

**“WHEN THEY PUT HER IN THE WATER THE LIFEBOAT TOUCHED IT FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE OLD MACDONALD GOVERNMENT PLACED HER ON LAKE WISSANOTTI”:
LIFEBOATS AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Many ships have sunk and many lives have been lost on Canadian waters. To help prevent the loss of lives, in the late 1800s the government of Sir John A. Macdonald set about providing communities with lifeboats. However, in almost every case the federal government’s responsibility ended when they gave the community the lifeboat. The crews and the boat maintenance were left to be organised locally. Only five lifeboat stations across all of Canada were maintained by the federal government.

This system left the country with poorly-maintained lifeboats and poorly-trained rescuers. John Milton Platt, a Liberal member of Parliament, was a critic of this set-up. In 1884, he told the Minister of Marine and Fisheries that because there was “no proper system... instead of spending money in enlarging [the lifeboat program], he should perfect what he has”⁵. Despite Platt’s demands, the Macdonald government continued with its flawed lifeboat program.

1. Think about the lifeboat sent to save the *Mariposa Belle*. What problems of the Canadian government’s lifeboat program did *Sunshine Sketches* expose?
2. In the 1800s, the Macdonald government was accused of placing lifeboats on shores simply to buy favour with local voters. Can you think of any instances today where governments have been accused of doing something for their own interest, and not public interest?

⁵ *Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada. Second Session: Fifth Parliament, vol. XVI, 12 March 1884 - 19 April 1884, p. 1129.*