

2 Reflections on the Governance in Newfoundland and Labrador Project

Lisa Moore



Lisa Moore reflects on the ingredients for a Democracy Boil-up. #NLpoli #DemocraticReformNL

When Alex Marland invited me to co-edit a book on governance in Newfoundland and Labrador, I immediately said yes. I recognized it as a unique opportunity to learn a tremendous amount about the inner workings of governance from a wide variety of voices. These voices would be drawn from across the province and across the country, both from within the university and from community contributors.

Democracy, as it has manifested in my life, has meant the ability to speak without censorship and to be able to listen to the voices of others, to have access to multi-voiced and complex debate in order to create equality throughout society, both locally and globally.

I already knew that democracy is open-ended and evolving, in a constant state of disruption and realignment; an amorphous state, subject to shape-shifting, acted upon by a variety of disparate forces, of which governance is only one.

But I also knew that voting is not just a right but a privilege. I wanted to learn what a vote could do. I wanted to learn how the machinery of governance works here in Newfoundland and Labrador and if it might be improved.

I am a fiction writer and most of my reading consists of literary fiction. Though I read fiction for pleasure, as most people do, I also read fiction in

order to “keep up with” or to discover new stories, those stories from voices frequently overlooked, or outright silenced; those voices that articulate experiences very different from my own.

I try to read outside the literary canon to find the wildest innovation in form. New voices forge new modes of expression and narrative and result in new ways of thinking about the world. Hence, much of what I know about how the political touches down in our lives has been informed by this reading.

Consider the distinctive voice found in local literature — which, not so very long ago, belonged decidedly outside the canon — and how it reflects the political.

I’ve learned from Bernice Morgan’s *Random Passage* about the compromised and vulnerable position of women who came from outport Newfoundland to work in the grand houses of the merchant class in St. John’s in the mid-1800s. Michael Crummey’s *Sweetland* reflects the pain caused by contemporary resettlement programs, the mobilization of Newfoundland populations to Fort Mac for work, and the instability inherent in those jobs. Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen* takes into account the trauma of poverty in St. John’s and the cracks in our justice system. Ramona Dearing’s short story, “An Apology,” from her story collection, *So Beautiful*, explores the trauma inflicted through the child sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic priests and the Christian Brothers in this province, and the incredible political power those institutions welded to create a systemic silence and denial throughout many sectors of Newfoundland and Labrador society.

The voices of fiction show us the way in which the political is *felt* in our lives; how we are shaped by, among other things, the social and political forces at work in society, how those forces infiltrate our most intimate moments and alter our notions of identity. Art is always political because it transforms us by awakening our imaginations and giving us access to the other’s voice or point of view.

Alex and I began working together on this project at a moment when the American presidential election campaign was heating up and political storms in Germany and France were being fuelled by racist rhetoric, when the reverberating shock of Brexit was rippling through Europe and manifesting in unexpected ways in North America, and when the protests surrounding Muskrat Falls were reaching a fever pitch. While I was reading the incoming essays from academics and community contributors, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, an event that surprised everyone, including, many surmised, Trump himself. How could such a

historical and monumental shift in global politics not have been foreseen? Had democracy morphed so dramatically, overnight, that few political pundits could predict this shift? It seemed that governance, perhaps everywhere, was due for an overhaul.

Alex and I agreed that essays in the collection needed to offer “fixes” to local problems of governance that would be actionable no matter which party was in power. We agreed to encourage authors to identify fixes that would not require extra expenditures.

And as the essays rolled in, the breadth and depth of the subjects they addressed inspired excited discussions between us: the positive and negative repercussions of Newfoundland nationalism, the obfuscating lens of charisma in leadership, the under-representation of minorities in governance, the ethics of party fundraising, breastfeeding in the House of Assembly, and what role inadequate governance had played in the province’s financial crisis — to name a just few of the topics.

We discussed the role of social media in the branding of political parties and, as one essay inspired, the history of democracy going back to the Byzantines, and the notion of real-time virtual democracy, as suggested by another author, who playfully described a sort of fit-bit bracelet or “democracy app” into which individuals might input political choices, to be aggregated to provide real-time democratic opinions.

Early in the development of this project I embarked on a cruise from Newfoundland, up the coast of Labrador to Greenland. On the way I visited the resettled communities of Hebron and Ramah. Inuit were resettled from Hebron in the 1950s and were torn away from their land and their way of life, and they had withered in the face of everything they lost. There is a plaque in Hebron with the text of an apology from then-Premier Danny Williams to the Inuit of Labrador and another plaque of the Inuit response, which accepts the apology graciously but does not deny the irreparable damage the government knowingly inflicted.

It was on this trip in the Arctic that I met the Inuk artist Billy Gauthier. I’d had the opportunity to listen to a lecture he gave on the ship about his art. Gauthier uses traditional Inuit carving materials, such as bone, antler, tusk, and stone. His iconography is an exploration of traditional and contemporary Inuit life on the land. There are touches of humour, but this work is also charged with a pride about Inuit history, about the knowledge required to hunt and fish, and the desire to protect that knowledge and way of life.

On the way back to the ship from the town of Hebron, Gauthier fished an Arctic char from the water and deftly cut the fish into pieces for everybody on the Zodiac. We ate it raw with the wind in our faces. I was

deeply moved by Billy's generosity and his knowledge about the land and the ease with which he pulled several fish from the sea and shared with us. Later I would learn that he was one of the three hunger strikers protesting the development of the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project who brought the voice of the people of Labrador to the attention of the country.

The social and political climate unfolding in this province as this publication came together was heating up, becoming increasingly tumultuous, charged with political tension. As I read through these submissions, I was keenly aware that we are facing a critical and dire moment in the history of the province. Millions of dollars in spending are being cut in the name of budget austerity. The public sector faces substantial job losses, cuts to health care, and the outsourcing of public services, along with cuts to services in rural areas.

If ever there were a time for the citizens of Newfoundland and Labrador to ask what kind of life we want in this province, it is now. What is important to us? Why do we live here? What do we need? How do we ensure those needs are met by local governance?

Throughout the many discussions that occurred in the gathering of these essays, with colleagues, community contributors, friends, and fellow writers, many people voiced the opinion that Newfoundland and Labrador is most definitely not an easy place to govern. The province covers a large land mass and a very large number of small and aging communities in need of expensive services — snow clearing, road maintenance, ferry services, and access to health care, education, and clean drinking water — just to name a few services the government must deliver.

I entered into the project of working on this collection of essays in this moment of provincial crisis because the project offered an opportunity to explore democracy and its workings, just when this province most requires a healthy democracy.

These essays capture governance in Newfoundland and Labrador at a particular historical moment and they advocate for necessary improvements. Taken as a whole they illuminate the cogs and wheels of a complex machine, as well as the fractures and broken parts. This collection asks whose voices are represented and, more specifically, how can we eliminate the gaps and silences in these voices; how can they be amplified?

I read the essays hungrily, sometimes well into the night, and looked forward to meeting with Alex to discuss the ideas presented here. The more I read and the more we spoke, the more urgent the project began to feel.

Each of these essays — whether examining the atrophying organ of the press, addressing the unequal gender balance in governance, proclaiming

the need for representation for those with disabilities, exploring the lack of Indigenous representation in government, or discussing how the education system might prepare youth for political debate — felt like a hammer, and made of governance the nail. There are essays concerned with questions about when to employ direct democracy, and how individual citizens can develop democracy in our daily lives. These essays call for a provincial democracy that allows for a variety of voices and the co-operation of all parties to work together within all levels of government to successfully navigate these difficult economic times.

By the time we had read the essays and discussed them thoroughly, knowing about how governance works began to matter to me very much, and I came to understand more than ever what a resource we have in the rich diversity of voices in the province. The issues these essays illuminate are urgent, the solutions imaginative. I sincerely hope the House of Assembly's All-Party Committee on Democratic Reform gives these complex and articulate arguments the scrutiny they deserve and implements the suggestions offered here. ★

3 How Democratic Government Works in Newfoundland and Labrador

Alex Marland



Here's a primer on how government works in Newfoundland and Labrador. #NLpoli #DemocraticReformNL

Some people have a greater awareness of how government works, or of what democracy entails. The following primer about the nuts and bolts of politics and public administration is offered to assist readers with their comprehension of democratic government in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Context

In many ways, Newfoundland and Labrador's democracy is outstanding, given the relative accessibility of the political elite and the government's general responsiveness to public demands. It has come a long way from the political corruption and dire financial circumstances that led to protestors storming the Colonial Building in 1932 and ultimately the Commission of Government era, a period from 1934 to 1949 that entailed a ruling council comprised of a governor, three British commissioners, and three Newfoundland commissioners. Elections were put on hold throughout that period — an unusual case of the people's elected representatives voluntarily relinquishing democratic government. It would be misguided to assume that the prospects of bankruptcy, or the reasons for it, were all that was wrong. The Commission observed many embedded problems with governance, such as the expectation of religious discrimination in the setting of electoral

districts, in making appointments to cabinet, and during hiring in the public service.¹ In the ensuing decades, power was concentrated in Premier Joey Smallwood and the provincial Liberal Party, and it is widely understood that he operated a “one-man government.”² Other charismatic men — principally Brian Peckford, Clyde Wells, Brian Tobin, and Danny Williams — followed suit. The influence of religious institutions persisted well into the 1990s, with churches administering the denominational school system, a matter that was settled after two divisive referendums. Government is now a large, professional organization compared with its former self, and yet chronic challenges persist.

In other ways, Newfoundland and Labrador’s system of government is sorely in need of repair. In recent years considerable political and financial instability has constituted problems with the system itself, rather than with any given individual(s). It is a vicious circle: electors reward leaders who respond to public demands, yet short-term thinking results in inefficiencies and inequity, leading to crisis and civil unrest. The upheaval undermines public confidence in government institutions and political leaders. And these are only the big-picture issues that the public knows about!

Warning: Democracy Is Messy

Reformers should bear in mind that everyone seems to love democracy and despise politics. A large gap exists between expectations for democracy and the realities of what it delivers. A sizable number of citizens are disengaged, with many Canadians seeing themselves as outsiders.³ As much as people might like the idealism of democracy, the struggle for power and influence inevitably results in a clash of opposing interests and frustration with systems and processes.

At the simplest level, a democratic system of government involves little more than the following: non-violent elections, a legitimate choice of options, citizens having the ability to determine who should be in power, and voters electing people to represent them in a legislature.⁴ Since Newfoundland and Labrador joined Canada in 1949, provincial elections have been held every four years or so as citizens elect people to represent them in the House of Assembly, from which an executive is formed. The province’s election campaigns may get heated, but they are bloodless affairs, and when a change of government occurs it is a peaceful transition. This does not necessarily mean that smooth governing will result, as captured by the brilliant title of *Telegram* reporter James McLeod’s book, *Turmoil as Usual*, within which he summarizes absurd situations that contributed to the latest bout of political instability.⁵

Is democracy as we experience it really the best that Newfoundland and Labrador can do? Are our democratic expectations practical and grounded? The truth is that democracy is highly problematic wherever it is practised. While few citizens are familiar with the theories of democracy in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, among others, much can be learned from them, as well as comparatively newer material and ways of thinking. Readers of classical and more recent theorists quickly learn democracy can be messy. The problems are nicely captured by Winston Churchill's famous quip that democracy is the worst form of government — except for all the others.⁶ It is better than the alternative of authoritarianism or totalitarianism, but again, it is messy, as American political scientist John Mueller emphasizes:

. . . democracy has characteristically produced societies that have been humane, flexible, productive, and vigorous, and under this system leaders have somehow emerged who — at least in comparison with your average string of kings or czars or dictators — have generally been responsive, responsible, able, and dedicated. On the other hand, democracy didn't come out looking the way many theorists and idealists imagined it could or should. It has been characterized by a great deal of unsightly and factionalized squabbling by self-interested, short-sighted people and groups, and its policy outcomes have often been the result of a notably unequal contest over who could most adroitly pressure and manipulate the system. Even more distressingly, the citizenry seems disinclined to display anything remotely resembling the deliberative qualities many theorists have been inclined to see as a central requirement for the system to work properly. Indeed, far from becoming the attentive, if unpolished, public policy wonks espoused in many of the theories and images, real people in real democracies often display an almost monumental lack of political interest and knowledge. . . . But it must be acknowledged that democracy is, and always will be, distressingly messy, clumsy and disorderly, and that in it people are permitted loudly and irritatingly to voice opinions that are clearly erroneous and even dangerous. Moreover, decision making in democracies is often muddled, incoherent, and slow, and the results are sometimes exasperatingly foolish, short-sighted, irrational, and incoherent.⁷