surprising [Indian] independence. Such of them as are ignorant and Pagan, Sir John and his agents were able to cajole, coerce, and bribe, but there are others who are educated, intelligent and well versed in the history of Tory treatment of Indians. These must have voted solidly for Colter.

In fact the votes of those Six Nations’ peoples who chose to participate were evenly divided, so that in the general elections held in 1887 and 1891 the sitting members, both opposition members, were returned.

Despite such evidence about the ways in which the extended franchise was being exercised, it remained controversial both within and beyond the Indigenous community. Debate over the Indigenous franchise continued unabated. From among Macdonald’s supporters came petitions, ‘speaking from actual knowledge of the Indians’ character’, alleging that ‘their halfcivilized state, their continual fancied grievances [sic], their want of knowledge in public and political affairs’ meant that they could not be relied on to exercise an independent vote. Within the Six Nations the chiefs remained opposed, anxious, Weaver suggests, that those who were voting in national elections would demand similar privileges within the band council as well. Arguing that the franchise Act ‘has caused divisions among us Indians’, they repeatedly petitioned for the privilege to be revoked, eventually
threatening to expel voters from the reserve. They became as independent British Canadian subjects and as if they are white men, the chiefs declared. ‘They are no more Iroquois Government’s subjects.’

Officers within the Indian Department, uncomfortable at being electorally accountable to their wards, added their support to the chiefs’ stance. ‘The extension of the franchise to the Indians at the present time [was] to say the least illtimed and . . . premature besides’, they agreed. ‘It has demoralised some of them to a great extent by dividing them into two parties, Reformers and conservatives, antagonistic of each other . . . it has set Brother against Brother, neighbour against neighbour.’

The divisions both within and beyond the reserves were the divisions of party, divisions the Conservatives decided to exploit in 1896 when they chose to make the Indigenous franchise an electoral issue. The Conservative candidate in Paterson’s seat of South Brant addressed a meeting on the Six Nations’ Reserve, recalling how the late Sir John Macdonald had ‘taken his political life into his hands in order to give them what he considered their just rights in the matter of having a voice in the administration of the Country for which their ancestors had fought and bled’. The themes of the speech were expanded in a broadsheet entitled ‘Facts for the Indians, What the reformers think of them’, which contained a selection of the most damaging statements from the 1885 debate. The Liberals made no attempt to reply. Although the election was to see his Party victorious, William Paterson lost his seat, with the Indigenous vote, for the first time, crucial to the result.

His colleague John Charlton, whose words had been used to particular effect in the broadsheet, wrote in consolation: ‘I hear with deep regret of your defeat in South Brant, attributable I suppose to . . . Catholics, and to the free use of boodle which proved especially efficacious among the Indians’. Ascribing Paterson’s defeat to the old Liberal bug-bear, another colleague, the Hon. G. W. Ross, added: ‘The Franchise Act must be repealed at the very first opportunity.’

1898: the national franchise repealed

Returned to power, the Liberals moved quickly to honour their promise to repeal Macdonald’s franchise Act. Faced with this prospect, the voters on the Six Nations’ Reserve tried to counteract the impression that Indigenous people did not want to participate in national politics. The petition praying for exemption from enfranchisement, they alleged, was the work of ‘persistent adherents of primitive tribal customs’, opposed or indifferent to ‘attaining a civilized plane’. Those who had become voters, they argued, ‘are unanimous in their desire for
the continuance of the franchise privileges [sic], since the granting of which, results have been manifested justifying the measure’. After debating the issue the band council agreed: ‘the privilege of voting at the Dominion election [should] be continued’.

The Liberals, however, never doubted the wisdom of their proposal. Although the implications for Indigenous voters were clear from the beginning, no major newspaper rose to their defence, and there is little evidence of the new Prime Minister Sir Wilfred Laurier being lobbied on the issue. There was, however, some debate within the parliament. ‘I believe it is almost an unheard of thing for the franchise, once conceded, to be taken away from a people who have enjoyed it’, remarked Ottawa-based Conservative member Sir Adolph Caron. His colleague James Lister warned: ‘Indians will remember [their disenfranchisement] as one of the greatest injustices ever perpetrated upon them by any legislature in this country’. Tabling a petition from 276 of the 647 Indigenous voters on the Six Nations’ Reserve, fellow-Conservative Charles Heyd moved an amendment to preserve the rights of those enfranchised under the old legislation, but the government responded by tabling a counter-petition signed by 354 Six Nations’ peoples asserting again that the franchise had brought discord to the reserve.

The prime minister argued that it was the return of the right of provinces to set their own franchise that was the key issue, Indigenous disenfranchisement an unfortunate consequence. ‘The right of voting is a local question, depending on the education of the people. And who is to determine that question? Is it not the legislature of each province?’ His colleague John Charlton reiterated the arguments he had advanced in the earlier debate. The Indigenous people of eastern Canada were not citizens but ‘a class of the population … living in tribal relations’ enjoying ‘special rights’ that other Canadians could not share. ‘If I cannot have the tribal advantages of the Six Nations, I do not want the Six Nations to have a right to claim them’, he declared. If they wanted to exercise the rights of citizenship, they had to abandon such ‘advantages’ and accept the responsibilities of citizens. The Liberal view prevailed, and the Bill passed with minimal debate. Indigenous people wishing to exercise the franchise were once again dependent on the whim of provincial legislatures, none of which had followed the federal lead.

A return to separate nation status

A pamphlet extolling the virtues of Canadian democracy, published in 1899, demonstrates how effectively Indigenous peoples had been excluded from popular imaginings of the nation as the century came to
its end. A citizen, the author declared, was a person who has the privileges and the duties of the inhabitants of the state or nation in which they were born. In Canada, where the property qualification no longer applied, ‘almost any man may have his name on the voter’s list. The right of voting is not denied even to the ignorant.’ In a country ‘settled by an intelligent, an industrious, a sober and a law-abiding people’, with ‘no crowds of half-civilized immigrants’ to threaten national harmony and ‘no negro problem to be solved’, race was not an issue in the franchise, from which only ‘aliens . . . criminals, paupers, lunatics’ were excluded.101

Where Macdonald’s national franchise could be seen as an attempt to tame or contain the Indigenous vote, its repeal made their exclusion absolute. Provinces that had removed their property qualifications while the federal franchise Act was in place had simultaneously intensified restrictions on Indian participation. Ontario, for example, retained a property qualification for Indians who had satisfied the conditions set by the Gradual Civilisation Act for twenty years after manhood suffrage was adopted for the non-Indigenous population, in 1888.102 When the North-West Territories Act introduced representative institutions to the areas that, in 1886, would become Alberta and Saskatchewan, it had extended the franchise to all male residents or householders, but had excluded specifically ‘Indians’ and aliens.103 While the legislation which returned the franchise to provincial control contained clauses prohibiting provinces from excluding from voting classes of otherwise qualified people, at the local level these clauses were not interpreted as applying to Indigenous people.104

In the years before the reintroduction of a national franchise, in 1920, a similar pattern prevailed. While property qualifications were removed in all the remaining provinces by 1920, the legislation in Prince Edward Island (1913) and Quebec (1915) excluded ‘Indians’ domiciled or resident on a reserve. In the debates preceding the introduction of woman suffrage, the possibility, or threat, of its being extended to Indigenous women was not an issue. This silence made it possible for the franchise to be achieved first in the frontier provinces where there were substantial surviving Indigenous populations. Women in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta were enfranchised in 1916, followed by Ontario and British Columbia in 1917, Nova Scotia in 1918 and New Brunswick in 1919. The electoral imbalance this staggered extension of the franchise threatened to create compelled the national parliament to extend the federal franchise to all White women in 1918, two years before it resumed control of its own franchise.105

Such a determined policy of exclusion served to strengthen the voices of Indigenous leaders striving for recognition of their status as
separate nations rather than Canadian citizens. While individuals from the Six Nations' Reserve and representatives of the Grand Council of Indians of Ontario continued, up to and beyond the outbreak of the First World War, to petition for re-instatement of the franchise, their arguments were increasingly countermanded by those calling on the government 'to respect our Nationality, our rights, and liberties'.106 Conditioned to think of themselves in this way, Canada's First Nations' peoples were reluctant to embrace full citizenship when it was offered, so belatedly, in the 1960s, preferring instead to look forward to a time when they would be recognised as one of the three national groups in which Canada had its beginnings, a situation in which differences as well as rights are to be respected.

Notes
1 Sir John Macdonald, Canada, House of Commons Debates [1885], p. 1484 [hereafter: Debates].
3 Daily British Colonist, 31 March 1875.
4 Daily British Colonist, 7 April 1875.
5 Debates [1885], pp. 1388–9.
6 Globe, 28 April 1885.
8 Montreal Gazette, 28 May 1885.
9 Morning Chronicle, 14 May 1885.
12 Morning Chronicle [Halifax], Ottawa Letter, 13 May 1885; see also Debates [1885], pp. 1485, 1486.
13 Fairbank, Debates [1885], p. 1532.
19 NAC, MG 26A, Macdonald Papers, vol. 323, p. 145870, 1 August 1889, Macdonald
to Hamilton Wilcox, Esq, Chairman Executive Committee, Women’s Suffrage Party, New York.


23 *Globe*, 11 May 1885.


25 *Debates* [1885], p. 1484.

26 Ibid., p. 1523

27 *Globe*, 2 May 1885.

28 *Globe*, 6 May 1885.

29 *Debates* [1885], p. 1484.


31 *Debates* [1885], p. 1486.

32 Ibid., p. 1488.

33 Ibid., p. 1488.

34 Ibid., p. 1574.

35 *Debates* [1880], p. 1990.

36 *Debates* [1885], p. 1491.

37 *Debates* [1880], p. 1996.

38 *Montreal Gazette*, 8 May 1885.

39 *Debates* [1885], pp. 1504–5.

40 Ibid., pp. 1549–51.

41 Ibid., pp. 1503–4.

42 *Globe*, 5 May 1885.

43 *Debates* [1885], p. 1582.

44 Ibid., pp. 1486–7.

45 Ibid., p. 1563

46 Ibid., p. 1575.

47 *Debates of the Senate of the Dominion of Canada* [1885], p. 1226 [hereafter: *Debates*].

48 See for example Mr Charlton, *Debates* [1885], p. 1523.

49 Ibid., p. 1579.

50 Ibid., p. 1542.

51 Ibid., p. 1202.

52 Ibid., pp. 1556–7, 1572.

53 Ibid., p. 1525.

54 Ibid., p. 1579; see *Globe*, 6 and 7 May 1885 for further expression of outrage at this suggestion.

55 *Debates* [1885], pp. 1534–5.

56 Ibid., p. 1538.

57 Ibid., p. 1516.

58 *Debates* [1884], p. 1419.

59 Cameron, *Debates* [1885], pp. 1439, 1503.

60 Charlton, in Ibid., p. 1504.

61 Ibid., p. 1526.

62 Ibid., p. 1541.

63 *Globe*, 2 May 1885.

64 *Globe*, 1 June 1885.

65 *Debates* [1885], p. 1542.

66 Ibid., p. 1525.

67 *Globe*, 12 May 1885.

68 *Debates* [1885], p. 1526.
ENTRENCHING SETTLER CONTROL

69 Ibid., p. 1573.
70 Ibid., p. 1576.
71 Globe, 28 May 1885.
77 Ibid., p. 173.
82 NAC, RG 10, vol. 886, Indian Affairs, Six Nations’ Superintendency, Correspondence 1886, 6 September 1886, Visit of Sir John Macdonald.
84 NCA, RG 10, vol. 885, Indian Affairs, Six Nations Superintendency, Correspondence, October to December 1885, 22 December 1885, Minutes of the Six Nations’ Council.
85 Globe, 9 September 1886.
86 Debates (1898), p. 3947.
87 NAC, MG 26A, Macdonald Papers, vol. 441, part 1, p. 218265, 1 April 1887, Petition on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Maniwating Liberal–Conservative Association.
89 Ibid., 2 November 1896, Petition from Johnson William, Onondaga Chief, Jacob Silversmith, Cayuga Chief, William Sandy, Cayuga Warrior, George Martin, Mohawk Warrior and John Buck, Onondaga Warrior, to Earl of Aberdeen, Governor General of Canada. For an earlier resolution along similar lines, see NAC, RG 10, vol. 883, Indian Affairs, Six Nations’ Superintendency, Correspondence January–April 1885, 9 March 1886, Minutes of the Six Nations’ Council.
90 NAC, RG 10, vol. 2284, file 57169–1, Political Status of Six Nations, 1890–1920, 9 December 1896, Response from Acting-Superintendent-General, Indian Affairs, to Governor General in Council.
91 NAC, RG 10, vol. 6821, file 492–20–1, part 1, 2 April 1897, Moses Martin, Mohawk Warrior, to Superintendent General, Indian Affairs.
92 Debates (1898), p. 3947.
94 NAC, RG 10, vol. 6821, file 492–20–1, part 1, 12 May 1897, 203 Mohawk men to Hon. Wilfred Laurier, Prime Minister.

95 NAC, RG 10, vol. 6821, file 492–20–1, part 1, 1 March 1898, Minutes of Council held at Ohawaken Council House.

96 Debates [1898], p. 3947.

97 Ibid., p. 3953

98 Ibid., pp. 3944–5; 3947.

99 Ibid., p. 3981

100 Quoted in Bartlett, ‘Citizens Minus’, p. 182


102 Statutes of the Province of Ontario [1888], p. 11; Elections Canada, History of the Vote in Canada, p. 53.

103 Elections Canada, History of the Vote in Canada, p. 53.

104 Ibid., pp. 52–3.

105 Ibid., pp. 65–8. Women in Quebec were not enfranchised at the provincial level until 1940.