

The 2015 Newfoundland and Labrador Election: Liberals Have a Ball as PC Party Suffers from Post-Williams Hangover

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Introduction

In 2003, the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party of Newfoundland and Labrador rose to power on the basis of a solid plan, an ideological vision and the populist leadership of Danny Williams. In 2007, the Williams team was returned to government on nearly 70 percent of the vote, winning 44 of 48 seats, one of the most lopsided election outcomes in Canadian provincial history. When Williams resigned in 2010 he tapped his lieutenant Kathy Dunderdale to be premier. Drama and instability ensued, magnified by tumult possible only in smaller polities clinging to vestiges of elitism. As the PC Party crumbled, the Liberal Party climbed back from the precipice. It maintained a healthy lead in public opinion polls from mid-2013, won by-election after by-election, and attracted donors and floor crossers. Heading into the 2015 election, that the Liberals would form a majority government and that Dwight Ball would become the next premier were foregone conclusions. The campaign, other than its outcome, was uneventful and introduced calm after years of political instability. The real challenge for Premier Ball and the Liberals will be delivering the better tomorrow they promised.

A Very Bad Year: Two PC Leadership Contests and 3½ Premiers in 2014

The PC Party won 37 of 48 seats in the October 2011 provincial election. It marked the first time in the province's history a woman led a party to election victory. Despite the third consecutive PC majority government there were signs of trouble. Cracks in the Tory foundation were masked by a brilliant campaign turning on Premier Dunderdale bringing "new energy" to the role (see Marland 2012). The lack of a leadership contest deprived the party of policy renewal, and its election platform was little more than platitudes lavishing praise on Williams-era accomplishments. Williams feuded publicly with his protégé when she did not bend to his demands (CBC 2011) and the party failed to recruit any heavyweight candidates. The moribund Liberal Party won 6 seats, all in the west, benefiting from the electoral system and the resilience of its brand (but see Bittner and Matthews 2015). That the New Democratic Party (NDP) won 5 seats and placed second in the popular vote, by far its best ever performance, signalled the

willingness of some voters to switch allegiances, particularly in the St. John's area. It was not long before it was clear that the PC administration was long in the tooth.

In an all too common refrain, the most significant policy problem was getting spending under control. Public expectations had risen with growing revenues, powered by offshore oil royalties. A decline in oil production and ballooning budget deficits were projected. Dunderdale was faced with a difficult task, given that Newfoundland's political parties are left-wing on social policy and cluster the centre on economic policy (Kerby and Blidook 2014), reflecting a low political appetite for cutting spending in a society that believes in big government. Drawing the wrath of public sector unions requires resolve, because they tend to be better financed and organized than opposition parties, and the labour movement easily taps into public sympathy. After warning up to 800 public sector layoffs were coming, the Tories backed down in the 2012 budget, opting only to trim 45 temporary positions. Warnings of a billion dollar deficit would also prove to be overly pessimistic. Support for the Dunderdale administration collapsed when the 2013 budget shrunk the government payroll by approximately 1,200 positions, including five percent of its core workforce (Antle 2013). Problems persisted as government budgets were based on rosy economic forecasts, with the 2012 budget forecasting oil at \$124 US, and the 2013 budget using a \$105 estimate. Every dollar in the price of oil is worth approximately \$20 to \$25 million for the provincial government (Roberts 2014), so the budgeting model raised public expectations and failed to deliver. The 2013 budget period saw the party's and Dunderdale's popularity plummet (Table 1). Partisan loyalties were softening, and the NDP was briefly the main beneficiary.

Table 1
Opinion Survey Data, Newfoundland and Labrador Decided Voters (2011 – 2015)

(1) “If a provincial election were held today in NL, which party would you vote for?”

(2) “Which one of the following individuals would you most prefer as Premier of NL?”

(typical margin of error +/-3.5 percent at a 95 percent confidence level)

Month	(1) Party Preference				(2) Leader Preference			
	PC	Lib	NDP	Other	Dunderdale/ Marshall/Davis ¹	Aylward/ Joyce/Ball ²	Michael/ McCurdy ³	DK/NR
Aug. 2011	54	22	24	0	50	16	17	17
Nov. 2011	60	26	13	0	59	21	8	14
Feb. 2012	54	28	18	0	48	22	13	16
May 2012	49	33	18	0	44	23	12	21
Aug. 2012	45	33	22	1	37	31	16	16
Nov. 2012	46	31	23	1	36	29	18	16
Feb. 2013	38	39	22	1	32	33	17	18
May 2013	27	36	37	0	21	24	36	19
Aug. 2013	26	41	33	0	22	21	35	22
Nov. 2013	29	52	19	0	25	36	18	21
Feb. 2014	33	53	13	1	32	38	11	19
May 2014	29	53	16	2	33	38	11	18
Aug. 2014	26	58	15	1	28	40	13	20
Nov. 2014	29	60	10	1	26	46	9	19
Feb. 2015	31	56	13	0	29	47	9	15
May 2015	27	50	22	1	26	43	18	14
Aug. 2015	27	48	25	1	24	42	17	17

¹Kathy Dunderdale was replaced by Tom Marshall on an interim basis on December 3, 2011. Paul Davis became PC leader on September 13, 2014 and Premier on September 26.

² Kevin Aylward was replaced by Dwight Ball on an interim basis on January 3, 2012. Eddie Joyce was interim leader from July 18, 2013 to November 17 when Ball became permanent leader.

³ Lorraine Michael was replaced by Earle McCurdy on March 7, 2015.

Source: Corporate Research Associates Inc. (<http://cra.ca>)

Austerity was accompanied by a number of other controversies. During the 2011 federal campaign, Dunderdale endorsed Stephen Harper, the Conservative leader whom Williams had publicly disparaged and who was wildly unpopular in Newfoundland and Labrador. She delayed reconvening the legislature for months after the provincial election. Opposition and media frustration grew when the government barrelled forward in June 2012 with more restrictive access to information rules. At every turn, PC MHAs were berated for the undemocratic nature of *An Act to Amend the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, commonly known as Bill 29. The government refused constant calls for deeper scrutiny of the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric megaproject and of Nalcor Energy, the Crown corporation. The government backed down over cuts to the Justice department after the legal community voiced objections. Leaked electronic messages revealed the PC caucus and political staffers were disabling

computer controls to enable repeat voting on online media straw polls (Kerby and Marland 2015). All of this contributed to perceptions of a self-interested government.

Trouble within the ranks emerged when long-time PC MHA Tom Osborne (St. John's South) left to sit as an independent, eventually joining the Liberals in September 2013. The next month, Finance Minister Jerome Kennedy suddenly resigned. It came to light that in July the premier's chief of staff had left, one of a number of staff changes in the premier's office during Dunderdale's tenure, a sharp contrast with the stability of the Williams era. Travel claims revealed Kennedy and the chief of staff had returned home early from a summer trade mission to China, allegedly due to in-fighting with the premier (Fitzpatrick 2013). The popularity of the PC Party and its leader continued its decline (Table 1), with each poll generating negative headlines and the sense of a disconnected government. The media pile-on climaxed in early January 2014 when the province endured mass electrical power blackouts during a cold snap, which became known by the Twitter hashtag #DarkNL. Rather than assuring citizens she was on top of the problem, Premier Dunderdale's image of an out of touch elite was boiled down to an oft-repeated soundbite that "We're not in a crisis." It proved to be too much when PC MHA Paul Lane (Mount Pearl South), a former caucus chair, crossed the floor to the Liberals and cited the premier as the reason. She resigned the next day, January 24, barely two years into a majority mandate. Whereas the province was in shock and generally mourned Williams' exit, 81 percent approved of Dunderdale stepping down, a sentiment crossing party lines (CBC 2014a).

Dunderdale's pronouncement that PC stalwart Tom Marshall would be interim premier instilled calm and order. Marshall ruled out interest in seeking the mantle on a permanent basis, and an endearing style briefly ranked him among the country's more popular premiers (Angus Reid Global 2014). That Marshall was on the good side of public sector unions by committing to defined pension plans surely had something to do with this popularity. Likewise, the media and opponents welcomed his decision to initiate an independent review of Bill 29, and to introduce additional oversight of Muskrat Falls. The government would later adopt all of the recommendations of the access to information review committee, chaired by former Liberal Premier Clyde Wells. More specifically, it appeared to mark the beginning of a more open, transparent and publicly accountable era. Nevertheless the road to a new premier would be filled with absurdities.

The first of two PC leadership contests in 2014 attracted three candidates, none of whom were from the party caucus or had House of Assembly experience. The roster was comprised of a fringe candidate who would be expelled by the party in early April for offensive remarks on Twitter; an outspoken fish merchant who was too right-wing for Newfoundland political culture and who dropped out in mid-April when it became clear he was unwanted by the caucus and by Williams; and a low-profile West-coast businessman with name recognition connected to his grocery store chain, *Coleman's*, bearing his last name. Heading into the leadership convention in July, Frank Coleman was the only one seeking the job, and was the presumed premier-designate. How could an outsider and relative unknown rise to such heights? This is only possible in small, elite-oriented polities; former UPEI president Wade MacLauchlan was similarly unopposed that year on his way to the premiership of that province. It helped that Williams backed Coleman, exuding considerable sway with the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary wings of the party. For instance much of the Tory caucus were spotted mingling with Coleman and Williams in the former premier's corporate box at the Mile One Centre stadium (CBC 2014b).

Marshall fired a number of Dunderdale's remaining loyalists in the Premier's Office to make way for a transition team comprised of people who worked on Coleman's leadership bid (CBC 2014c). Coleman maintained his low profile, leading to questions about which man was in charge (MacLeod 2014). On June 16, the presumed 12th Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador abruptly pulled out, citing concern for a family member's health. With that, the reluctant candidate's brief foray into politics was over. Another leadership race would be required. Marshall would have to stay on, papering over divisions between Dunderdale and Williams loyalists.

The second PC leadership contest also ended in an unusual manner. Facing some backlash over the Coleman affair, Williams said he would stay out of it, and three experienced candidates came forward: Paul Davis, the minister of Child, Youth and Family Services and a former Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC) spokesperson; Steve Kent, the minister of Municipal and Intergovernmental Affairs and a former mayor of Mount Pearl; and John Ottenheimer, a lawyer and former Williams-era health minister. The race was the traditional format, whereby candidates had to sign up members to select delegates in each of 48 ridings, climaxing in delegate voting at a televised leadership convention on September 12. Heading into the convention, Davis and Ottenheimer were thought to have a similar number of delegates, with

Kent in third (Cochrane 2014). The campaign was largely uneventful, except Davis and Kent appeared to form a pact. The results of the first ballot were 289 Ottenheimer, 253 Davis and 141 Kent. When, as expected, Kent declared his support for Davis it seemed certain he was playing the role of kingmaker. However on the presumed final vote Davis had 340 votes to Ottenheimer's 339 votes, with one spoiled ballot. The PC Party constitution stipulates the victor must have "more than 50 percent of the valid ballots cast." Because Davis had an even 50 percent of those cast, a dramatic third vote was held, and on live television organizers frantically raced to locate delegates to urge them to return to the convention. On the final ballot, Davis prevailed with 351 out of 678 ballots, positioning him as what may be the first former police officer to become a Canadian first minister.

A general election would be required within a year of Davis assuming office, as per the *House of Assembly Act*:

3.1 Election on Change of Premier

Where the leader of the political party that forms the government resigns his or her position as leader and as Premier of the province before the end of the third year following the most recent general election, the person who is elected by the party to replace him or her as the leader of the party and who is sworn in as the Premier of the province by the Lieutenant-Governor shall, not later than 12 months afterward, provide advice to the Lieutenant-Governor that the House of Assembly be dissolved and a general election be held. (*Act*, sec. 3.1)

This passage, introduced by the Williams administration and unique in Canada, was a sore point because some interpreted it as requiring an election within a year of Dunderdale's resignation some eight months earlier. Therefore many moves were interpreted as ways to prolong the PCs' time in office. This included the two weeks during which Davis prepared for the transition to the premiership on September 26, which fuelled rather than forestalled a media narrative of cynicism.

Leadership Change and Party Renewal

Paul Davis entered provincial politics via a by-election in 2010; just four years later he was premier. He got off to a rocky start, through a combination of party baggage and his own stumbles.

One of the reasons for the abrupt departure of premier-designate Coleman was controversy surrounding the divestiture of his many business interests. When he sold Humber Valley Paving the company failed to complete a \$20 million paving contract in Labrador. The Minister of Transportation and Works, Nick McGrath, forwent proper process by directing the government not to invoke a breach of contract penalty. On September 29 the auditor general disclosed that the cancellation of the contract was rushed through in 7.5 hours and improperly documented (CBC 2014d). McGrath immediately resigned as minister, sat as a backbench MHA and would fail to be re-elected.

The next day, Davis unveiled his new cabinet, marking the umpteenth shuffle during this calamitous period. The cabinet was comprised of familiar faces, including Kent who was promoted to deputy premier and minister of health. The exception was Judy Manning, an unknown lawyer who was appointed as minister of justice despite not being an MHA. Manning's refusal to seek a seat until a general election, her romantic ties to a party fundraiser, and her lack of media polish made her a lightning rod for criticism. Davis also faced backlash over rebranding the Department of Justice as the Department of Public Safety, before eventually changing it again to Justice and Public Safety. On this theme, to some the appointment of a former RNC chief as the premier's chief of staff conveyed a message of a police state. Despite the commotion, the party began to claw back in the polls under Davis (Table 1). The renewal did not last. Even their election readiness was in disarray: the party brought in a political consultant and then fired him when the media discussed his role in a New Brunswick government cover-up (Poitras 2015).

The opposition parties experienced leadership change too. On the cusp of the October 2011 general election, Liberal leader Yvonne Jones resigned for health reasons, resulting in the party's executive board hastily appointing Tobin-era minister Kevin Aylward from a pool of applicants. Aylward did not win his seat and announced he would resign. In December the board appointed MHA Dwight Ball as interim leader, the pharmacist and businessman who won his Humber Valley seat by 68 votes. To select a permanent leader, the Liberals followed their national counterpart's lead of forgoing the traditional delegate model in favour of signing up people to vote online using a preferential vote system. Ball stepped aside as interim leader to run and in November 2013 he won the race with 2,832 points compared with 1,398 for businessman Paul Antle and 1,145 points obtained by businesswoman Cathy Bennett. Two other candidates were

dropped after the first round. The Liberals immediately jumped into majority government territory in public opinion polls, and Ball became the most preferred party leader (Table 1).

A red tide was rolling in. Seats across the island that were impregnable during the Williams era went Liberal in by-elections. This included districts held by former premiers Dunderdale (Virginia Waters) and Marshall (Humber East), former finance ministers Kennedy (Carbonnear--Harbour Grace) and Charlene Johnson (Trinity--Bay de Verde), and prominent ministers Joan Shea (St. George's--Stephenville East) and Terry French (Conception Bay South). Williams stumped for the PC candidate in Virginia Waters against Bennett, but it was to no avail: the Liberals squeaked by to win a seat in St. John's for the first time in this century. Liberal momentum grew with PC mishaps and the positive news stories that flow from success in public opinion polls. The party commanded a renewed fundraising prowess, and paid off its debt after creditors forgave monies owed. Interest in becoming a Liberal candidate grew. All of this momentum was accomplished without many firm commitments or any clear plan as to how promises would be funded. The main criticism levied at the government-in-waiting was that it was so light on policy details that it was dubbed a "zebra party" for its assemblage of different political stripes (Canadian Press 2014). Nevertheless Liberal fortunes were further bolstered by the federal Liberals' sweep of all seven of the province's seats in October 2015 on a formidable 65 percent of the vote, toppling two New Democratic Party MPs in the process.

Meanwhile, the provincial NDP went through a leadership crisis of its own. The party benefited from the "orange wave" in the 2011 federal election and, for the first time in Newfoundland history, briefly became the public's preferred choice in May 2013 (Table 1). Confidence is captured in the following remark by leader Lorraine Michael, who positioned the party as ready to govern: "I know now that every time I look at a candidate that I have to think cabinet, whether it's cabinet that time, or the election after. I have to be thinking that way now" (NTV News 2013). The optimism did not last because another political soap opera was about to air. In October 2013 a leaked letter to Michael, signed by all members of her caucus, called for a leadership convention in preparation for the next election. Michael went to the media pleading betrayal and indignation. NDP MHA Gerry Rogers (St. John's Centre) backtracked and publicly supported Michael, while George Murphy (St. John's East) wept on television and asked for forgiveness. The other two signatories, Dale Kirby (St. John's North) and Chris Mitchelmore (The Straits--White Bay North), soon left the party to sit as independents. A stream of media

coverage reported that former candidates and party executives were also leaving the party. In February 2014, Kirby and Mitchelmore joined the Liberals. In May, Michael survived a leadership review vote, receiving 75 percent of 125 votes cast. But the damage was done, and the party experienced a string of dismal by-election results. In January 2015 Michael announced she would step aside as leader, though she would seek re-election as MHA. A leadership race attracted Earle McCurdy, the well-known former head of the Fish, Food and Allied Workers union, who ran against two fringe candidates. McCurdy secured 889 of 1,298 of the rank-order ballot votes cast online, by telephone and in person at the convention. The party began a gradual ascent, seemingly drawing on the pool of disaffected PC supporters who had parked their support with the Liberals (Table 1). However the party's fortunes suffered yet another setback when the two St. John's NDP MPs were defeated in October.

In an election year, one normally expects the government's budget to be full of goodies. It was quite the opposite in 2015, largely related to the price of oil. Premier Davis announced a freeze on hiring and discretionary spending. The most enduring change occurred in the lead-up to the budget: the number of MHA seats would be cut. The PCs initially proposed a reduction to 38 seats, until they reached a deal with the Liberals to settle on 40, leaving Labrador's four sparsely populated seats untouched. Opponents saw the reduction as an attempt to delay the election because the Electoral Boundaries Commission would need time to conduct the laborious task of redistribution. Moreover, the Liberals in particular would have to conduct new nomination contests. The NDP opposed the change, on the grounds that rural Newfoundland would have less representation. In March 2015 Premier Davis also cut the size of his cabinet, which was a convenient way to drop Manning as the province's longest serving unelected minister.

Budget 2015 was dire, and yet there was no civil unrest, likely due to the absence of layoffs. The HST would go from 13 to 15 percent in 2016, two new tax brackets would be introduced for higher income earners, and the corporate tax rate would increase. A home heating rebate program was eliminated. Teaching positions would be trimmed, and class sizes would be increased slightly. Aspects of health care boards would be amalgamated and public-private partnerships would be sought in long-term healthcare. Up to 1,400 jobs would be phased out over a five year period, mostly through attrition. Dozens of fees would be increased, ranging from hunting licences to motor vehicle registrations. A number of infrastructure projects were

postponed. Even with all this, a deficit of \$1.1 billion was forecast, and a balanced budget was not expected until 2020. Ball immediately pledged to rescind the HST increase, saying “if I had to make a choice over borrowing that extra money or increasing the HST, I would borrow more” (CBC 2015a). A willingness to borrow reflected the switched policy stances of federal counterparts, with the provincial Liberals pledging to increase government spending and not make cuts, and the NDP suddenly willing to consider all financial options (CBC 2015b).

Writ Drop

In June, Premier Davis announced that a general election would be held on November 30, 2015, formalizing the prolonged unofficial campaign. The latest reason for delay was to avoid overlap with the mid-October federal election. The exodus of former Williams-era ministers continued. Kevin O’Brien (Gander) resigned to run for the federal Conservatives. Felix Collins (Placentia--St. Mary’s), Tom Hedderson (Harbour Main), Clyde Jackman (Burin--Placentia West), Darin King (Grand Bank), Susan Sullivan (Grand Falls--Windsor—Buchans) and Speaker Ross Wiseman (Trinity North) announced they would not seek re-election. Williams himself would be conspicuously absent: just two days before the signing of the writ, the CBC reported his blind trust acquired 550 acres of land from the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation while he was premier (Antle 2015). The image of a dying government in its final days was firmly entrenched.

On November 5—that is, more than 13 months after becoming premier—Davis asked the lieutenant governor to dissolve the legislature and hold a general election at the end of the month. The party standings at dissolution were remarkably different from the conclusion of the previous election: 28 PC MHAs (down 9 seats), 16 Liberals (up 10), three NDP (down two) and one vacancy. The Liberal Party had already held an event days earlier to mark the launch of their official campaign. At 25 days, the provincial contest would be a short sprint compared with the 78 day federal marathon.

Campaign Dynamics

Candidate Recruitment

The reduction to 40 seats meant some incumbents were without a riding. Among Liberal MHAs, former leader Jim Bennett (St. Barbe) chose not to contest Ball in an amalgamated seat

and was unsuccessful seeking the nomination in different district; Stelman Flynn (Humber East) lost out to Scott Reid (St. George's--Stephenville East) in a nomination contest; and Steve Croker (Trinity--Bay de Verde) defeated Sam Slade (Carbonnear--Harbour Grace) to represent the party in a combined district. Other MHAs whose districts vanished, mainly PCs, did not seek re-election.

Candidates were nominated in a spattering of ridings throughout the summer. Whereas the Liberals had difficulty finding candidates in 2011—even publicly nominating an unknown who volunteered via email and resigned on the same day—there was now considerable competition in Liberal nomination contests. For instance, around the time Coleman resigned, a dozen people vied in Port de Grave for the chance to represent the Liberals against the PC incumbent. The only good news for the PCs was the surprise announcement on October 30 that Ryan Cleary, the recently defeated NDP MP for St. John's South--Mount Pearl, was joining the Davis team to seek a provincial seat.

Fewer ridings ought to alleviate the chronic problem of weaker parties having difficulty fielding a full slate. Nevertheless, over a week into the campaign the PCs and New Democrats still had five ridings with no candidates. For the Tories this included O'Brien's seat in Gander which had been vacant for some time; for the NDP, volunteers who had no plans to campaign were nominated (CBC 2015c; Roberts 2015a). Things worsened for the PCs when a candidate resigned after tweeting that spiritualism can overcome cancer, and after the CBC reported she had owed money to a Filipina nanny (Antle and Cochrane 2015). Another of their candidates dropped out for health reasons. It took party staffers to come forward at the last moment for all three parties to field 40 candidates by the November 20 nomination deadline. Four independents ran. The NDP had more female candidates (18) than the Liberals (8) and PCs (6) did combined.

Electioneering and Advertising

The Liberal Party ran a classic frontrunner campaign, reminiscent of an episode of the TV sitcom *Cheers* where supportive electors do not notice a popular politician saying little of substance (Cheers 1993). The vapid slogan “A stronger tomorrow” and party advertising was light on policy detail. The Liberal priority was to project an image of a compassionate, capable leader (see Appendices 1 to 3), as the PCs had done in 2011. Visuals of Ball chatting with different types of electors were overlaid by a soothing narrator, conveying a soft tone similar to

party visuals of Trudeau. Dunderdale had campaigned in a similar way. A typical voiceover relayed an overarching message of comfort:

In Newfoundland and Labrador, community matters to us. So does health and education. Dwight Ball understands the importance of innovative health care, leading-edge education programs for our children, and accessible care for seniors. A new Liberal government will deliver programs that are based on results. Because stronger communities means a stronger tomorrow. On November 30th, vote Liberal.

(Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador 2015a)

The Liberals finally released their platform one day before advance polling. Fluffy cost-neutral pledges included plans to engage stakeholders on steering areas of policy, as captured in the following brochure remark: “We will continue to listen to the more than 500,000 advisors we have across our province, because we know building a stronger tomorrow for Newfoundland and Labrador starts with working together with you” (Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador 2015a). The party attempted to reach the sweet spot of campaigns, when the leader is referred to by first name, which never caught on with Davis. “Team Dwight” appeared on the Liberal bus and on promotional materials, and pledges were signed simply by “Dwight”. There was more substance than the feel-good messaging let on. The Liberal Party employed a policy playbook that worked for UK New Labour in 1997, for the federal Conservative Party in 2006, and countless others: emphasize five key policies. The Liberals’ “five point plan” grouped its policy commitments into the following themes:

1. Restoring openness, transparency, and accountability;
2. Building a smarter, stronger economy;
3. Improving health and health care;
4. Supporting safe and sustainable communities; and
5. Investing in our future through education.

Among the most prominent pledges were halting the HST increase, replacing the St. John’s Waterford Hospital for the mentally ill and replacing the Western Memorial Regional Hospital in Corner Brook. Ways to control spending were fuzzy, including savings to be achieved in cutting unspecified government waste, selling some government assets, and raising millions through economic diversification. Political scientists would be interested in the plans for structural reform to the legislature, including a schedule for more regular House of Assembly sittings, establishing legislative review committees, setting up an all-party committee on democratic

reform, and ending compensation for parliamentary secretaries. No changes to Section 3.1 in the *House of Assembly Act* regarding a premier's resignation are proposed, however. As the campaign wore on, questions emerged about affordability in the face of declining oil revenues, and the PCs ran advertising warning of Liberal cuts. The Liberals countered with assurances public sector jobs were safe, including Ball's promise "No people will lose their jobs" (Roberts 2015b).

The other parties' platforms were underwhelming too. The PC Party continued to coast on its record and emphasized its leader's attributes. The party platform promoted four "pillars" of health, opportunity, people and the economy. The PCs slogan "Davis '15" and website (Appendix 4) emphasized the leader and downplayed the party. The New Democrat platform was more basic. NDP materials were boilerplate orange and green, with little mention of the leader, with a slogan "On your side". The party website was as non-descript as its campaign: rudimentary information about the leader, a downloadable platform, and bios about candidates (Appendix 5).

Twitter had been used in a smart way by Dunderdale in 2011 to frame her image (see Marland 2012). In 2015, social media was so commonplace that it was not a competitive advantage for anyone. Candidate websites had a professional look and feel, but were often plagued by the challenge of keeping content fresh with regular updates, and were difficult to locate due to poor search engine optimization. Twitter was now a constant source of online chatter, for instance conversation grouped under the #nlvotes hashtag and Liberal tweets using #strongertomorrow. One noteworthy digital development was candidate YouTube videos. Some had high-quality production values, others were decidedly homemade by amateurs, and none captured the public imagination. Boilerplate material featured the candidate speaking to the camera, or electors (and sometimes children) speaking about how they supported the candidate. Among the countless examples, a dozen women in a church sang to organ music about how they pledged to vote for Calvin Peach, the PC incumbent in Placentia West--Bellevue. Whether electors bothered to locate these videos is another matter. Many MHAs had a maze of old content available online and new videos were often difficult to locate via their websites. Judging by the number of view counts—even professional videos by high profile candidates often had less than 50 views after being online for over a week—it is likely some videos were vanity projects viewed exclusively by existing supporters who found out through referrals and Twitter.

A new development for Newfoundland politics was database marketing. This involves supplementing elector information from the list of electors with data collection, such as email addresses submitted through a party's website. Email blasts are a cost-efficient way to distribute party messages and fundraise. For the Liberals and New Democrats, sharing of data with national counterparts ought to have profited from the federal campaign, and efficiencies were realized as federal election campaign signs were replaced with provincial ones. In the next election database marketing will surely be a more integral component of campaigning and fundraising.

A final notable feature of campaign 2015 was the engagement of the Nunatsiavut government. That body has authority over education, health and justice in northern Labrador, and like Nunavut operates on a consensus drawn from a non-partisan legislature. Nunatsiavut ran constant television advertising urging voters and provincial politicians to prevent the Muskrat Falls dam from poisoning Lake Melville with mercury contamination. Notwithstanding some news coverage and social media chatter, including under the #MakeMuskratRight hashtag, the campaign gained little traction.

Debates and Polls

A number of leaders' debates were held leading up to the campaign and two televised debates were held during the official campaign. The NTV debate, held in the House of Assembly on November 16, is best described as the leaders shouting over each other. The CBC debate, held on November 23 at The Rooms provincial museum, was far better due to the interventionist nature of moderator David Cochrane. Some others were held on radio, including a VOXM debate in which Ball did not participate. Compared with past elections, there was hardly any discussion about the provincial campaign on the station's open line programming, ordinarily a forum for fiery daily debates. This speaks to what was a decidedly low-key affair.

The campaign was so uneventful that the most newsworthy events were public opinion poll results. As indicated, pre-election polls told a story of the Liberals on the cusp of a landslide victory, of the Conservatives mired in distant second, and of New Democrat fluctuations. A poll released on the first full day of the campaign set the tone by putting the Liberals at 66 percent, the PCs at 19 percent and the NDP at 15 percent. The top issue was the economy or jobs (34 percent), followed by health care (18 percent), and rounded out by a series of economy-related issues like oil prices, Muskrat Falls, and the government deficit (Abacus Data 2015). Even

though that poll found most felt the province was on the right track, 60 percent felt it was definitely time for a change. Mid-November polls by Abacus Research, Corporate Research Associates, and MQO Research indicated Liberal support was rising further, hitting an astounding 74 percent of decided voters in an NTV/MQO poll. To add to the sense of Liberal inevitability, a series of seat-specific polls were fodder for daily news stories about how the Liberals were runaway leaders in key ridings, including where Davis, Kent, Cleary and McCurdy were candidates (e.g., Fitzpatrick 2015a). Nestled within the Liberals' strength was a constant finding that Ball's support trailed his party's and Davis was more popular than his own party. Neither fit the traditional mould of a bombastic leader who defends provincial interests against outsiders, a trope that might have fit for McCurdy's social crusader image but was not tried, perhaps because new Prime Minister Trudeau was no bogeyman. Regardless, the polling data was tangible evidence of a potential Liberal sweep.

A new narrative began to emerge in the final week: the need for a strong opposition. Even Liberals had concerns. "Even though I'm such a big Liberal, I still think there should be an opposition. An opposition makes a good government," said one district association president (Fitzpatrick 2015b). Another wrinkle cutting into Liberal momentum was the revelation that the chief financial officer on Tom Osborne's campaign authored a letter seeking funds from the province's heavy civil association for the potential future minister of transportation and works. Osborne immediately cut ties with his CFO, a former party president (Cochrane and Roberts, 2015). The PC and NDP leader tours were already concentrated in the St. John's area, and Davis retrenched to campaigning in his own district. Meanwhile, Ball continued to visit diverse ridings, even some Tory strongholds. On the final day, one voter captured the public disgust towards the PCs that had pervaded Newfoundland for years: "I don't even want them in opposition. Go back to the hills and reassess themselves" (McLeod 2015). For many, rather than being inspired by alternatives, it would be a proverbial case of throwing the bums out.

Election Results

After a dozen years in government, and several years of disarray, the Progressive Conservatives were voted out of office. The Liberals coasted to victory, winning 57 percent of the popular vote and 31 of 40 seats (Table 2). The dull, unimaginative nature of the campaign

and its foregone conclusion was reflected in election turnout, which was a historic low of 55.2%, ranging from 40% in Torngat Mountains to 72% in Cape St. Francis.

Consistent with past elections, Liberal support was strongest in the western portion of the province, where they won all seven seats on an astounding 79 percent of the vote (Table 3). They swept Labrador's four seats too. The biggest inroads were made in the central region of the province where the Liberals won 10 of 11 seats, an area where voters have tended to lean towards the party forming government. The measure of Liberal success can be found on the Avalon, particularly in the St. John's area where the party has historically experienced challenges. The Liberals won 11 of 18 seats on nearly half the vote in the region, including some key St. John's ridings.

Predictions of a Liberal victory were so encompassing that the surprise was which of their candidates were unsuccessful rather than those who were successful. Ball won handily in Humber--Gros Morne, whereas he experienced difficulties in the past. Incumbents in immovable Liberal seats were handily re-elected, like Andrew Parsons (96% in Burgeo--La Poile), Lisa Dempster (93% in Cartright--L'Anse au Clair) and Randy Edmunds (93% in Torngat Mountains). All four incumbents who crossed the floor to the Liberals (Kirby, Lane, Mitchelmore, Osborne) were elected with their new party. Party stalwarts like Eddie Joyce (Humber--Bay of Islands) were re-elected, as were most incumbents brought in during by-elections, notably Cathy Bennet (Windsor Lake). Former Liberal MPs Gerry Byrne (Corner Brook) and Siobhan Coady (St. John's West) became MHAs. At 22 years of age, Mark Browne (Placentia West--Bellevue) became the youngest MHA in the province's history. Other fresh faces include star candidate and surgeon John Haggie (Gander), former journalist Pam Parsons (Harbour Grace--Port de Grave), former mayors Al Hawkins (Grand Falls--Windsor--Buchans) and Graham Letto (Labrador West), with the latter no longer residing in Labrador. The highest profile Liberal who was not elected was Paul Antle in St. John's East--Quidi Vidi, the runner-up in the party's leadership race two years' prior.

Table 2
2011 and 2015 Newfoundland & Labrador General Election Results

Party	2011				2015			
	Contested	Won	Votes	% vote	Contested	Won	Votes	% vote
Liberal	48	6	42,411	19.1	40	31	114,271	57.2
NDP	48	5	54,713	24.6	40	2	24,176	12.1
PC	48	37	124,523	56.1	40	7	60,143	30.1
Other	3	—	430	0.2	4	—	1,344	0.7

Source: Elections Newfoundland and Labrador data (www.elections.gov.nl.ca)

Table 3
2015 Newfoundland & Labrador General Election Results, by Region

Region (seats)	Major communities	Liberal	NDP	PC
Avalon (18)	Bay Roberts, Carbonear, Conception Bay North/South, Mount Pearl, Paradise, Placentia, Portugal Cove, St. John's, Torbay	48.8% (11 seats)	16.1% (2 seats)	35.6% (6 seats)
Central (11)	Bonavista, Burin, Gander, Grand Falls-Windsor, Marystown	59.8% (10 seats)	7.3%	32.8% (1 seat)
Western (7)	Channel-Port aux Basques, Corner Brook, Deer Lake	79.0% (7 seats)	7.3%	13.8%
Labrador (4)	Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador City	63.4% (4 seats)	17.7%	18.9%
Total:		57.2% (31 seats)	12.1% (2 seats)	30.1% (7 seats)

Note: Calculated by the author. Excludes four independents who together obtained 0.7 percent of the total vote.

The Liberal juggernaut was halted by the stubborn popularity of a number of PC and NDP incumbents, possibly reflecting a public desire for a strong opposition. The Tories surprised with seven seats, mostly in the suburbs of St. John's. Strongholds Cape St. Francis and Ferryland were easily held by Kevin Parsons and Keith Hutchings, respectively. Despite gloomy opinion surveys, Davis was re-elected in Topsail-Paradise, and Kent held off Mount Pearl mayor Randy Simms in Mount Pearl North. Minister David Brazil was re-elected in Conception Bay East--Bell Island. The party even picked up a new MHA in Barry Petten, who had previously been narrowly defeated in a by-election in Conception Bay South. The NDP held its lock on St. John's East--Quidi Vidi, where Michael was re-elected, and Gerry Rogers was re-elected in St. John's Centre. Of course, despite diminished expectations there were many disappointments for both parties. Most notably, McCurdy failed to get a seat, meaning the NDP leader would not have a place in the legislature where the party is a seat short of official party status. Ministers Sandy Collins (by just 54 votes), Dan Crummell, Derrick Dalley and Keith Russell were defeated. Cleary and

Manning were unsuccessful, as were a number of backbenchers. The pain would have been worse had more PC incumbents sought re-election. Still, the opposition parties' performance was much better than polls predicted, both in terms of popular vote and seat count. Both leaders pledged to stay on for the near future.

Premier Ball's First Term, 2015-2019(?)

On December 14, Dwight Ball was sworn in as Newfoundland and Labrador's 13th premier. To symbolize fiscal restraint, he also took on responsibility for intergovernmental affairs and for Labrador and Aboriginal affairs, and presided over just a dozen ministers, many of whom held multiple portfolios. Among the most significant portfolios, Bennett was tapped as finance minister, Parsons as justice minister and house leader, Haggie as health minister and Coady as minister of natural resources. Byrne, Hawkins, Joyce, Kirby and Mitchelmore were among the others appointed to cabinet. When the House convened, Osborne was voted House Speaker. With just three of seven Liberal female MHAs appointed to cabinet, and none appointed as parliamentary secretaries, the executive fell short of the gender parity standard set by Trudeau and some other premiers.

The gloomy financial situation facing the government and province worsened as the price of oil continued to drop. On December 22, Ball and Bennett delivered an economic update. The projected deficit for 2015-16 was raised to \$1.96 billion, up from the PCs' estimate of an already ominous \$1.093 billion, and was forecast to run in the \$2 billion range for years to come. To put this in perspective, the deficit sat at seven percent of gross domestic product (GDP), and contrasted with approximately \$7 billion in projected revenue. The Liberals promptly announced a review of the multi-billion dollar Muskrat Falls project, and put the brakes on government hiring, discretionary spending and travel, and the hiring of consultants.

The Liberals may be in office for some time, if Newfoundland's historical pattern of extended one-party rule continues. In the near future, how Premier Ball, Minister Bennett and the new administration navigate a serious financial problem in a province that wants big government in the face of dwindling revenues will be something to watch. Brent crude peaked at \$124Cdn in June 2014; by October 2014 it was below \$100; at the end of 2014 it was \$66; the price rebounded to \$77 in February 2015; then a drop to the \$60s in August; down to the \$50 range in December 2015; and retrenched into the low \$40s in January 2016 (Exchange Rates 2016). To

manage this precarious fiscal situation, the Liberals will need to pour oil on troubled waters, conveying the sense of calm and order that served them so well throughout the collapse of the post-Williams PC government.

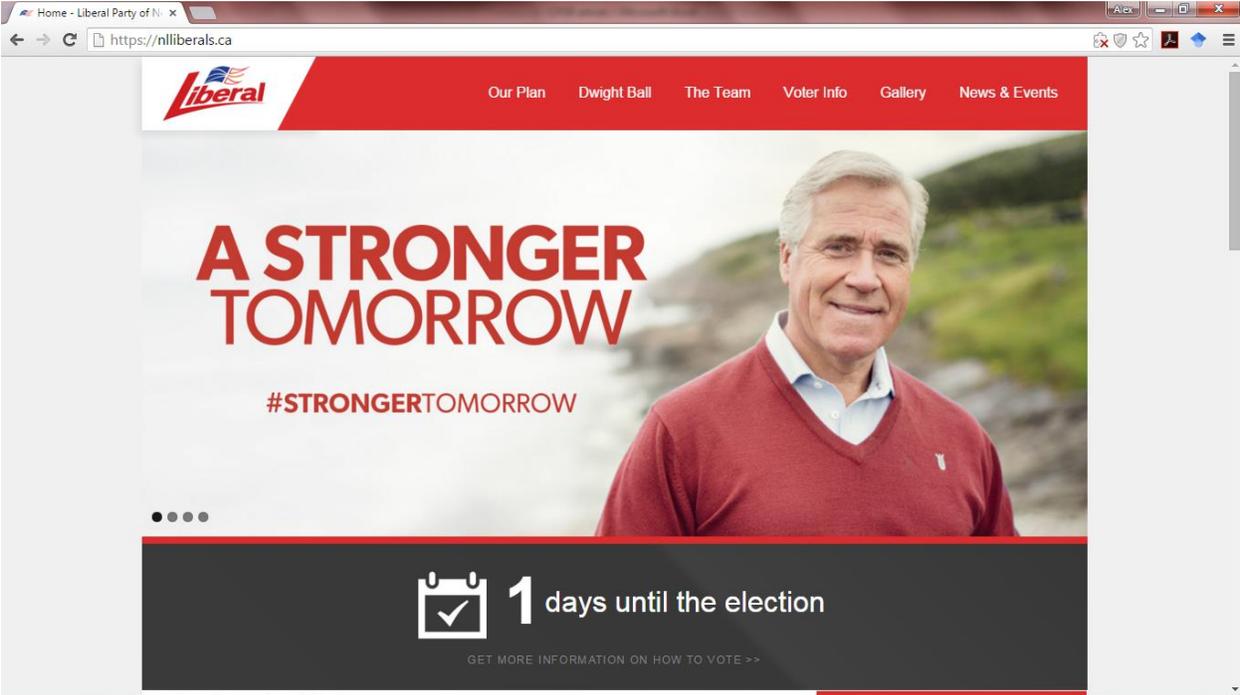
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Appendix 1
Screenshot of Liberal Party homepage <https://nlliberals.ca/>
(November 29, 2015)



Appendix 2

Screenshot of Liberal Party video “Vote for a #StrongerTomorrow”

(November 29, 2015)



Appendix 3

Liberal Party transit poster advertising

(St. John's, December 2015. Photograph by the author.)



Appendix 4

Screenshot of Progressive Conservative Party homepage <https://www.pcparty.nl.ca/>
(November 29, 2015)



Appendix 5
Screenshot of New Democratic Party homepage <http://nl.ndp.ca/>
(November 29, 2015)

