

# Dominions' Military Relationship to Great Britain 1902-1914 (British Dominions)

By [Steve Marti](#)

## Summary

The dominions of Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand, and South Africa shared an ambiguous constitutional relationship with Britain. The self-governing dominions were free to implement their own policies in matters of defence, but their limited resources and reliance on British protection, particularly the security provided by the Royal Navy, necessitated a degree of imperial cooperation. Popular sentiment and external threats encouraged dominion integration in imperial defence, but integration was complicated by differing priorities based on each dominion's domestic concerns. The competing interests of imperial sentiment and rising nationalism was the crux of each dominion's military relationship with Great Britain.

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## Introduction

The term "dominion" distinguished [Britain's](#) self-governing settler colonies from other possessions of the British [Empire](#). Relations between the dominions and Great Britain between 1902 and 1914 were intertwined with questions of imperial defence. Indeed, when the title was first applied to the Dominion of [Canada](#) to describe the self-governing federated colonies of British North America in 1867, the British impetus for encouraging Canadian Confederation was to transfer part the cost of defending British North America onto the colonies.

Along with Canada, the self-governing colonies of [Australia](#), [Newfoundland](#), and [New Zealand](#) were officially designated as dominions at the Imperial Conference of 1907. [South Africa](#) was granted dominion status upon unification in 1910. Though the terms of each dominion's constitution varied, dominion governments were granted autonomy over all internal matters, while Britain retained control over the colonies' foreign affairs. Under this arrangement, the dominions entered a state of war when Britain declared war, but each dominion could determine the extent to which it mobilized its forces to support the imperial war effort.

The ambiguous relationships between the dominions and Britain complicated their integration into a system of imperial defence. Matters of cost and competing priorities raised debates over the extent of dominion investment and expected reciprocity from Britain. The presence of enfranchised non-British populations, such as [French-Canadians](#) or Afrikaners, complicated the degree to which elected representatives from each dominion could commit to imperial endeavours, while all parties were preoccupied by the security threats in their own geographical context. The haphazard negotiations that took place over a series of conferences beginning in 1902 provided a forum for Britain to clarify its relationship with the dominions.

## The Bonds of Empire

The dominions' common British heritage was celebrated with military pageants that symbolized their membership in a greater Britain. In the tradition of [Victoria, Queen of Great Britain \(1819-1901\)](#) Diamond Jubilee of 1897, dominion contingents sailed to London to participate in grand, year-long imperial spectacles surrounding the coronations of [Edward VII, King of Great Britain \(1841-1910\)](#) in 1902 and [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#) in 1911. These displays were replicated in the dominions with parades of local forces, with capital ships of the Royal Navy adding to these exhibitions of imperial might. HMS *Indomitable* led a fleet of eight ships to the Quebec Tercentenary in 1908 and impressed commentators with the naval might of the British Empire.<sup>1</sup> During its 1913 tour of New Zealand, HMS *New Zealand* welcomed 400,000 visitors aboard, nearly half of the dominion's population.<sup>2</sup> These exchanges sent a part of the dominions to the imperial metropole and brought the empire home to the dominions.

Security also kept the sparsely populated dominions close to Britain. Rivalries between the great European powers raised fears that the dominions could be captured as colonial bargaining chips. [Germany](#) provided the most credible threat as it accumulated colonies in Africa and the [Pacific](#). German presence in Samoa and New Guinea threatened to disrupt trade in Australia and New Zealand, while the possibility of annexing German colonies also

fed sub-imperialist ambitions in the Pacific dominions.<sup>3</sup> Expansion into [German South West Africa](#) also gave Afrikaner statesmen such as [Jan Christian Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#) and [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#) an incentive to compel pro-Boer colonists to support a unified South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Bordered only by the [United States](#), Canada had few credible external threats and no nearby colonies to seize.

## The Dominions and Imperial Defence

A notable outcome of the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) was the contribution of military forces from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. This was not the first time colonial governments raised forces for overseas service, but the relative size and scale of this deployment raised questions about further integration of dominion forces into imperial defence, as well as broader issues of dominion participation in the affairs of the empire.

During the Colonial Conference of 1902, New Zealand Premier [Richard John Seddon \(1845-1906\)](#) introduced a motion to create a standing "Imperial Reserve" to which the dominions would contribute. The idea was well-received by Colonial Secretary [Joseph Chamberlain \(1836-1914\)](#) and representatives from the Cape Colony, but Canadian and Australian delegates were wary of a system that would hand dominion funds and soldiers over to imperial command, thereby entangling the dominions in future imperial conflicts. Canadian Prime Minister Sir [Wilfrid Laurier \(1841-1919\)](#) preferred contributing to imperial defence by bolstering defences in Canada, and Australian Prime Minister Sir [Edmund Barton \(1849-1920\)](#) shared similar views. No formal commitments were reached at the conference, other than a resolution to standardize equipment and training in dominion forces in keeping with imperial patterns.

The matter of imperial defence was revisited at the Imperial Conference of 1907. Secretary of State for War [Richard Burdon Haldane \(1856-1928\)](#) proposed a cooperative system of imperial defence. Haldane's scheme allowed the dominions to maintain military strength according to their domestic requirements, but emphasized the need to pool resources in times of crisis. The dominions' commitment to imperial defence rested on the integration of the empire's military forces and stressed uniformity of armaments, equipment, dress, and training among dominion forces. This arrangement appealed to nationalists and imperialists in the dominions by encouraging the expansion of national forces that could be deployed to support imperial conflicts.

## Dominion Armies

## Integrating Dominion Armies

Rising tensions with Germany highlighted the need to expand British military capability on land. As settler colonies, the dominions offered a reservoir of manpower for imperial armies. Each dominion fostered unique military traditions as they raised voluntary militias. The war of 1812 left an indelible impression in both English- and French-Canadian popular memory of the militia's capabilities, while Dutch settlers in South Africa relied on *Kommando* militias to guard against native uprisings. Australia's colonial militias gradually discarded the red serge of the British Army and adopted khakis and slouch hats to mirror the image of the archetypal bush worker, such as pastoralists, drovers, miners or other frontier occupations idealized by such Australian poets as [Henry Lawson \(1867-1922\)](#) and [Banjo Paterson \(1864-1941\)](#).<sup>5</sup> The idea of a citizen army appealed to dominion nationalists who celebrated the martial attributes of frontier society by rationalizing the influence of the frontier as an environmental determinant that defined settler society.

Despite popular preferences for voluntary militias, each dominion maintained a small corps of professionals that provided instructors to train locals in times of emergency. The need for professional leadership raised debates between promoting local talent and importing experienced British officers. In Australia and New Zealand, British officers acted as the senior officers of the dominions' armies, but in Canada General Sir [William Dillon Otter \(1843-1929\)](#) became the first Canadian-born Chief of the General Staff in 1908. General [Christian Frederick Beyers \(1869-1914\)](#), a Boer who fought the British, replaced Brigadier General Sir [George Grey Aston \(1861-1938\)](#) as the senior military officer in South Africa in 1913.<sup>6</sup>

Imperial officers were sent to the dominions to fill the perpetual shortage of adequately trained staff officers, while opportunities were made available for dominion officers to attend Staff College in Britain. South African officers did not benefit from this scheme, but the South African Military School taught British doctrine to its officer cadets.<sup>7</sup> After observing manoeuvres in New South Wales, New Zealand's Chief of Defence Staff, Colonel Sir [Alfred William Robin \(1860-1935\)](#), negotiated a permanent exchange of staff officers between the two dominions. Trans-Tasman professional cooperation increased when the [Australian government](#) agreed to train New Zealand officer cadets at the Royal Military College in Duntroon (Australian Capital Territory), which opened in 1911.<sup>8</sup> Wider exchanges between the dominions did not materialize, but the transfer of officers between Britain and the dominions impressed British professional and cultural traditions onto dominion armies.

## Compulsory Military Training

The resolutions of the 1907 Imperial Conference set goals for the operational integration of dominion forces, but doubts persisted among politicians in London and in the dominions that the dominions' militias were able to teach anything more than close-order drill and musketry to its volunteers. Declining enrolment, particularly among rural units, contributed to these doubts. Though each dominion's defence legislation included provisions for conscription in response to invasion, rising tensions in Europe and the deliberations of the 1909 Imperial Defence Conference prompted a rewriting defence legislation to institute compulsory military training.

Australia's *Defence Act* was amended to turn the Militia into the Citizen Forces. Establishments were set to field an expeditionary force of four divisions and two mounted brigades, and compulsory training was imposed to ensure these formations could be filled with partly-trained volunteers.<sup>9</sup> Boys were required to participate in cadet training from age twelve, and from ages eighteen to twenty Australian men performed sixteen days' annual training with Citizen Forces. In its first year, 155,000 boys were registered and 92,000 participated in compulsory training.<sup>10</sup> The New Zealand *Defence Act* of 1909 implemented a similar system of compulsory training with the aim of fielding an expeditionary force of 10,000.<sup>11</sup> In Canada, the National Defence League lobbied unsuccessfully for compulsory military training, but six provinces incorporated cadet training into their school curricula.<sup>12</sup> The *Union Defence Act* of 1912 created a Permanent Force of 2,500 mounted [rifles](#) and [artillery](#) in South Africa along with an Active Citizen Force of 25,000 reservists in local regiments that merged the traditions of British militias and Afrikaner *Kommandos*.<sup>13</sup> These militia units were raised through voluntary enlistments and shortages were filled with conscripts drafted in district levies. Though compulsion was used to bolster the peacetime strength of dominion armies, obligatory service was tolerated because conscripts were restricted to domestic service. Imperial expeditions still required a specially-raised contingent of volunteers. Compulsory training aimed to provide men with the skills and conviction to enlist in an imperial expeditionary force when needed.

## Problems of Race and Ethnicity

The effort to expand dominion forces reflected social tensions of race and ethnicity. In South Africa, the divisions of the Anglo-Boer Wars were still visible in the green uniforms of the Active Citizens Force, adopted because Afrikaner volunteers refused to wear British khaki.<sup>14</sup> The *Union Defence Act* excluded anyone not of European descent from military service. The

wording hinted at the possibility of including Africans in military forces, but the priority was to appease Afrikaner concerns that allowing Africans to perform military service would encourage further demands for racial equality. The possibility of an African uprising was commonly played up by both British and Afrikaner statesmen to manipulate Afrikaner anxieties and encourage cooperation in a British state.<sup>15</sup>

The 1909 amendment of Australia's *Defence Act* likewise exempted men found "not substantially of European origin or descent" from military service, which tacitly excluded Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders from enlisting. Australian policies contrasted starkly with New Zealand's, where Maori were encouraged to enlist, though exempt from compulsory training. Enlistment in existing Volunteer units was acceptable, but almost every application to form an all-Maori corps in the Volunteer Force was denied. The Wairarapa Maori Mounted Rifles was the only independent Maori unit prior to 1915.<sup>16</sup>

The place of First Nations in Canada's militia was more ambiguous. The *Militia Act* of 1904 applied to British subjects in the dominion, which implicitly included First Nations. Recruitment was left to the discretion of the commanding officer of a given unit, and some allowed First Nations men to enlist. Military training was believed to facilitate assimilation into settler society and by 1913 4,655 First Nations boys were receiving cadet training through the Department of Indian Affairs' residential schools.<sup>17</sup> French Canadians were generally ambivalent toward the Militia, which did little to encourage French-Canadian enlistment. Instruction at annual camps was only provided in English. Uninterested in the militia, French Canadians formed separate rifle clubs which allowed them to participate in martial exercises while expressing their cultural identity. One rifle club was named the *Chasseurs de Salaberry*, harkening back to the militia of New France, while another club adopted the accoutrements of the Papal *Zouaves*, which had recruited volunteers in French Canada from 1868 to 1870 to defend the Papal States during the wars of Italian reunification.<sup>18</sup>

## Naval Forces in the Dominions

German naval expansion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was met with a costly restructuring of the Royal Navy. Each dominion maintained auxiliary naval services for coastal defence, but the costs of naval rearmament encouraged further dominion involvement in naval affairs.

Part of Britain's response to the naval threat was a defensive alliance with [Japan](#), signed in 1902. With the Japanese Imperial Navy safeguarding the Pacific, the Royal Navy recalled most of its capital ships home to match threats from Germany. This redeployment

heightened anxieties in Australia and New Zealand. The outcome of the [Russo-Japanese War](#) in 1905 made Imperial Japan a greater object of paranoia in Australia than the German East Asia Squadron. Prime Minister [Alfred Deakin \(1856-1919\)](#) invited the [United States](#) Navy to call at Sydney and Melbourne during its 1908 circumnavigation of the globe and courted the Great White Fleet as a foil to the "Yellow Peril."<sup>19</sup>

Fears of Japanese naval supremacy in the Pacific were addressed at the 1907 Imperial Conference when the Admiralty offered to replace the capital ships denuded from stations in the East Indies, China, and Australia with the financial assistance of the dominions. Suspicious that these new ships would again be recalled home, Australian Prime Minister [Andrew Fisher \(1862-1928\)](#) negotiated the formation of an Australian Fleet Unit that could be turned over to Britain in case of war. Canadian Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier took Fisher's proposal further to form an independent naval service. In 1910, two aging cruisers were transferred to the dominion to provide the Royal Canadian Navy with its first ships, HMCS *Niobe* and HMCS *Rainbow*. Laurier's compromise was derided by Canadian imperialists who argued that the acquisition of two ships did not contribute enough to meet the German naval threat, while nationalists criticized the provision that the ships could be turned over to Britain during wartime.

The Australian Fleet Unit was re-designated as the Royal Australian Navy in 1911. A battle cruiser, HMAS *Australia*, two light cruisers, and two destroyers were delivered to Sydney amid much fanfare in 1913. Not convinced that the Australian Fleet Unit offered much protection for New Zealand, Prime Minister [Joseph George Ward \(1856-1930\)](#) readily committed a ten-year subsidy of £100,000 per year to contribute to the upkeep of the Royal Navy.<sup>20</sup> The bulk of this subsidy purchased a battle cruiser for the Royal Navy, HMS *New Zealand*, which toured the dominions in 1913. HMS *New Zealand* was recalled to home waters when war broke out in 1914, affording little direct protection to its namesake.

As statesmen from the more populous and prosperous dominions negotiated the purchase of capital ships, Newfoundland organized its own contribution to imperial defence. With fewer financial means, Newfoundland was able to contribute experienced sailors to the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) from its workforce of fishermen. At the 1902 Colonial Conference, the Admiralty pledged to maintain 600 volunteers in [Newfoundland](#) if the colony offset the expense through an annual subsidy and accepted the cost of refitting HMS *Calypso* for use as a drill ship. A division of the RNR in Newfoundland provided a source of income to supplement fishermen's seasonal wages during the winter months and attracted a healthy number of volunteers. The RNR was also an instrument of social uplift meant to promote discipline and a strong work ethic among young fishermen in the rural outports. Initial plans sought to moor

the drill ship in remote Placentia Bay to keep volunteers away from the temptations and vices of a port city. However, it was decided that the presence of HMS *Calypso* in St John's harbour provided a reminder of imperial and naval strength.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The dominions' military relationship to Great Britain was defined by negotiation and compromise. The pressure for dominion representatives to compromise on matters of imperial defence reflected the limits of imperial sentiment in the dominions. For all the parades, reviews, regattas, and other public displays of imperial military strength, dominion statesmen knew that unconditional commitments to imperial defence would incur great costs and aggravate political or ethnic divisions at home. As the events of 1914-1918 revealed, imperial sentiment remained strong enough that each dominion could easily contribute a sizeable contingent of volunteers for imperial defence at the outbreak of war, but these sentiments were not strong enough to sustain or expand military commitments without meeting popular resistance. The coming conflict would necessitate further negotiations and compromises with Britain to justify the sacrifice suffered by the dominions.

Steve Marti, The University of Western Ontario

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## External Links

- [Atkinson, Neill / Dalley, Bronwyn / McLean, Gavin: Dominion status, 5 August 2014 \(New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Australia and the Boer War, 1899-1902 \(Australian War Memorial\) \(Article\)](#)
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