

# The End of Politics? Political Campaigns in Newfoundland and Labrador

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## The End of Politics? Political Campaigns in Newfoundland and Labrador

CAMPAIGNS ARE AN ESSENTIAL FEATURE OF OUR DEMOCRACY. They help us choose who we want in our representative institutions and which party offers the best policies for our well-being, and, of course, the party with the greatest number of candidates elected forms the government. Those elected on the losing side sit as the opposition. After a few years another campaign either rewards them with another term or throws the rascals out. Campaigns have their own architecture, too, and often display elements of performance and spectacle.<sup>1</sup> A frontrunner usually emerges and convinces enough voters that their party offers a better alternative than the others.<sup>2</sup> Campaigns engage the citizen, turning the community into what Alex de Tocqueville terms a “feverish state,” and become “the daily story of the public papers, the subject of individual conversations, the goal of all moves, the object of all thoughts, the sole interest of the moment.”<sup>3</sup>

Campaigns fade quickly into the background, however, usually forgotten unless there is a defining moment. Yet, they are more than contests between political rivals for the right to govern. They offer a window into a political community and its history, an opportunity to locate paradigms and dynamisms that may be enduring or shifting.<sup>4</sup> In Newfoundland and Labrador,

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1 There has been a vast literature on elections as theatre and spectacle as a way to explain Donald Trump's victory in 2016. See, for example, Douglas Kellner, *Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016), esp. 1-7 as well as Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

2 M. Chou, R. Bleiker, & N. Premaratna, “Elections as Theater,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49, no. 1 (January 2016): 43-7.

3 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Eduardo Nolla (Indianapolis, ID: Liberty Fund, 2010), 1:224.

4 See J. Gillies, V. Raynauld, and A. Turcotte, eds., *Political Marketing in the 2019 Canadian Federal Election*, Palgrave Studies in Political Marketing and Management (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2021) and G.C. Jacobson, “How do Campaigns Matter?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (May 2015): 31-47.

campaigns have rarely been dull and their aftermath have sometimes bordered on the bizarre.<sup>5</sup> Just a decade after winning representative government, the House of Assembly was amalgamated with the appointed Legislative Council as campaigns became increasingly disruptive. It marked the first but not the last surrender of democracy. One campaign resulted in a tie. Another pivoted on whether or not to suspend democracy. After 1949, Joseph R. Smallwood won six consecutive campaigns and the seventh was a virtual draw when rural Newfoundland revolted against Smallwood. Campaigns have given rise to a string of charismatic and powerful personalities, and a common campaign leitmotif has been targeting an external adversary as the source of the province's economic woes.<sup>6</sup>

### The COVID-19 election

The 2021 campaign was much less rousing than others. It was not a bitter fight over policy or principle and was memorable only because COVID-19 disrupted voting. Three provinces had had successful pandemic campaigns, two of which turned minority governments into majorities. Still, a pandemic election was risky; but Andrew Furey, who became Liberal leader and premier in August 2020, was seeking an opportune moment to launch a campaign. He had not held elected office until taking the top job, but he had the right connections and moved in the proper circles. His father was a Liberal senator, he had been provincial chair of the 2015 Liberal campaign, and he door-knocked with friend and federal Liberal minister Seamus O'Regan during the 2019 federal campaign.<sup>7</sup> A respected orthopedic surgeon, celebrated philanthropist, and humanitarian, he had been long touted as the fresh face of Newfoundland's new economic and cultural elite, the one best able to lead the Liberal party and the province where, it seems, success in other fields still turns to political ambition. When the opportunity came, Furey was anointed as the province's 15th premier. Ed Hollett, a keen observer of Newfoundland and Labrador

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5 For a quick scan of the province's parliamentary history, see Neil Penney, "The Parliamentary Tradition in Newfoundland," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 11-16.

6 Jerry Bannister, "A River Runs Through It: Churchill Falls and the End of Newfoundland History," *Acadiensis* 41, no. 1 (Winter/Spring, 2012): 211-25; Bannister, "Whigs and Nationalists: The Legacy of Judge Prowse's History of Newfoundland," *Acadiensis* 32, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 84-109; Raymond B. Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish: Newfoundland-Ottawa Relations Since 1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

7 <https://www.facebook.com/SeamusOReganMP/posts/2426162597462726>; "Political Life a 'Noble Calling' says Surgeon Andrew Furey," CBC News, 13 April 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/political-life-a-noble-calling-says-surgeon-andrew-furey-1.3030326>.

politics, described him as one of “the most carefully constructed brands ever to sit in the Premier’s Office.”<sup>8</sup> Like many aspiring celebrity politicians, he, too, wrote a book.<sup>9</sup>

Furey’s popularity soared during COVID as case numbers remained low. Newfoundland participated in the popular Atlantic Bubble, whereby residents could travel within the four Atlantic Provinces without restrictions. He often appeared with Dr. Janice Fitzgerald, chief medical officer, who became a COVID superstar with her “Hold fast, Newfoundland and Labrador” nautical aphorism. He also rode the popularity of Health Minister John Haggie – he of “Don’t let them lick the handle of the shopping cart” fame, spoken with his charismatic Lancashire brogue. Furey’s approval rating jumped to 53 per cent in late 2020, and Liberal support climbed as that of the opposition lagged.<sup>10</sup> On 15 January 2021, he called an election for 13 February.

In the history of Newfoundland campaigns, 2021 was exciting only for the chaos around voting and being Canada’s first with exclusively mail-in ballots. The campaign was cautious, both in door-knocking and in policies presented. Furey spoke of boldness but voters never knew what it meant. He sought only a stronger mandate to manage the province’s fiscal and economic situation; the opposition parties insisted there was no need for a campaign but claimed they were better able to deal with the province’s problems, including its burgeoning \$47 billion debt – the highest debt burden of any province as a percentage of GDP. They also claimed to be better able to broker a lifeline to Ottawa to get the province out of its financial mess.<sup>11</sup> Just 48 hours before balloting began, in-person voting on the Avalon Peninsula was delayed indefinitely as new COVID cases soared. A day later, after election workers announced they would not appear on voting day, in-person voting in all 40 constituencies was suspended. Several weeks of confusion reigned. Voting eventually concluded

8 Ed Hollett, “The One About Re-Runs. We Are This Close to Being Politically Rickrolled,” *Bond Papers*, 28 June 2021, <https://edhollett.substack.com/p/the-one-about-re-runs>.

9 Some examples include Justin Trudeau, *Common Ground* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014); Jagmeet Singh, *Love and Courage: My Story of Family, Resilience, and Overcoming the Unexpected* (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 2019); and Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2007).

10 Angus Reid Institute, “Premiers’ Performance: The Year of COVID-19 Draws to a Close with Most, But Not All Holding Majority Approval,” 1 December 2020, <https://angusreid.org/premier-approval-december2020/>.

11 Don Drummond and Louis Lévesque, “Facing Newfoundland and Labrador’s Fiscal Challenges,” *MAX Policy*, Max School of Public Policy, 6 April 2021, <https://www.mcgill.ca/maxbellschool/article/articles-max-policy/facing-newfoundland-and-labradors-fiscal-challenges>; Newfoundland and Labrador, *Budget 2021*, 31 May 2021, <https://www.gov.nl.ca/budget/2021/>.

on 25 March. Results were announced on 27 March, 71 days after the writs had been issued. Furey won a narrow victory, 22 seats (but 48 per cent of the vote), four more than the opposition parties and three more than at dissolution. Only 48 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot, the lowest ever for any Canadian election. One constituency had a 22 per cent turnout. Despite a number of legal challenges, Furey cautiously asserted “I think this is a legitimate election.” Polls, however, suggested a third of voters considered the result illegitimate, perhaps not without good reason. Political scientist Kelly Blidook notes that there was no reason to think that the election would have had a turnout less than that of the previous campaign (60.66 per cent).<sup>12</sup>

### The democratic deficit and threat to democracy

Concern about democracy in Newfoundland and Labrador is not new. In the 2015 campaign, Liberal leader Dwight Ball promised an all-party committee of the House of Assembly to consider democratic reform.<sup>13</sup> Ball was elected but it was not until February 2019, just weeks before another campaign, that he appointed an All-Party Committee on Democratic Reform. Returned to a minority position, he disbanded the All-Party Committee in favour of a Select Committee on Democratic Reform with equal representation from the governing and opposition parties. It, too, did little.<sup>14</sup> After the tumultuous election of 2021, Premier Furey promised an investigation to review “what happened” in the campaign with a view to “modernizing” the Elections Act; there was no mention of democratic reform.<sup>15</sup> Alex Marland and Lisa Moore had attempted to facilitate the earlier process with an innovative, independent grassroots initiative to study democratic reform and renew governance in the province. Their *Democracy Cookbook* brought together nearly 90

12 Kelly Blidook, “Andrew Furey’s Liberals have a Legitimacy Problem,” *Independent* (St. John’s) 30 April 2021; Nahid Masoudi, “Motivating Voter Turnout,” in *The Democracy Cookbook: Recipes to Renew Governance in Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. Alex Marland and Lisa Moore (St. John’s: ISER Books, 2017), 161–4.

13 Newfoundland and Labrador, House of Assembly, Select Committees, <https://www.assembly.nl.ca/Committees/SelectCommittees/SelectCommDemReform/>.

14 Newfoundland and Labrador, “Government Delivers Promised All-Party Committee on Democratic Reform,” 25 February 2019, <https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2019/just/0225n02/>; David Maher, House of Assembly Strikes New Committee to Reform Democracy in Newfoundland and Labrador,” Saltwire Network, 5 December 2019, <https://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/news/house-of-assembly-strikes-new-committee-to-reform-democracy-in-newfoundland-and-labrador-384373/>.

15 CBC News, “Furey Vows to Review Problem-Riddled N.L. Election, Modernize Elections Act,” CBC News, 29 March 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/andrew-furey-review-nl-election-1.5967873>.

commentators with proposals to “turn Newfoundland and Labrador from a democratic laggard into a democratic leader.”<sup>16</sup> Nahid Masoudi focused on voter turnout, noting that in the 2015 federal election the province’s was the lowest nationally at just 67 per cent; and in the provincial election that same year, only 55.6 per cent of eligible voters went to the polls – the lowest since 1949. The most common reason given for not voting: “not being interested in politics.”<sup>17</sup>

With the 2021 campaign reaching another historic low in voter participation, there is reason to worry about the state of democracy in the province. There is much discussion elsewhere about threats to democracy around the world, prompted largely by the 2016 victory of authoritarian leader Donald Trump. The discussion has focused on the rise of populism, although the events of 6 January 2021 on Capitol Hill in Washington and attempts at voter suppression in the US are also reasons for concern. The situation in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Venezuela, and elsewhere are similarly worrisome. Democracy is being imperilled not through old-fashioned military coups but within the democratic process itself.<sup>18</sup> A successful democracy rests on certain values and norms, such as the acceptance of one’s political opponents to govern if they win a free and fair election as well as a nation’s constitution and laws. In a successful democracy political parties and elites ensure openness and fairness within the party; Furey apparently had access to the Liberal membership list when he announced his intention to run for the party leadership. Democracy requires a free press and the commitment from political leaders to engage with the media, including a willingness to explain their policies. It is also about efficient and honest government, capable of providing effective and coherent policies and having the capacity to manage, successfully, pressing policy challenges. Voter turnout is also a gauge to assess the health of a democracy as voting is democracy’s fundamental feature. It is expected adult citizens will vote and have their ballot counted. When citizens choose not to vote because

16 Alex Marland and Lisa Moore, “Democratic Reform on the Menu in Newfoundland and Labrador, 2018,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 5–7.

17 Nahid Masoudi, “Motivating Voter Turnout,” and Alex Marland, “Voting in Newfoundland and Labrador: Turned off by Canadian Elections? Tune in to Canadian Idol!,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 220–37. For a more general discussion of voter turnout, see Michael D. Martinez and Jeff Gill, “Does Turnout Decline Matter? Electoral Turnout and Partisan Choice in the 1997 Canadian Federal Election,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 2 (June 2006): 343–62.

18 See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2018).

they have lost interest in campaigns, as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians told pollsters in 2015, it is troubling. That citizens cease to exercise their franchise because they are apathetic may be the greatest threat to a functioning and healthy democracy and the first step to imperilling their democracy and ending politics, at least formal electoral politics.

### **Historicizing 2021 campaign**

The 2021 election presents an opportunity, then, to consider the history of democracy in Newfoundland and Labrador through a history of campaigns. It might be useful to recall that democracy had rather weak beginnings in 1832. Perhaps democracy, like a life itself, struggles when it is born into a troubled and debilitating environment. If it survives its early years, however, it can likely thrive; but in Newfoundland democracy was put on life support in 1842 and suspended completely nearly a century later. At other times democracy has been fairly uncompetitive. When re-established in 1949 after Confederation, the democratic system produced essentially a one-party state for more than two decades although such a result is not, admittedly, anti-democratic. Since then, the province has been periodically governed by charismatic leaders who have dominated campaigns. At their height of popularity Danny Williams captured 70 per cent of the popular vote and Brian Peckford enjoyed the support of more than 60 per cent of the electorate. In those instances, to oppose the governing party was considered disloyal – even unpatriotic. That is another troubling trend. David Cochrane, a senior CBC reporter, has identified a phenomenon he labels “patriotic correctness,” where even “informed dissent is seen as nothing short of treason.” Cochrane found that the simple questioning or criticism of the government – and by extension of the province itself – is often “viewed as an unpatriotic assault upon the very fabric of Newfoundland and Labrador.”<sup>19</sup> The late historian David Alexander insisted a society must question its elites. He suggested that resource weakness could never be the explanation for Newfoundland’s economic challenges, and courageously, perhaps foolhardily, asked, if not resource weakness, “then it might be that the country failed to maximize its potential through incompetence.” He wondered about the “inadequacies of the clique who dominated the economic and political life of

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19 David Cochrane, “Patriotic Correctness in Newfoundland and Labrador,” in Marland and Moore, *Democracy Cookbook*, 60-1.

the country” and urged further study of their behaviour and character.<sup>20</sup> The subjects Alexander raised are difficult to consider in any jurisdiction, but they are as important as they are controversial.

There has emerged in Newfoundland is a homogenized political identity that has displaced old antagonisms that once animated political campaigns. The traditional distinction – and animosity – between baymen (those in rural outport communities) and townie (those in St. John’s) seems to have faded. For rural communities, St. John’s is no longer the foreign land it once was. Outports have endured a creeping urbanity and the urban and suburban centres have embraced traditional outport culture (once dismissed as backward) as their own. This new political identity has weakened historical cleavages. Celebrated novelist Bernice Morgan captured the old cleavages when she wrote that Newfoundland’s muse was class and region: “I write out of blind anger,” she said, “anger about colonialism, anger about what religion did to us, anger that my grandfather once had to go cap in hand to someone else’s grandfather.”<sup>21</sup> Those sentiments once dominated campaigns but not anymore.

The overthrow of Smallwood’s regime in the early 1970s was driven largely by the sense that he had no appreciation or understanding of the province’s rural culture in his search for modernity and a new industrial paradigm. Yet that revolution did not usher in an uprising against elites or the established party system. There has been no campaign marked by extraordinary mobilization for social and economic change nor an organized public revolt to demand a more meaningful politics and political reform to confront a democratic deficit. Politicians and citizens alike treat an election campaign as a panacea and place all hope for something better in a new leader or the other party, although the differences between the two major parties is that one is in power and the other is not. The new Avalon Peninsula middle class professional and cultural elites – in their sprawling two-stories, often on the outskirts of St. John’s, or in their rennovated, upscale downtown jelly-bean dwellings – dominate politics as the St. John’s fish, mercantile, and legal interests did in an earlier era.<sup>22</sup> Today, the Newfoundland ethos, or creed, has bred a new

20 David Alexander, “Literacy and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Newfoundland,” *Acadiensis* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 3–4, 33–4.

21 Sandra Gwyn, “A Sense of Place,” *Maclean’s* 110, no. 25 (23 June 1997): 18–21; see also Gwyn, “The Newfoundland Renaissance,” *Saturday Night* 91, no. 2 (April 1976): 38–45.

22 S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 269.



confidence and new sensibilities, especially among the chattering class.<sup>23</sup> There has been a tendency again, as it was in the campaign for democracy in the 1830s, to turn the focus outward rather than inward in the search for answers to persistent challenges. Historian J.K. Hiller has put it more bluntly, calling it a “tendency to look for external scapegoats.”<sup>24</sup> The problem always lies elsewhere. The popular Newfoundland anthem, *Ode to Newfoundland*, still bellowed with great enthusiasm, calls upon God to guard Newfoundland, presumably from something dangerous and ostensibly from the outside. At the same time, though, there has emerged a subdued resignation among many in the province. This includes those who remained in the declining fishing outports, and those who fled their rural communities for the Avalon Peninsula after the collapse of the fishing industry in the early 1990s or became itinerant or rotational workers in search of high-paying jobs in the resource and construction sectors throughout Canada and abroad. Many rural communities are now without the significant numbers of young men and women who orchestrated the revolt against Smallwood in the late 1960s and early 1970s to demand a new politics, and those in the urban and urban-adjacent areas, especially near St. John’s, no longer have a sense of the conflicts of which Bernice Morgan wrote.

This essay now turns to show how Newfoundland’s political campaigns were enlivened by many vigorous debates and intense conflicts. Often contentious, issues such as Confederation, economic development and infrastructure spending, and the state of the dominion’s fiscal situation have invigorated campaigns since the 1832 election campaign. They were replete with both charismatic politicians and political rascals engaged in all sorts of shenanigans. Campaigns were rarely dull.

### **The Confederation campaigns**

The most animated campaigns were those over Confederation, the first in 1869, and the second in two referendums during 1948. It is not necessary to provide details of either, as both are surely well-known to the readers of this journal.<sup>25</sup> In both instances, the campaigns generated great interest and great

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23 The “chattering class” refers to the politically, culturally, and socially active metropolitan middle class.

24 James K. Hiller, “Robert Bond and the Pink, White and Green: Newfoundland Nationalism in Perspective,” *Acadiensis* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 132.

25 For a history of Confederation, see Raymond B. Blake and Melvin Baker, *Where Once They Stood; Newfoundland’s Rocky Road Towards Confederation* (Regina, SK: University of Regina Press, 2019).

tension, and both were pivotal moments in Newfoundland history. From a series of articles James Murray published in the *Evening Telegram*, we know that voters were engaged and participated readily in 19th century campaigns.<sup>26</sup> Political events were well-attended, loud, highly visible performances that were generally marked by processions of voters, who often carried torches and passed through hastily constructed arches of green boughs as they marched to campaign rallies of “cheerily large audiences.” Voters demonstrated, Murray reminds us, “the existence of a wonderful quickness of apprehension, and of capacity and eagerness to understand important matters.” While campaigns were moments of theatre, spectacle, and performance (often supplemented with alcohol), they are also important moments of citizenship as voters became the centre of attention; they often travelled great distances to polling stations to perform their civic duty.<sup>27</sup>

When Confederation became the campaign issue in 1869, Frederic Carter was premier and union’s major proponent. Many merchants, members of the St. John’s colonial elite, and the press were initially supportive. So, too, was the governor and the Colonial Office, but an opposition emerged to challenge those promoting Confederation. Voters were galvanized by the performance of anti-confederate leader, Charles Fox Bennett, merchant and effective and determined campaigner. He warned union would bring compulsory military service for fishers in far-away lands, increased taxation, and result in the loss of political control to a distant government. He likened union to that of England and Ireland, a point not lost on the colony’s huge Irish population. The anti-confederate campaign rebuked as treasonous those who were ready to turn their back on self-government and the independence they enjoyed as a British colony. He was a Newfoundland nationalist, trumpeting its economic potential. It had to be protected from the clutches of the rapacious Canadians. It was patriotism with a considerable swagger, and it was effective. The campaign was electoral theatre: a narrative was created, both real and imagined, that engaged and persuaded voters who had a voice, sometimes a gentle murmur and at times a loud roar. Voters made a choice that reflected their hopes and aspirations as well as their fears and anxieties. On 13 November 1869, after a vigorous campaign, voters overwhelmingly rejected Confederation. The campaign had generated great excitement, with 78 per cent of those eligible

26 James K. Hiller, “Research Note: James Murray and the 1882 Newfoundland General Election,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 237–58.

27 *Evening Telegram* (St. John’s), 28 November and 8 December 1882.

voting, and it sealed the fate of Confederation for several generations.<sup>28</sup> It also set Newfoundland on a path seeking a new model of economic development that, unfortunately, never reached the potential for which Bennett had hoped.

When Confederation emerged again in the late 1940s much had changed in Newfoundland, largely because of the temporary prosperity brought by the Second World War; but the interest in politics had not diminished.<sup>29</sup> There was growing pressure to return the democratic constitution that had been suspended in 1934. A National Convention was subsequently elected to make recommendations to London for constitutional options to be considered in a referendum. Many among the St. John's elite assumed that they would lead that process, but like elites elsewhere they, too, failed to discern important shifts occurring within their society that made their conservative worldview out of touch with that of many voters.<sup>30</sup> The Convention debates (11 September 1946 to 30 January 1948) were recorded and broadcast nightly. Two primary narratives emerged: one promoting Confederation and the other a return to Responsible Government. The former, articulated by Smallwood and his supporters, was that Newfoundland had failed to provide a decent living for its ordinary people; their best hope for a better, more secure future was in Canada. They argued Newfoundlanders deserved an expansion of social rights through the provision of new social security measures that had become important instruments of statecraft elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> The other group appealed to Newfoundland patriotism and the constitutional right to self-government and national independence. It implored citizens not to cede control of their nation to Canada: "Are we going to admit to the rest of the world we're not fit to govern ourselves?"<sup>32</sup>

Like the earlier Confederation debate, citizens were captivated by the campaign. Since 1869 the electorate had expanded, notably to include women. The new medium of radio also allowed campaigners to reach nearly every voter.<sup>33</sup> In the first referendum, on 3 June 1948, 88 per cent of those eligible

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28 Blake and Baker, *Where Once They Stood*, 61.

29 David MacKenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation, 1939-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986); Peter Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).

30 *Daily News* (St. John's), 25 October 1940.

31 See Raymond B. Blake, *From Rights to Needs: A History of Family Allowances in Canada, 1929-92* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).

32 *Independent*, 29 April 1948.

33 For the advent of radio, see Jeff A. Webb, *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of Broadcasting Corporation on Newfoundland, 1939-49* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

voted, and in the second, on 22 July, 84 per cent.<sup>34</sup> The campaigns were dogged, intense, bitter, divisive, and closely followed. Both the Confederate Association and the Responsible Government League disseminated their campaign messages through various media, through the recruitment of local spokespersons, and in campaign speeches and rallies. Smallwood, especially, directed his appeal to women as mothers and grandmothers, emphasizing the importance of social programs. He canvassed the country by all modes of transport, and penned open letters to communities he could not visit. Branding himself as the champion of the “common man,” he promised to protect the “toiling masses” from the privileged Water Street merchants – all to capitalize on the dislike among outport voters of the St. John’s commercial elite that dominated their lives. Even airplane fly-overs were part of Smallwood’s campaign spectacle, and his community campaign rallies resembled those that Murray described.<sup>35</sup> The final campaign resulted in a narrow victory for the confederates and Newfoundland became a province of Canada in 1949.

### **The beginnings of democracy**

Other election campaigns are no less important even if they have largely faded from public memory. Since the advent of representative government in 1832, there has always been a class of persons (almost exclusively male) who believed it was their destiny to provide political leadership. That, indeed, may well be true of the 2021 campaign that featured Andrew Furey and the Progressive Conservative leader, Ches Crosbie, who built a successful law practice before his ambition turned to politics. He followed the path of his father, John, who similarly left the comfort and security of the family business and law for a political career. Keith Matthews argues that such practices date from the beginnings of democracy in 1832, when self-styled reformers of the mercantile and professional elite presented themselves as democrats fighting for justice even though they did not reflect the interests of the majority of voters – especially those in the outports. William Carson and Patrick Morris, the leading reformers, born in Scotland and Ireland, respectively, claimed to represent the inhabitants of the island. They invoked patriotic language and campaigned on standing up for Newfoundland. They were not fighting for

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34 “Burin,” Report by G.C. Jenkins, 2 December 1947, GN 38/S-2-5-2, file 7, The Rooms Provincial Archives (RPA), St. John’s.

35 John FitzGerald, “The Confederation of Newfoundland with Canada, 1946–49” (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1992), 158–9.

the freedom of Newfoundlanders, Matthews contends, but for “recognition of their own rightful position as the leaders and rulers of Newfoundland society.” They believed “the poor should be grateful for the wise and benevolent direction of their superiors.” Those early 19th-century politicians etched a path that has proven enduring: they articulated a narrative of Newfoundland as impoverished and aggrieved because of the actions of outsiders. In their narrative the villains were the imperial government and English merchants, and Carson and Morris convinced the electorate it was oppressed. As Matthews suggests, politicians “who tell others that they are badly governed will never lack a following” even though the colony’s problems in the years before 1832 were economic and not constitutional.<sup>36</sup> In that first campaign the only native-born Newfoundlander who stood for election lost, and of nine constituencies six were acclaimed, suggesting that, at its launch, democracy was not very competitive; there was also little indication that those outside St. John’s were clamouring for democratic institutions. Matthews, himself a transplanted Englishman from Devon, hints at another theme in Newfoundland political history: “The romance of Newfoundland has always seemed more real in St. John’s than elsewhere.” The arrival of democracy, he concludes, simply swapped the hegemony of London and West Country England for that of St. John’s, and the reformers from the St. John’s elite did little in 1832 to address the feelings of frustration, isolation, and bitterness in the outposts.<sup>37</sup>

Between 1832 and 1869 campaigns were frequently a contest largely between Catholic reformers, or Liberals, who sought control of the Assembly against a mostly Protestant mercantile Tory class. Sectarianism and violence become a significant feature of several campaigns and troops were often despatched to maintain order, sometimes between different factions within the same religious group.<sup>38</sup> Whether the Roman Catholic Bishop Michael Fleming and his clergy

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36 Keith Mathews, “The Class of ‘32: St. John’s Reformers in the Era of Representative Government,” *Acadiensis* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 93; Gertrude Gunn, *The Political History of Newfoundland, 1832–64* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 12. There are conflicting interpretations on the road to representative government; see Melvin Baker, “Sectarianism, Patronage, and the Age of Harmony, 1815–1848,” <http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~melbaker/1815-48.htm>.

37 Mathews, “Class of ‘32,” 93.

38 See James E. Candow, *The Invisibles: A History of the Royal Newfoundland Company* (St. John’s: Breakwater Books, 2019). See also David Facey-Crowther, “The British Army and the Aid to the Civil Power in British North America, 1832–1871,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 93, no. 376 (Winter 2015): 321–4. Sectarianism and violence, it might be noted, were common feature of 19th-century campaigns throughout North America; see Scott See, *Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 1999).

entered campaigns because of their religion, their Irish nationalism, or their hope to win a greater share of the spoils for the Catholic community remains a matter of some debate. Tory campaigns appealed to the mercantile interests and played upon Protestant fears of a Catholic-controlled House of Assembly. In such circumstances, voters had a difficult choice when they publicly declared their vote: either antagonize the clergy and risk losing the sacrament, or alienate the merchant and imperil their credit. Several constituencies were notable for their violence, particularly in Conception Bay. There, candidates and voters alike were intimidated by rival groups that marched in large numbers from polling station to polling station during the campaigns. In the 1836 campaign, for instance, eight were charged and convicted with inciting violence. Two by-election campaigns in 1840, one in St. John's, had troops stationed near the polling stations to maintain order, and the other, in Conception Bay, had magistrates requesting troops to prevent violence. The governor and Executive Council had initially refused to despatch help, but when the returning officer closed the polls after a confrontation left one person with a fractured skull, seven with bullet wounds, and two houses set ablaze, troops were despatched.<sup>39</sup>

The political situation became so volatile that the British government ordered an investigation. It was told the 1832 constitution had been premature, as there were insufficient numbers with the "respectability, intelligence and attainments" for elected or appointed office. The St. John's Tory elite echoed such claims and called for suspension of the House of Assembly. It was also alleged that religious dissension had contributed to the violence, and that Assembly members were simply "passive tools in the hands of the priesthood." In 1842, less than a decade after the granting of representative government, Newfoundland had a new constitution. It raised the minimum qualifications for both voting and standing for elected office and instituted simultaneous voting and shorter campaigns. More significantly, it amalgamated the elected House of Assembly with the appointed Legislative Council into a single chamber. It was not an auspicious beginning for democracy. For six years, there was a "respite from party politics" as the governor's appointees held 10 seats in the Assembly of 25. The governor selected the Executive Council and headed the administration.<sup>40</sup> As Newfoundlanders prepared for a return

39 Linda Little, "Collective Action in Outport Newfoundland: A Case Study from the 1830s," *Labour/Le Travail*, no. 26 (Fall 1990): 7-35; Gunn, *Political History of Newfoundland*, 31-3, 66-72.

40 Gunn, *Political History of Newfoundland*, 77-9, 35-6 and Phillip McCann, "Sir John Harvey, J.V. Nugent and the School Inspectorship Controversy in the 1840s," *Newfoundland*

of the 1832 constitution in 1848, the *Public Ledger* noted that of the British colonies, Newfoundland has “stood alone in the disreputable history of her self-government.” It hoped citizens had learned to exercise civility and moderation in their politics and that the campaign for the general election on 16 November would be peaceful and free of church interference.<sup>41</sup>

While the 1848 campaign was without incident, the situation would deteriorate after the granting of responsible government in 1855. Campaigns were marred by sectarianism as the Liberal party continued to be supported by Catholic voters and the Catholic Church, and the Tory party by Protestants, the Protestant churches, and the mercantile elite. There was also a sense among some politicians and elites that their political opponents could never form a government that was legitimate.<sup>42</sup> Governor Sir Alexander Bannerman had a particular dislike for the new Catholic premier, John Kent, and quarreled with him on a number of issues after 1855. Bannerman obviously failed to understand the principle of responsible government and he dismissed Kent when the latter reduced the salaries of civic officials, including many Protestant judges, and invited opposition leader, Hugh W. Hoyles, to form an administration. Kent’s party held a majority and Hoyles lost a vote of confidence, setting off another tumultuous campaign. In a community with the population divided almost evenly between Protestants and Catholics and with their spiritual leaders supporting political rivals, the 1861 campaign was the most violent in the country’s history. Rioting, the despatch of troops, and deaths were its memorable features.<sup>43</sup> In Harbour Grace violence and intimidation erupted, prompted by a meddlesome Catholic bishop and priests who favoured different Liberal candidates for the two available seats, and the magistrate refused to open the polls. In Harbour Main, one person died when violence erupted. When the House of Assembly convened after the campaign, it, too, became a site of violence. The riot act was read, political leaders and clergy called for calm. Someone in the crowd allegedly fired upon troops called out to maintain order. In the melee, three voters were killed, twenty wounded,

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*Studies* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 199–222.

41 *Public Ledger* (St. John’s), 5 November 1848, and also quoted in Gunn, *Political History of Newfoundland*, 109.

42 Ian McDonald, Educational Television (ETV) “Newfoundland Since 1815,” History 120, Lecture 6 (St. John’s: Memorial University Extension Service, n.d.), 3–5.

43 P.B. Waite, “John Kent,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/kent\\_john\\_10E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/kent_john_10E.html); Edward Moulton, “The Political History of Newfoundland, 1861–1869” (MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1960), 75–115.



and considerable property destroyed. Sporadic violence continued over the following few weeks; even Premier Hoyles's summer cottage, just outside St. John's, was set ablaze.<sup>44</sup>

The violence during and after the campaign was a national embarrassment, and some wondered again if Newfoundland was ready for democracy.<sup>45</sup> The situation, however, prompted an accommodation between the religious groups, who agreed to divide the spoils of office along denominational lines. It was also an acceptance that denominationalism would be woven into the country's society, culture, and political system.<sup>46</sup> The arrangement mitigated much of the violence that had marked earlier campaigns, but denominationalism and sectarianism would continue to cast a large shadow over Newfoundland society and politics well into the 20th century and sometimes result in renewed violence.

### **Railways, development, and state finances**

With accommodation on sectarianism largely achieved, election campaigns pivoted on new and equally contentious issues. It should be noted, though, political leaders would still periodically exploit denominationalism for partisan gain. As we saw above, Confederation was a divisive issue and, even after the 1869 result, it became a campaign wedge issue as politicians and others tried to taint opponents to exploit existing tensions as Protestants and Catholics frequently found themselves on opposite sides of the political divide. Normally such politicking was and continues to be condemned for degrading the quality of public discourse and for pandering to core supporters, but wedge politics was used to appeal to those in the middle – those without firm views. After all, campaigns have an eye on the persuadable voter.

State support for a railway and economic development were pivotal and controversial issues in the late 19th century following the vote to stay out of Confederation. William Whiteway, at one time a keen supporter of union, became premier in 1878, promising to diversify the economy away from the sea and embrace the Canadian model of development. He used the railway, especially, to divide the electorate and entice the persuadable voter. The

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44 On the election, see Patrick O'Flaherty, *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933* (St. John's: Long Beach Press, 2005), 89-92.

45 O'Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 94.

46 Rebecca Faye Ralph, "A Sectarian Solution: An Examination of the Development of Denominational Education in Newfoundland, 1836-1934" (PhD diss., University of Calgary, 2019).



mercantile community, usually supportive of the Tory party, charged that the railway would lead to financial ruin. In the 1882 campaign, Whiteway directed his appeal to workers, promising “to raise the working class to their proper position in the body politic.”<sup>47</sup> Victorious in that campaign, a failed railway contract and renewed sectarianism soon after sent voters back to the polls. On St. Stephen Day, 1883, Harbour Grace again erupted in violence when members of the Loyal Orange Lodge, attempting to march through the Catholic quarter, encountered Catholics intent on keeping the parade out of their neighbourhood.<sup>48</sup> Five men were killed and another 17 injured in the confrontation. The violence did not occur during a campaign, but it precipitated one that thrust sectarianism to the forefront once again. When the 19 charged in the Harbour Grace incident were acquitted, many in Whiteway’s administration bolted to the opposition to create the Reform party. Robert Thorburn led the Reform party into the campaign, promising “no amalgamation with the Roman Catholics” and, in the words of Hiller, “beating the Orange drum.” It was a Protestant Rights’ platform, and Thorburn won a healthy majority.<sup>49</sup>

After a few years in political exile, Whiteway returned, not as a Conservative, but as the leader of a new Liberal party. An estimated 3,000 people attended a St. John’s rally to celebrate his return, with marching bands, fireworks, and a huge torch-light parade. As Kurt Korneski notes, Whiteway understood “the new political realities and the appeal that railway development had among Newfoundland’s workers.” In the campaign that followed he presented himself as “the apostle of progress and the leader of the workingman’s party.” Banners surrounded him, promising “Progress,” “Labour and Good Wages,” and “No More Emigration.” He won the 1889 campaign, and again embraced the railway and development of the interior. Whiteway’s

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47 Cited in J.K. Hiller, “Sir William Vallance Whiteway,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/whiteway\\_william\\_vallance\\_13E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/whiteway_william_vallance_13E.html).

48 Willeen G. Keough, “Contested Terrains: Ethnic and Gendered Spaces in the Harbour Grace Affray,” *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (March 2009): 29–70.

49 Pat Collins, *The Harbour Grace Affray: St Stephen’s Day 1883* (St. John’s: DRC Publishing, 2011) and quoted in J.K. Hiller, “Sir Robert Thorburn,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/thorburn\\_robert\\_13E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/thorburn_robert_13E.html).

success demonstrated a considerable “skill at navigating a political landscape in which class-based populism was increasingly important.”<sup>50</sup>

The campaign promise of jobs through infrastructure spending and megaprojects had arrived to stay. The introduction of the secret ballot in 1887 also ushered in a new approach to voting and, indeed, campaigning. Politicians and elites no longer knew for sure how citizens voted and were less able to directly intimidate voters. Campaign platforms took on additional importance as politicians had to earn support through the presentation of attractive policies and effective campaigning. The coverage of campaign speeches in newspapers grew, and public funds were lavished on the electorate to enhance the likelihood of re-election. Such tactics, however, were sometimes taken too far, as Whiteway discovered and another prime minister (Sir Richard Squires) would learn later on. Although re-elected in the 1893 campaign, Whiteway and 17 of his caucus were charged with illegal use of public funds during the campaign and forced to resign. Although the Liberals had won, the Conservatives soon found themselves holding power until new elections in 1894 returned the Liberals to office once again.<sup>51</sup>

By 1900 campaign issues had become largely predictable: resource development, the railway, relations with the United States and Canada, spending on poor relief, and the state of financial management. So, too, was the tenor of campaigns established. As S.J.R. Noel has noted, campaigns saw the influence of railway owners and “a new class of self-made men” that included successful outport merchants, established St. John’s lawyers, and a new breed of small business owners. They were “all tough-minded, able, [and] more than a little ruthless.” Most had political ambitions and they imbued campaigns with a certain political hucksterism.<sup>52</sup> In the 1900 campaign, the railway backed the opposition against Liberal Robert Bond, who vowed to revise a contract for managing the railway that the Conservatives had negotiated with the Reid

50 Kurt Korieski, *Conflicted Colony: Critical Episodes in Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland and Labrador* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 95–6.

51 J.K. Hiller, “The Railway and Local Politics in Newfoundland, 1870–1901,” in *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. James Hiller and Peter Neary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 137–9; Hiller, “The Trinity Bay Election Trial, 1894: Electioneering and Local Government,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 215–29.

52 S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 103, 55–58.

Company just before the campaign began.<sup>53</sup> The Reids contributed handsomely to the Tories, offering transportation for candidates who supported them and even providing candidates in some districts. In a few instances, Reid supporters were nominated as Independents or Independent Liberals to confuse voters and split the Liberal vote. One commentator noted that the press wrote of nothing but the campaign. Voters were engaged.<sup>54</sup>

Bond won and remained premier until the 1908 campaign against Edward Morris's People's Party. Each won 18 seats. Bond campaigned on his record, waging a modest campaign.<sup>55</sup> It was a tactical mistake: the price of fish had declined due to overproduction, poor quality, and competition in the foreign markets. At the same time, the price of imports, particularly flour and other staples, increased. Bond's Liberals fell out of favour. His attempts to characterize Morris of being in the pocket of the Reid Railway Company and secretly working for Confederation had little impact. Morris, on the other hand, embraced a new style of aggressive campaigning, perhaps ushering in the era of political hucksterism masquerading as new political leadership. He made 30 promises ranging from higher widows' allowances to old age pensions to new schools and hospitals to new railway branch lines while vowing to lower taxation. In his campaign manifesto and in rallies across the island, he expressed his emphatic opposition to Confederation. Newfoundland's "true mission," he said, was to "work out her own destiny, independent of Canada."<sup>56</sup> Morris had clever slogans – "Bond's Day is Done" and "No More Bondage" – and claimed victory when only 218 of the 96,296 votes cast separated the two parties.<sup>57</sup> An intense struggle for power ensued, and the House of Assembly could not agree upon a speaker. In the run-off campaign Confederation was a major issue, although both party leaders loudly renounced it. The tactic was dog-whistle politics: Governor Ralph C. Williams wrote a politician often raises the Confederation issue "not because he really fears confederation as a living issue, but simply to score a political point against his adversary . . . as a

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53 For Bond's career, see, James K. Hiller, *Robert Bond: A Political Biography* (St. John's: ISER, 2019).

54 Ted Rowe, *Robert Bond: The Greatest Newfoundlander* (St. John's: Creative Publishing, 2017), 114–17.

55 *Manifesto of the Right Hon. Sir Robert Bond, P.C., K.C.M.G., Premier, 1908* (St. John's: Liberal Party, 1908), 1.

56 For an excellent overview of the election, see Hiller, *Robert Bond*, 331–9 as well as *Evening Chronicle* (St. John's), 5 October 1908.

57 *Daily News*, 21 April 1909, and Rowe, *Robert Bond*, 167–8.

Judas who would sell his country.”<sup>58</sup> It was an inauspicious campaign for Bond, one of Newfoundland’s great politicians. He was continually heckled, and the low point came on 30 April. While ascending a wharf at Western Bay where men, women, and children had gathered, he was pushed into the harbour by a group urged on by John C. Crosbie, St. John’s merchant and People’s Party candidate.<sup>59</sup> The 52-year-old Bond, like many Newfoundlanders, could not swim; he was quickly retrieved from the water – soaked, angry, and embarrassed.<sup>60</sup> Morris prevailed with 26 seats to Bond’s 10.

On the evening of the 1908 election, St. John’s-born William Coaker, then farming in Dildo Run, Notre Dame Bay, met with a small group of fishers in Herring Neck to launch the Fishermen’s Protective Union (FPU). Coaker would remain a dominant player in campaigns for nearly three decades. He championed the aspirations of fishers, who demanded a greater share of the wealth that came from their labour, but his political success was fleeting.<sup>61</sup> In the 1913 campaign, he and Bond forged a shaky alliance. Bond re-entered public life because he worried about the state of politics in the dominion: it had become “so debased, so low, so dishonest that there is not a fraction of an inducement for anyone of self-respect to have anything to do with it.”<sup>62</sup> For him, Morris’s railway branch line policy and other extravagant and reckless expenditures had “grave peril” for Newfoundland’s future. The railway, however, had become all the rage – a symbol of modernity and progress, especially for the new class of self-made men and professionals who supported Morris. Building community connections to the main line added to the colony’s burdensome debt that then stood at more than \$22 million.<sup>63</sup> The 1913 campaign was a minimalist one for Bond, however, and tempered with realism; his promises were few. He missed the final rally in St. John’s. His campaign manifesto noted that “the serious financial embarrassment brought about by the waste and extravagance of the present [Morris] Government renders

58 Ralph Williams, *How I Became a Governor* (London: John Murray, 1913), 424.

59 Melvin Baker, “Sir John Chalker Crosbie,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 16, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2016, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/crosbie\\_john\\_chalker\\_16E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/crosbie_john_chalker_16E.html).

60 See also O’Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 243–4.

61 On this point, see Melvin Baker, “Challenging the ‘Merchants’ Domain’: William Coaker and the Price of Fish, 1908–1919,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 189–226 as well as Sean T. Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts: National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914–34* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2013).

62 Quoted in Rowe, *Robert Bond*, 180. See also G. Panting, “‘The People’ in Politics,” *Newfoundland Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (1967): 15–18.

63 See Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, 103–5.

it impossible for the finances of the Colony to respond to further demands [promises] at this time.”<sup>64</sup> He promised that, if elected, he would begin a “thorough Expert Examination into the financial condition of the Colony, with a view to establishing its finances on a sound basis” while embarking on “a sane and judicious expenditure of the Colony’s revenues.”<sup>65</sup> Morris waged another aggressive campaign, especially in constituencies up for grabs along the south coast and on the Avalon Peninsula, and ignored warnings about public spending to make a long list of promises. The turnout was among the highest ever but the outcome no surprise: the People’s Party prevailed but Bond’s call for an expert review of the dominion’s fiscal capacity gathered momentum over subsequent years, an indication of the severity of the problem. Bond also expressed concern about the tenor of the campaign, notably the “use of sectarian tactics in some Roman Catholic areas.”<sup>66</sup> Bond had had enough of campaigns and politics: he retired permanently to his country home in Whitbourne.

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought temporary prosperity but it also brought much heartbreak to Newfoundland, especially when the Newfoundland Regiment suffered catastrophic losses at Beaumont Hamel on 1 July 1916. A new nationalism emerged from the war and politicians, such as Richard Squires, leader of the Liberal Reform Party, adopted war imagery in the 1919 campaign, narrating his party as a “body of young, enthusiastic Newfoundlanders who are prepared to go ‘Over the Top,’ and ‘Do their bit’ for the country . . . just as our fellow-countrymen, the boys of khaki and blue did their bit on field and flood for Homeland and Empire.”<sup>67</sup> The campaign had been forced when finance minister Michael Cashin moved a non-confidence motion in his Unionist government, which was seconded by the prime minister. The government fell, and Cashin led the People’s Party into the campaign. Like Bond, he promised voters sound fiscal management and good stewardship of natural resources; but Squires, in an alliance with Coaker, and with the promise to vigorously pursue a policy of state-supported industrial development, fisheries reform, and to cleanse “the public life of the Colony from corruption and graft,” won 24 of the 36 seats. That both parties expressed concern with the dominion’s finances and the state of politics in the country

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64 Quoted in Hiller, *Robert Bond*, 403.

65 *Evening Telegram*, 4 October 1913.

66 Quoted in Hiller, *Robert Bond*, 408.

67 Quoted in Blake and Baker, *Where Once They Stood*, 140-1.

was foreboding, but little changed after the campaign. Moreover, the war had been expensive and, with the cost of the railway, the country's debt grew to \$42 million by 1919. A few years later the fiscal situation worsened when the government purchased the bankrupt Newfoundland Railway.<sup>68</sup>

The 1920s marked the beginnings of particularly difficult and divisive times in the dominion, and it was reflected in the election campaigns of the period. In 1923, the Conservative campaign criticized Squires for policies that "dragged down this country from the heights of prosperity to the depths of adversity and reduced our people from a state of comfort and contentment to one of abject misery and utter distress." The public debt then stood at \$60 million, or \$240 per person, and servicing charges amounted to nearly \$15 per capita.<sup>69</sup> Squires promised support for further economic development, including a new pulp and paper mill on the west coast, and won a handsome majority. He was forced to resign within weeks, however, amid allegations that he had misappropriated public funds for electioneering purposes and personal profit. A subsequent investigation by British barrister, Thomas Hollis Walker, uncovered "gross mismanagement," noting that politicians had exploited the situation around relief and other public expenditures "to further their political aims."<sup>70</sup> Squires was arrested on 22 April 1924, and charged with larceny, prompting a new campaign. On 2 June, Walter Monroe's oddly named Liberal-Conservative Progressive Party was elected on a campaign pledge to "Clean up; keep clean and give a square deal to all." It was a small step back from Squires's political hucksterism.<sup>71</sup>

By then, many were complaining about the "terrible dearth of political leaders" in the country.<sup>72</sup> In a public lecture in St. John's just before the 1924 campaign, Alfred Morine, a politician of dubious distinction, stated democracy

68 Hiller, *Newfoundland Railway*; Hiller, "The Politics of Newsprint: The Newfoundland Pulp and Paper Industry, 1915-1939," *Acadiensis* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 3-25; McDonald, "To Each His Own," 106-18.

69 *Daily News*, 11 April 1923.

70 In transmitting the report to the Colonial Office, Governor Allardyce provided a list of examples where Squires and others had mismanaged public expenditures; see Allardyce to J.H. Thomas, 17 March 1924, CO532/275, RPA. For the Hollis Walker Enquiry, see R.M. Elliott, "Newfoundland Politics in the 1920s: The Genesis and Significance of the Hollis Walker Enquiry," in Hiller and Neary, *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 181-204.

71 Quoted in Elliott, "Newfoundland Politics in the 1920s," 195.

72 Quoted in Blake and Baker, *Where Once They Stood*, 147. On this subject, see also James Overton, "Economic Crisis and the End of Democracy: Politics in Newfoundland During the Great Depression," *Labour/Le Travail* 26 (Fall 1990): 85-124.

“has failed to justify its existence” in Newfoundland. Echoing the pre-war sentiments expressed by Bond, he called for the substitution of self-government by a “government by an overlord, in which the governed people should have no voice.” Morine’s comment cut to the quick, as he blamed not just the governing system but also the people and their representatives. They had all failed “to maintain the integrity” of our democracy and have “created in its stead an odious and incapable autocracy, contrary to the spirit of our laws.”<sup>73</sup> Just a year earlier, Bond had responded to entreaties to re-entry public life by saying that politics in Newfoundland had become so diseased that there was only one option: “Plunge in the knife and cut it out, roots and branches.” After Squires’s arrest, Bond added: “The Community is rotten to the core . . . one is ashamed of the conditions of things, heartily ashamed and sorry . . . . My country has a great weakness for charlatans and humbugs and it is now paying to the full for its folly.”<sup>74</sup> A few years later as the fiscal situation further deteriorated and emigration reached historic highs, the St. John’s Methodist College Literary Institute (MCLI) debated whether Newfoundland had borrowed beyond its means.<sup>75</sup> Many blamed the lack of good governance and an inept system of party politics. In 1927, the MCLI debated whether parliamentary governance and the party system should be replaced by an elected non-partisan commission. William Coaker also joined the chorus for change.<sup>76</sup> At the end of fiscal 1928, Newfoundland’s debt stood at more than \$77 million.<sup>77</sup>

Before election day on 29 October 1928, Monroe turned the government over to his cousin and business leader Frederick Alderdice. Meanwhile, Squires had become Grand Master of the Orange Order to help rebuild his reputation and mount a political comeback. He even lured Coaker out of retirement.<sup>78</sup> The political machinations worried Governor Sir William Allardyce. He wrote London that in Newfoundland “with few exceptions men enter politics for what they can make out of it,” and none of the current lot “realize the gravity of the existing financial situation and care less.” Moreover, he noted, citizens have no

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73 *Evening Telegram*, 25 March 1924.

74 Cited in Rowe, *Robert Bond*, 193–5.

75 *Evening Telegram*, 4 March 1927.

76 *Evening Telegram*, 25 March 1927. On the commission idea, see Gene Long, *Suspended State: Newfoundland before Canada* (St. John’s: Breakwater, 1999) and Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World*, 12–43.

77 *Newfoundland Royal Commission 1933, Report*, Cmd. 4480 (London: His Majesty’s Printing Office, 1934), 47.

78 Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, 185.



appetite for retrenchment and continually demand greater public expenditures from their politicians.<sup>79</sup> Would female voters, 25 years of age and older, who, on 9 March 1925, won the right to vote and to stand for election, make a difference?<sup>80</sup> Apparently not. In a promise-laden campaign, the formerly disgraced Squires won 55 per cent of the popular vote and a 16-seat majority. He promised the electorate what it wanted, including further industrial development and state-sponsored investment to create jobs. He attacked the St. John's merchant elite, who he said controlled Monroe and the political system. He even circulated a gramophone recording of one of his campaign speeches.<sup>81</sup> Ninety per cent of eligible women voted and likely contributed to Squires's handsome majority.

### Campaign to suspend democracy

As the Great Depression devastated Newfoundland's economy along with that of many nations, Coaker renewed his call for an elected commission of six men to govern the country for ten years. "There is, in my opinion," he wrote, "no hope of essential change by changing a Liberal Administration for a Tory. Each new administration is a little bit worse than its predecessor."<sup>82</sup> In the words of one historian, "Newfoundland politics were in need of purification."<sup>83</sup> The electorate was disenchanted and angry, and, amidst charges of further corruption in Squires's administration and increasing unemployment, deprivation, and misery, citizens took to the streets on several occasions in 1932. The situation exploded on 5 April. An angry crowd of 10,000 descended on the Colonial Building, the seat of power, demanding higher relief payments and jobs. To maintain order, several thousand citizens were deputized. A week later the British cruiser, *HMS Dragon*, arrived in St. John's harbour.<sup>84</sup> Squires

79 Allardyce to Secretary of State, 9 February 1928, GN1.3.A, box 139, dispatch 115/28, RPA. See also Sir William Horwood to L.S. Amery, 16 August 1928, GN1.3.A, box 139, dispatch 689/28, RPA.

80 On suffrage, see Heidi MacDonald, "Woman's Suffrage and Confederation," *Acadiensis* 46, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2017): 163-76 and Linda Cullen and Marilyn Porter, eds., *Creating This Place: Women, Family, and Class in St. John's, 1990-1950* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).

81 James K. Hiller, "Sir Richard Anderson Squires," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 16, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003-, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/squires\\_richard\\_anderson\\_16E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/squires_richard_anderson_16E.html).

82 *Fishermen's Advocate* (Port Union), 27 December 1929.

83 Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts*, 275.

84 Doug Letto, *Newfoundland's Last Prime Minister: Frederick Alderdice and the Death of a Nation* (Portugal Cove-St. Philip's, NL: Boulder Publications, 2014), 58-9.



dissolved the House of Assembly and set a general election for 11 June. By then, Coaker had had enough: "If a man with a soul encased in steel, experienced and not under forty years old, appeared on the political horizon in this country today as a Mussolini I would support him with all my strength."<sup>85</sup> The situation had reached a breaking point.

The campaign would be the last for 15 years. Squires remained the political huckster, campaigning on that elusive goal of balanced budgets, bonuses for the fisheries, and industrial and agricultural development as he had in three previous campaigns. He had to realize the dominion was broke. Meanwhile, Alderdice, now leader of the Newfoundland United Party, campaigned, as he had in 1928, as a plain man of business. Supported by Water Street merchants, he promised to "repair the damages wrought by the misgovernment, misconduct and tragedies of the past few years, and give the country a safe and sane administration of its affairs, with fair play to all and favor to none." He also promised voters that, if elected, he would immediately appoint a committee to consider "the desirability and feasibility of placing the country under a form of commission government for a period of years," although he assured voters he would ask their approval before doing so. Doug Letto's examination of press coverage of the 1932 campaign shows that the electorate was engaged. They liked Alderdice's solution. He won in a landslide: 25 of 27 seats.<sup>86</sup>

### Post-Confederation campaigns

The next campaign for the House of Assembly would come only in 1949, after Newfoundland and Labrador joined Canada.<sup>87</sup> It marked the beginning of the Smallwood era and shows how effectively Smallwood brought into his party many who had campaigned vociferously against union. Some from the Responsible Government League joined Canada's Progressive Conservative party. From 1949 to 1966 the outcomes of campaigns were rarely in doubt, but they are important as they reveal a particular political culture. The electoral system heavily favoured rural areas and fishers, which Smallwood

85 Quoted in Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts*, 293.

86 Letto, *Newfoundland's Last Prime Minister*, 55-80; James K. Hiller, "Corruption and Collapse, or Did Squires Do It?" in *Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences. Symposium March 2000* (papers and presentations), ed. Garfield Fizzard (St. John's: Newfoundland Historical Society, 2001), 90.

87 On post-Confederation elections, see Parzival Copes, "The Fishermen's Vote in Newfoundland," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne De Science Politique* 3, no. 4 (December 1970): 579-604.

was able to mobilize through various means, including gerrymandering and a patron-client relationship.<sup>88</sup> The Liberal party dominated in both federal and provincial campaigns, and Smallwood's political machinations were designed to exhibit political stability and his leadership in Canada's newest province. They demonstrated to potential investors, to the federal government, to elites in Newfoundland, and to voters who was in charge.

Campaigns took on an element of nationalism once again, especially in 1959. Smallwood launched an election campaign after he decertified the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) during a loggers' strike and following a major quarrel with Prime Minister John Diefenbaker over Term 29 of the Terms of Union. The Terms of Union called for a review of Newfoundland's financial situation after eight years of union. Ottawa had refused to send additional RCMP officers during the IWA strike, fearing they would be used as strike-breakers and Diefenbaker refused to make the financial payments to the province that Smallwood sought. Smallwood's campaign embraced a nationalist rhetoric: first, portraying the IWA as a sinister outside organization intent on destroying the peace and tranquility of Newfoundland, and second, reminding the electorate that the prime minister and the people of Canada "just don't understand Newfoundland." He had declared three days of official mourning to protest the federal policy on Term 29, lowered flags to half-staff, draped doors at government building in black crepe, and dressed himself in black as if attending a funeral. These were tactics that other premiers would later emulate. In the campaign that ended on 20 August 1959, Smallwood championed Newfoundland's victimization, its exceptionalism, and its betrayal by outsiders and called upon Newfoundlanders to "Stand up for Newfoundland. Stand up for Newfoundland's rights" as Bennett had in 1869 and Peckford and Williams would later on. In that campaign, Smallwood won 31 of 36 seats and nearly 60 per cent of the vote.<sup>89</sup>

Liberal campaigns generally were presented as festivals of democracy and of citizen engagement. Smallwood would often fly into communities, accompanied by the local candidate, to be greeted by leading citizens, and then mingle briefly with residents, especially children. If the schools were open,

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88 Gordon O. Rothney, "The Denominational Basis of Representation in the Newfoundland Assembly, 1919-1962," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science / Revue Canadienne D'Economie Et De Science Politique* 28, no. 4 (November 1962): 564-70; Copes, "Fishermen's Vote in Newfoundland," 585-600.

89 See Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish*, 49-57.

he generally declared a holiday. Campaign success was about how smoothly they unfolded and how uneventful the challenge to the Liberal candidate. The outcome was not fixed, as voters had to make a choice at the ballot box. However, we need further research on how campaigns were engineered and managed to achieve the desired result. In Smallwood's case, campaigns were symbols of a manipulative and authoritative regime, and they were about legitimatizing his command. Smallwood's string of campaigns (both federal and provincial) did not meet much opposition until 1968, when the Liberals lost all but one of seven constituencies in the federal campaign that year. The province was undergoing considerable transformation and Smallwood's long run was about to end.

The 1971 campaign, which also saw the emergence of the New Labrador Party, was a virtual tie; but in a run-off in 1972, the Progressive Conservatives won a resounding majority and held the government until 1989. During much of that period, Peckford was premier and he, too, often donned the mantle of a Newfoundland nationalist, confronting, notably, Pierre Trudeau over ownership of the offshore oil resources and Labrador hydroelectricity and control of the fisheries. His campaigns were scrappy, and he put to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians a simple question: are you going to join in the fight for our rights to take control over what is rightfully ours, or are you going to support the give-away party (i.e., the Liberals)?<sup>90</sup> It was a campaign style with a long history in the province and one that continued with his successors, notably Danny Williams, who was a master of spectacle and performance, especially with his removal of the Canadian flag on provincial buildings in a 2004 fight with Ottawa over offshore revenue-sharing.<sup>91</sup> Even Liberal leader Clyde Wells, who, like Williams left a successful legal practice for the party leadership and the premier's job, excited voters with his confrontational relationship with Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and several provincial premiers – not over ownership of resources but over the equality of the provinces. He sought a strong national government able to assist in the development and well-being of Newfoundland and Labrador at a time when

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90 For that period of Newfoundland politics, see Robert Paine, *Ayatollahs & Turkey Trots: Political Rhetoric in the New Newfoundland* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1981).

91 CBC News, "Canadian Flags Ordered Down," 23 December 2004, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/canadian-flags-ordered-down-williams-1.505946>.

premiers and the prime minister were embracing greater decentralization of power in Canada.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

The 2021 campaign lacked the passion and intensity that have characterized many others historically. Without the pandemic, the delay in voting that it precipitated, and the mail-in only ballots, the campaign would have been unremarkable. This is especially surprising as Newfoundland and Labrador face a staggering debt and struggles to deal with the fiscal millstone of the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric megaproject. Add to that a shrinking population, a burgeoning health care crisis (especially in remote and outport communities), and an impending green revolution that will likely scuttle the province's oil prospects and one hope for financial security. A few lone voices have even pondered the possibility of downgrading Newfoundland and Labrador from province to territory.<sup>93</sup> Given the realities, one might have imagined the 2021 campaign as igniting the passion and intensity – even the political hucksterism – that have characterized so many campaigns since 1832. Not so. It is difficult, though, to dismiss 2021 as a unique campaign and blame the pandemic for the “turn away” from democracy by a significant portion of eligible voters. Voter participation was the lowest ever, but the previous low was in the preceding campaign in 2015, suggesting there may be a trend occurring there. As has been shown above, Newfoundland struggled with a sustainable democracy in the 1840s and again in the 1930s. Even in the pandemic election in the United States, Americans voted in record numbers, and the voter turnout exceeded 66 per cent in New Brunswick's pandemic election.

Election campaigns are one venue to define and debate the hopes and aspirations of a people. Although democracy was launched in Newfoundland in 1832 without a vigorous debate among competing interests, and there have been periods of weak political competition, campaigns have also been passionate

92 See Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish*; Alex Marland, “The 2015 Newfoundland and Labrador Election: Liberals Have a Ball as PC Party Suffers from Post-Williams Hangover,” *Canadian Political Science Review* 9, no. 3 (2016): 72–98; Marland, “A Race for Second Place: The 2011 Provincial Election in Newfoundland and Labrador,” *Canadian Political Science Review* 6, nos. 2–3 (2012): 117–30; Marland, “Masters of Our Own Destiny: The Nationalist Evolution of Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 42 (April 2010): 155–81; and Marland, “Voting in Newfoundland and Labrador,” 219–37.

93 Edward Riche, “Feeling a Bit Territorial: We Might Not Be That Good at the Whole Province Thing,” CBC News, 10 October 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/riche-pov-province-territory-1.5753353>.

and divisive – even to the point of violence among competing political interests and, sometimes, even within the same party. There have been fierce and determined campaigns over union with Canada, state support for the railways, and economic development and how to manage the financial crisis during the 1930s. Campaigns have pivoted on the issue of protecting Newfoundland and Labrador from external, meddlesome entities, notably the imperial government in London and, after 1949, the federal government in Ottawa. Voters have been intensely engaged in various campaigns and voted in large numbers to have their voices heard. Leaders such as Charles Fox Bennett, Robert Bond, and Richard Squires have enlivened the political debate as have Brian Peckford and Danny Williams more recently. In some respects Andrew Furey attempted to invoke this tradition, when he said in his 2021 victory speech “To continue as premier is to stand as a fighter, in a proud legacy of fighters, for Newfoundland and Labrador.”<sup>94</sup> But this was weak nationalist rhetoric, and it did not reflect the tenor of his lacklustre campaign. Instead he positioned himself as best able to negotiate a deal with his friends in Ottawa. It was a pale comparison with the nationalism of Carson, Bennett, Peckford, Williams, and even Smallwood. 2021 was a campaign of hopelessness – a cap-in-hand campaign – not of a new vision for a struggling political community. It lacked the emotion that had been at the heart of many earlier campaigns. In its simplest form, the ballot box question, if there was one, was which leader could best negotiate a bailout from Ottawa. The question was, one might argue, a way for the electorate and political leaders to renounce their own responsibility for the decisions of political elites who have steered the provincial state in recent years and those that wished to do so after 2021. The major problems facing Newfoundland and Labrador are internal; they were in 1832 when the first nationalists emerged, and they remain so. The pivotal question for the province and its people is how best to manage the economy and pursue policies for a secure and positive future so that the province can stand independently without bailouts from the national government. The July 2021 promise of a \$5.2 billion deal with the federal government ahead of the 2021 federal election to help cover the costs of the troubled Muskrat Falls project is not the wind of change that the province needs; it merely leaves one wondering if the province is moving forward or, indeed, heading back to the previous status quo that saddled it with the huge

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94 CBC News, “Liberals Claim Slim Majority in Newfoundland and Labrador, As Voters Tap Furey to Lead,” 27 March 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/nl-election-results-2021-1.5966912>.

debt in the first place. The solution does not point to a new politics or vibrant democratic debates about the path forward.

The most remarkable feature of the 2021 campaign is voter apathy,<sup>95</sup> perhaps the greatest threat to a functioning and dynamic democracy. We can only wonder if the pandemic election served to further undermine confidence, first, in government institutions and in politicians and, second, in democracy itself. Historically, political campaigns have mobilized interests and they have often elicited the emotion one expects leaders to evoke. Emotion is an effective way to build consensual values and mobilize crucial party supporters while attracting the uncommitted. Many campaigns since 1832 had been about mobilizing citizens anew.<sup>96</sup> Yet a comment heard frequently, especially in the 2021 campaign, was that political parties must work together for the good of the province. Partisanship is often dismissed as we seek tranquility in campaigns. Doing so signifies the end of the vigorous, emotional debates that once marked campaigns in the province. It also portends the end of politics and, with the low 2021 voter turnout and the increasing disinterest in the political campaigns, Newfoundland and Labrador might well lead the way to the end of politics in Canada.

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95 This article does not consider the role of the open-line phone-in show which is very popular in Newfoundland and Labrador and remains one form of citizenship engagement.

96 Some of those ideas are discussed in Richard Johnston et. al, *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 77-80.