

Report

More than the Usual Turmoil: The 2019 Provincial Election in Newfoundland and Labrador

Alex Marland

Professor, Department of Political Science, Memorial University of Newfoundland – Email address: amarland@mun.ca

Hannah Loder

Student, Department of Political Science, Memorial University of Newfoundland – Email address: heloder@mun.ca

Abstract

Turmoil in the House of Assembly leading up to the 2019 general election in Newfoundland and Labrador foreshadowed an unusual result. Liberal Premier Dwight Ball, stung by public outrage over his government's 2016 austerity budget, spent the balance of his term wary of difficult decisions while ministers and MHAs hurled accusations of bullying at each other. The Liberal government routinely evoked its *The Way Forward* planning document as a source of policy solutions and blamed the Progressive Conservatives for sanctioning the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project boondoggle. Public opinion polls often put the Liberals in front, but Ball's popularity lagged behind his party's and occasionally that of the opposition leaders. The election produced the first minority government in nearly half a century, including the rare victory of two Independents, and the Liberal caucus soon agitated for new leadership. The province's dire economic circumstances mean that more political turmoil is likely.

Résumé

Les turbulences à l'assemblée législative à l'approche des élections générales de 2019 à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador laissent présager un résultat inhabituel. Le premier ministre libéral Dwight Ball, piqué par l'indignation de la population à propos du budget d'austérité de son gouvernement pour 2016, a passé le reste de son mandat à se méfier des décisions difficiles, tandis que les ministres et les députés se lançaient des accusations d'intimidation les uns envers les autres. Le gouvernement libéral a régulièrement évoqué son document de planification «The Way Forward» comme une source de solutions politiques et a reproché aux progressistes-conservateurs d'avoir sanctionné le gâchis du projet hydroélectrique de Muskrat Falls. Les sondages d'opinion mettent souvent les libéraux en avance, mais la popularité de Ball est à la traîne par rapport à celle de son parti et, parfois, des chefs de l'opposition. L'élection a produit le premier gouvernement minoritaire en près d'un demi-siècle, y compris la rare victoire de deux indépendants, et le caucus libéral s'est rapidement agité pour changer de leadership. La situation économique désastreuse de la province laisse présager de nouvelles turbulences politiques.

Keywords: Newfoundland and Labrador, 2019 provincial election, Dwight Ball, House of Assembly, minority government

Mots-clés: Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador, élections provinciales de 2019, Dwight Ball, assemblée législative, gouvernement minoritaire

Introduction

Politics in Newfoundland and Labrador has been aptly described as *Turmoil, as Usual* (McLeod, 2016). In recent years, democratic government has been akin to a roller coaster ride whose tracks follow the rise and fall of oil prices. In the first decade of this century, the astonishing popularity of the Progressive Conservative (PC) government led by Danny Williams benefitted from the rising price of oil. However, in mid-2014 the price of Brent crude oil began a precipitous decline from over \$110 US/barrel to under \$30 by early January 2015. Turbulent politics resulted as politicians tried to grapple with a provincial government and an economy that had grown dependent on offshore oil (see Marland, 2016). By the time the Liberals formed government in late 2015, the price of oil had begun a bumpy ascent, yet the massive cost overruns of the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project combined with government spending outstripping revenues placed the province in a precipitous situation. Freshly installed Premier Dwight Ball soon experienced turmoil of his own as he presided over a calamitous period in the storied history of the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly.

Three aspects of Ball's leadership style came to the fore during the 48th general assembly (2015-2019). First, wherever possible blame former PC governments; second, champion the strategic thinking of the 2016 policy document *The Way Forward*; and third, incur self-inflicted wounds when aversion of responsibility fails to take hold. The 2016 austerity budget was a watershed moment in how the Liberals would govern under his leadership. Unwilling to endure such backlash again, the premier's reluctance to quell controversy sometimes prolonged the negative media coverage, particularly with respect to cabinet and caucus management. An election reckoning seemed likely in 2019.

Heading into the 2019 general election, public opinion polls indicated that the Liberals would be in a close race with the resurgent PCs, while the moribund New Democratic Party (NDP) would be hard-pressed to get their new leader elected. Historically, governing parties have enjoyed long periods of uninterrupted rule in Newfoundland and Labrador, alternating between Liberal governments (1949-1972, 1989-2003) and Progressive Conservative governments (1972-1989, 2003-2015). Governing parties usually win a majority of seats multiple times. Notably, when a first-time government seeks re-election, it has always increased its vote share and seat count. We would therefore have expected the Liberals to return to office with a majority of seats. Instead, the Liberals ended up eking out a minority government, the first such result in the province since the 1971 election, which overshadowed the rare feat of two Independents being elected. With an even more unstable political balance of power and no fiscal respite in view, just eight months after the election Premier Ball would announce his plans to resign, propelling the Liberal Party into a leadership race and demonstrating yet again that the politics of Newfoundland and Labrador are as predictable as the price of oil.

Dwight Ball's First Term, 2015-2019

On November 30, 2015, the Liberals ended 12 years of Tory rule by securing a majority government with 31 of 40 seats in the House of Assembly. The opposition parties were reduced to seven PCs and two New Democrats. A slimmed-down cabinet of just 13 members, including the premier, signalled interest in fiscal belt-tightening. Leading the higher-profile members was businesswoman and former leadership contestant Cathy Bennett who was appointed minister of finance. Notable Liberal Members of the House of Assembly (MHAs) joining her were former Members of Parliament Gerry Byrne (Corner Brook) and Siobhan Coady (St. John's West), party stalwart Eddie Joyce (Humber – Bay of Islands), former PC minister Tom Osborne (Waterford Valley), and former NDP MHAs Dale Kirby (Mount Scio) and Christopher Mitchelmore (St. Barbe – L'Anse aux Meadows). The media savvy Andrew Parsons (Burgeo – La Poile) was appointed minister of justice and government house leader. Among those left out of cabinet was Paul Lane (Mount Pearl – Southlands) who had crossed the floor from the PCs and was re-elected as a Liberal.

Premier Ball immediately declared that strong financial management was his government's top priority (CBC, 2015). Minister Bennett was tasked with the immense responsibility of mitigating the province's deficit, which had ballooned to \$1.8 billion. A provincial financial review was released just one week after the cabinet was sworn in. The Treasury Board was directed to engage in a line-by-line analysis of government budgets to identify cost savings, principally through attrition (i.e., not filling jobs as they become vacant). All nonessential travel was suspended.

The ascetic April 2016 budget was the most contentious moment of Ball's tenure. In a blatant act of breaking campaign promises, Minister Bennett unveiled a budget rife with tax increases. The budget doubled the gasoline tax, hiked income tax rates, increased government service fees and reversed a key campaign promise not to increase the Harmonized Sales Tax from 13 percent to 15 percent. Despite promising no layoffs approximately 600 jobs were cut, many of which were vacant positions. Classroom sizes were set to increase, infrastructure plans were postponed or cancelled, and student loans returned in lieu of grants (Roberts, 2016a). Especially contentious was a temporary deficit reduction levy. The levy applied to anyone earning at least \$20,000 in taxable income and thus approximately 62 percent of tax filers would have to pay the new tax. Controversy also centred on news that more than half of the province's library branches would close (Graham, 2017). None of this was what the Liberals had promised in the 2015 campaign.

Public demonstrations erupted at the Confederation Building. The protests were fuelled by social media activists converging under the Twitter hashtag #NLrising and by the organizational strength of public sector unions. MHA Lane was expelled from the Liberal caucus for saying that he intended to vote for an opposition motion to eliminate the levy. Sustained pressure forced the government to raise the levy's minimum income threshold to \$50,000, meaning that about three quarters of tax filers would be exempt from paying it—up from 38 percent exempt—whereas the rest would pay an annual levy calculated using the original scale (Canadian Press, 2016). Eventually the government would backtrack on the library closures as well. When the levy came into effect on July 1, 2016, the escalating scale meant that someone earning \$55,000 would have to pay \$100 annually, a resident earning \$100,000 would pay a levy of \$700, and so forth. The government would find other money through cost efficiency initiatives, such as digitization. Further funds would be identified

through a zero-based budgeting agenda requiring departments and government entities to justify all spending. The Liberal government estimated that the books would be balanced within five years (Barry, 2016). Ensuing budgets would be unadventurous, notwithstanding the elimination of some management jobs (Roberts, 2017a).

Usually new governments benefit from a post-election honeymoon. Indeed, an Angus Reid public opinion survey in February 2016 found Premier Ball's approval rating at 60 percent, the second highest of any premier in Canada at the time (Dangerfield, 2016). By May, public approval of Ball plunged to just 17 percent, the worst in the country. Another poll showed the party's support was at the same level as that of the deeply unpopular PC government in its final year in power (Table 1).¹ More ominously, Premier Ball's personal popularity was lower than that of any of his Newfoundland and Labrador predecessors in recent memory. To put the public animosity in perspective, when the PC government delivered an austerity budget in 2004, the percentage of citizens preferring Williams as premier dropped to 39 percent – a number that Ball would not achieve for the rest of his term. However, an abnormally high number of people were unable to identify a leader they would prefer as premier. In June, posters calling on Ball to resign adorned light poles along roadways around the Confederation Building. More controversy ensued when internal emails showed that the premier's director of communications had tried to have government staff remove the posters (CBC, 2016).

A challenge for fiscal hawks and doves alike was navigating the Muskrat Falls fiasco, also known as the Lower Churchill Project. Initiated by Premier Williams, and pursued by his successor Kathy Dunderdale, the megaproject incurred multi-billion dollar cost overruns. Public angst grew in April 2016 when Premier Ball and his Minister of Natural Resources, Siobhan Coady, announced the resignation of the CEO of Nalcor Energy. Ed Martin had overseen the Crown corporation and worked closely with former PC premiers to advance the Muskrat Falls project. It turned out that Nalcor's board of directors had dismissed Martin without cause, triggering a severance payout of nearly \$1.4 million during a period of fiscal austerity (McLeod, 2017). New Nalcor CEO Stan Marshall promptly labelled the project a "boondoggle" (Roberts, 2016b).

Further churn in executive offices stirred political turmoil at precisely the moment that the province needed stability. Within a year of assuming office, the chief of staff, deputy chief of staff, the director of communications and the press secretary all left or were forced out of the premier's office (Cowan and Kelland, 2016). The sense of executive drift ensued in September 2016 when private sector lawyer and former Liberal leadership contestant Bernard Coffey was appointed as the non-partisan clerk of the executive council. His appointment would not last long.

¹ See public opinion survey tables in previous Newfoundland and Labrador election summaries published in the *Canadian Political Science Review*.

Table 1**Opinion Survey Data, Newfoundland and Labrador Decided Voters (2015-2019)**

(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 95 percent confidence level)

Month	(1) Party Preference ¹				(2) Leader Preference			
	Lib	PC	NDP	Other	Ball	Davis/ Crosbie ¹	NDP leaders ²	DK/ NR
Aug. 2015	48	27	25	1	42	24	17	17
Nov. 2015	67	22	10	1	50	27	11	11
Feb. 2016	66	23	11	0	53	29	8	11
May 2016	27	34	38	2	18	35	22	25
Aug. 2016	34	33	32	1	17	32	24	27
Nov. 2016	42	34	23	1	27	35	17	21
Feb. 2017	33	39	26	1	21	33	23	23
May 2017	34	40	24	2	23	36	16	25
Aug. 2017	40	33	24	3	23	29	18	30
Nov. 2017	44	33	19	3	31	31	19	20
Feb. 2018	41	33	24	2	28	27	23	22
May 2018	36	42	22	0	27	34	19	20
Aug. 2018	43	35	19	2	31	30	16	23
Nov. 2018	46	35	17	1	32	30	17	21
Feb. 2019	45	38	16	0	38	31	12	19
May 2019	46	42	7	5	38	30	12	20
Aug. 2019	42	32	23	2	34	26	21	21

¹ Decided voters only.² Ches Crosbie succeeded Paul Davis as PC leader on April 28, 2018.³ On March 7, 2015 Earle McCurdy succeeded Lorraine Michael as NDP leader. Michael became leader again on interim basis on September 28, 2017. On April 8, 2018, Gerry Rogers replaced Michael. On March 5, 2019 Alison Coffin became leader.Source: Corporate Research Associates Inc. (<http://cra.ca>), now known as Narrative Research.

In November 2016, the Liberal government released a planning document. *The Way Forward* was a culmination of government resources used to create a corporate plan. This was necessary given the thinness of the party’s election campaign platform. *The Way Forward* became a talisman to guide the Ball government’s decisions. However, efforts to introduce stability would be undermined again by human resources issues. It became known that Coffey was involved in two lawsuits suing government agencies, one of which he filed on the day of his appointment (Antle, 2017). That the head of the public service was a lawyer pursuing active legal claims against the government was an obvious conflict of interest. Coffey resigned in May 2017 following a series of negative news stories. That July, Cathy Bennett abruptly resigned as finance minister, prompting a shuffle that moved Tom Osborne into the post. Upon resigning, Bennett said she contended with threats during her brief tenure, a remark widely assumed to refer to cyberbullying she experienced after delivering the austerity budget (Cowan, 2017). Later, the MHA would reveal that the threats had emanated from within the Liberal cabinet and caucus. She alleged being subject to mobbing

and mild gaslighting; that is, other Liberals stamped out her dissenting voice and employed psychological tactics to make her feel an outcast (CBC, 2018a). The Liberal caucus would go on to lose its most strident advocate of fiscal discipline when Bennett resigned as an MHA less than three years after the election.

In November 2017, Ball announced a public inquiry into Muskrat Falls. The stated purpose was to uncover how the megaproject's cost had doubled to more than \$12.7 billion in a province of half a million people. The inquiry would be a public platform to keep political mismanagement by former PC governments in the news. Indeed, Muskrat Falls had become a top issue of public concern. Technocratic testimony and forensic reports were punctuated by public interest in Williams, Dunderdale, and Martin taking the stand. The main takeaway was that politicians had placed excessive trust in Nalcor personnel. When Ball eventually testified in July 2019, he said: "We were told the project would be \$6.2 billion. We're at \$12.7. We were never told that this project would be nearly 30 per cent of the net debt of this province" (CBC, 2019a). The premier remarked that the PCs should never have sanctioned the project and yet the Liberal government's decision to carry on with it was justified (McKenzie-Sutter, 2019b). The final report by Commissioner Richard LeBlanc was released in 2020 at a cost of over \$16 million.

The ballooning costs of Muskrat Falls put more pressure on the government to get its financial house in order. In January 2018, the government negotiated a wage freeze with public sector unions. The cabinet sought cost savings and yet was concerned about further dampening the economic mood of the province. The new collective agreement with the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE) included a no-layoff clause. As well, an early payout was offered to employees in exchange for relinquishing the future financial liability of severance payments (CBC, 2018c). The government had difficulty keeping up with the demand to issue cheques. The long-term cost savings offered an added benefit of potentially stimulating economic activity.

Two more Liberals left the party in April 2018. Minister of Municipal Affairs Eddie Joyce and Minister of Education Dale Kirby were removed from cabinet and caucus in the wake of bullying and harassment allegations from colleagues. Turmoil in the legislature ensued as leaks disclosed information about complaints filed with the Commissioner for Legislative Standards. Minister of Service NL Sherry Gambin-Walsh (Placentia – St. Mary's), Liberal MHAs Colin Holloway (Terra Nova) and Pam Parsons (Harbour Grace – Port de Grave), and PC MHA Tracey Perry (Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune) all came forward with concerns in some manner. The most unusual involved Holloway and Parsons filing a complaint with the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary about sustained personal attacks from the anonymous Twitter account @WackJobNL, which some speculated was operated by a sitting MHA (Maher, 2018). The commissioner's report revealed considerable infighting within the Liberal cabinet and caucus. Joyce was found to have broken the MHA code of conduct by misusing his resources to help a friend obtain a government job and Kirby was found to have made an inappropriate comment to Parsons. Both Independent MHAs were refused re-entry into the Liberal caucus and all MHAs were encouraged to participate in anti-harassment training. Suffice it to say the legislature was consumed with interpersonal conflict.

Meanwhile, the Progressive Conservatives were regrouping. In October 2016, former Premier Paul Davis announced his intent to step down as leader of the PC party. A leadership race attracted two contestants. In April 2018 high-profile lawyer Ches Crosbie prevailed over Tony Wakeham, a former health board CEO. Crosbie had been the frontrunner owing to his

public profile and his family's political lineage, particularly the pedigree of his father John Crosbie, a former federal and provincial minister. The leadership candidates were not MHAs and had not previously stood for election. Crosbie's campaign had begun in an atypical manner when he announced that in the early 1990s he was convicted for refusing a breathalyzer test (Roberts, 2017b).

The PCs won all three by-elections contested during the 48th general assembly. They held the Mount Pearl North seat vacated by former PC minister Steve Kent and retained Davis's seat in Topsail – Paradise. Crosbie won in Windsor Lake, which Bennett had represented, providing the new PC leader with a seat in the legislature. However, in October 2018 PC Party president Graydon Pelley tendered his resignation to lead a new party. The Newfoundland and Labrador Alliance (NL Alliance) proposed to fix the political system through honest and transparent government that would subject major decisions to public consultation (CBC, 2018b). The anti-establishment party threatened to attract PC supporters.

The provincial NDP changed leaders as well – twice. In September 2017, nearly two years after failing to win a seat in the House of Assembly, former fisheries union leader Earle McCurdy resigned as NDP leader. Former leader Lorraine Michael (St John's East – Quidi Vidi) returned to the post in an interim capacity. As the party's only other MHA, Gerry Rogers (St John's Centre) was favoured to assume the leadership. In April 2018, she prevailed in a leadership race against Alison Coffin, a Memorial University economics instructor. Rogers was the province's first out LGBTQ+ party leader. However, with an early election call pending, in February 2019 Rogers abruptly relinquished the leadership and announced that she would not seek re-election. At the time, the NDP was at 12 percent in the polls, while the Liberals and PCs were in a statistical tie at 44 percent and 42 percent respectively (CBC, 2019f). The next month, the NDP executive acclaimed Coffin as leader. The political novice was faced with the daunting task of hurriedly developing a campaign platform, raising money, recruiting candidates, and getting an election machine ready.

Pre-Writ Period

Politicians publicly mused about the conflict of provincial and federal elections scheduled for October 2019. As the calendar turned to 2019, rumours swirled that a Spring election was in the cards, fuelled by Premier Ball refusing to rule out the possibility (CBC, 2019d). The date of the previous provincial election had likewise been changed so as not to interfere with the national vote, although it was pushed ahead to extend the life of the government, not called early for the government's advantage. The Liberal party was flush with cash (CBC, 2019c) and was about to follow the timeworn election year practice of trying to buy votes with government money. Indeed, the Liberal government marked an optimistic milestone: March 2019 was the first time since February 2016 that public opinion polls registered satisfaction ratings that exceeded disapproval, albeit within the margin of error (Corporate Research Associates, 2019). They had also been leading in the polls since the previous August (see Table 1).

Premier Ball signalled that his government would leverage connections with its federal Liberal counterpart to maximize returns on a renegotiated Atlantic Accord. The federal-provincial agreement, signed in 1985, spells out how the governments jointly manage the oil

and gas situated off the province's shores. In 2005, Williams' popularity soared when he ordered the Canadian flag removed from provincial buildings and then triumphantly returned from Ottawa with a \$2 billion commitment. But Ball's style of leadership was different. As one commentator observed, "Dwight Ball is no Danny Williams. He doesn't seem to like conflict, appears to go out of his way to not rock the boat, and clearly prefers that things be civil—and quiet—rather than rowdy and chaotic" (Gushue, 2018). Hints of federal and provincial representatives working on a new agreement culminated in an April 1 photo op. Federal Indigenous Services Minister Seamus O'Regan, the Liberal MP for St. John's South – Mount Pearl and the province's representative in the federal cabinet, sat onstage with Premier Ball as they signed a renewed agreement. The province will receive about \$3.3 billion over 38 years, including immediate payments of about \$160 million a year. However, the agreement stipulates the province will make annual payments of \$100 million to the federal government beginning in 2045. Crosbie—whose father was one of the signatories of the original deal—dismissed the accord as "pre-election razzle-dazzle" and suggested the money will do nothing to absolve the province of its financial woes (VOCM, 2019). Despite Liberal efforts, the deal soon vanished from public conversation.

A weeklong flurry of spending announcements followed. There was money for fish plant workers, municipal infrastructure, immigration, agriculture, planning for a new prison in St. John's, ocean technology, arts and culture, health care and more (Kinsella, 2019). On April 15, Ball and Coady announced a long-anticipated rate mitigation plan to shelter citizens from the rising cost of electricity required to pay for Muskrat Falls. Economists warned that a plan was necessary because demand for electricity falls when prices go up (for more on price-elasticity, see Feehan, 2018). Despite the fanfare, the rate mitigation plan was widely panned for merely shifting the financial burden from electricity consumers to the government.

The next day, Finance Minister Osborne tabled an election year budget. His speech repeated the government's preferred messaging: blame the Progressive Conservatives, extol that all Liberal MHAs were united behind the premier's visionary leadership, mention *The Way Forward*, and promote economic optimism (Osborne, 2019). Election-style goodies were spread around, including a rebate on auto insurance taxes. The maligned deficit reduction levy would end as of December 31. An accounting slight of hand—specifically, integrating the Atlantic Accord money—allowed the government to say that it had returned to a budget surplus (CBC, 2019b). It was a sharp contrast with the fiscal rightsizing three years earlier that had sparked public unrest.

Writ Drop

On April 17, Premier Ball visited Lieutenant Governor Judy Foote to request that an election be held on May 16. For the second consecutive election, fixed-date election legislation was ignored to the governing party's political advantage. The writ drop came just one day after tabling the budget. The early dissolution of the House of Assembly meant there would be no budget debate, no review of budget estimates and no vote on the budget. Ball said that this was a way of taking the budget to voters' doorsteps and "engaging Newfoundlanders and Labradorians" on provincial fiscal matters (Maher and Whiffen, 2019).

The opposition leaders criticized the government for forgoing the budget debate and rushing the campaign, leaving them scrambling to secure candidates in all 40 electoral districts. PC and NDP house leaders issued a joint statement saying that an early election

would cut short important government work. Ball used the writ drop as an opportunity to paint the Liberals as a steady and responsible alternative to the opposition. The 29-day sprint to Election Day was on.

Campaign Dynamics

Candidate Recruitment

The 2015 election had been the first involving 40 seats, a reduction from 48. Among the anticipated benefits of reducing the number of MHAs was that the parties would have less difficulty recruiting candidates. In 2019, only the Liberals fielded a full slate. Their star recruit was Hasan Hai, who achieved local notoriety for leading a charitable fundraising campaign featuring a popular calendar of men dressed as mermaids. Originally from Pakistan, Hai attracted media attention for injecting diversity into a political arena dominated by Caucasians, most of whom are born and raised in Newfoundland and Labrador. The PCs failed to assemble a full slate. They did not run a candidate in Waterford Valley against Osborne because their intended nominee backed out at the final hour. After voting in advance polls had taken place, the party dropped its candidate in Cartwright – L’Anse au Clair over controversy about his anti-abortion and anti-same sex marriage comments. However, it was too late to remove the candidate from the party’s official roster.

Recruitment was a serious problem for the NDP. Neither of its incumbents stood for re-election. Lorraine Michael stepped aside so that Coffin could run in the Signal Hill – Quidi Vidi riding, traditionally an NDP stronghold in St. John’s. The party fielded its fewest candidates since 1972, appearing on the ballot in just 14 of the 40 electoral districts, mostly in St. John’s and its surrounding areas. By comparison, the freshly created NL Alliance ran candidates in nine districts. Joyce and Lane sought re-election as Independents; Kirby did not.

Electioneering and Advertising

Campaigning in the 2019 election was unremarkable. It followed the traditional fare of the main party leaders touring the province while the leaders of poorly resourced parties stayed close to their home districts. Liberal advertising had a higher production value than that of the PCs and the cash-rich party was less reliant on digital distribution than its opponents were. Party campaign strategies followed a timeworn playbook: the Liberals sought re-election by projecting optimism and instilling fear about the PCs; the PCs critiqued the Liberal government’s fiscal record; the NDP projected a social conscience while concentrating limited resources in a handful of seats; and the upstart NL Alliance struggled to achieve credibility.

Liberal advertising oscillated between emphasizing Dwight Ball’s positivity and profiling members of the Liberal team. The party’s Website focused on Ball (Appendix 1). Progressive Conservative advertising and its Website emphasized Crosbie’s leadership while critiquing the premier’s financial management (Appendix 2). As part of the framing contest, Ball accused the PCs of dirty politics. He called out Crosbie’s campaign for the anti-Liberal robocalls unleashed by the right-wing group NL Strong. Crosbie denied any association with the group that was run by his former communications director (CBC, 2019e). The controversy intensified Crosbie’s difficulties with putting the “progressive” in Progressive

Conservative, particularly when combined with his initial defence of the Labrador candidate's right to express social views that are contrary to that of the party before dropping him from the PC slate.

The limited NDP and NL Alliance publicity budgets meant that they relied on digital communications that had trouble capturing the public imagination (e.g., Appendix 3 and 4). A novelty was stories about the Independent MHAs each seeking re-election on a shoestring budget. Media reports indicated that Humber – Bay of Islands in western Newfoundland was painted bright purple with Eddie Joyce's Independent signs. He was portrayed as a long-time constituency man who frequented constituents' birthday and anniversary parties (Roberts, 2019). A similar story occurred on the outskirts of St. John's in Mount Pearl – Southlands. Lane predicated his campaign on the assumption that voters were disenchanted with party politics and were looking for a candidate who would not be forced to toe the line. He re-used his 2015 campaign signs by affixing a bright yellow "INDEPENDENT" sticker covering the word Liberal. The Independents' campaigns relied on leveraging name recognition, personal outreach, and voter dissatisfaction with the party leaders.

Party Platforms and Issues

Party election platforms likewise followed a timeworn approach. In Newfoundland and Labrador, political parties often look to their federal counterparts for policy direction, and the governing party emphasizes its accomplishments while championing the good news of an election year budget. There tends to be a stark contrast between the bureaucratic detail of its platform compared with those of opposition parties. The pattern was evident in 2019 with one noticeable difference: the governing party downplayed its leader.

The Liberal platform was largely a continuity of government messaging. It tweaked *The Way Forward* by using the slogan "Onward." The platform repeated the Liberals' overall theme that the province had turned a corner after difficult times caused by the Progressive Conservatives. For example:

In order to save the province from the brink of financial ruin due to mismanagement by the previous Progressive Conservative government, your Liberal government made tough choices, some of which were not popular. The sun is breaking through the clouds and the return to surplus is drawing near. This means we can honour our promise to reduce taxes in our province, even while we mitigate Muskrat Falls. (Liberal Party of NL, 2019: 50)

Notably, the party opted for a photograph of a family on the cover. Dwight Ball barely appeared in the document.

Many of the Liberal pledges strained credibility given the party's record of abandoning 2015 commitments, the lack of detail and obvious spin. The Liberals pledged to eliminate the budget deficit by 2023 through a combination of decreased spending and increased revenue derived from the renegotiated Atlantic Accord. A new mental health and addictions facility was promised for St. John's as well as a mental health unit in Labrador. Somehow, the government would increase the number of immigrants to the province. Promises about democratic reform, including changing campaign finance laws, were typically vapid: "The all-party committee [on democratic reform] will review democratic processes in Newfoundland and Labrador with the goal of improving democracy to better serve residents of the

province” (Liberal Party of NL, 2019: 71). Arguably, the most comprehensive section of the platform appeared at the end. The party declared a dedication to fighting workplace harassment and requiring all MHAs participate in mandatory respectful workplace training.

The platforms of the opposition parties were similarly unsurprising. There was standard criticism of the government’s record of broken promises and other faults, often couched in hyperbole. The PC platform, dubbed “Yes With Ches,” was noticeably Crosbie-centric. It promoted pillars of jobs, affordable living, and honest leadership. The NDP released a short list of promises, including raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, lowering the voting age to 16, and supporting newcomers. The NL Alliance did not release a platform. It advocated an anti-elitism strand of democratic reform.

Controversy arose with a week left in the campaign when the Liberals drew policy inspiration from its competitors’ platforms. A former NDP MHA running as a Liberal in Signal Hill – Quidi Vidi against Coffin made an announcement: a Liberal government would commit \$5 million over three years for the arts community (Kelland, 2019). That the funding was not outlined in the Liberal platform and yet would be factored into that year’s budget was suspect; that a candidate who was not part of the government was making a spending announcement, even more so. Pandering to NDP supporters was blatant and mirrored the federal Liberals’ leftist turn.

Debates and Polls

Leaders’ debates were held in St. John’s on April 30 and May 1. The Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour organized the first one. All four leaders stood behind podiums facing a small audience and fielded questions on topics of concern to the labour movement, such as labour standards, gender equality, and health care. It was a warm-up to the main event the next day, which was televised and livestreamed. The televised debate followed a standard format of a panel of journalists asking questions to leaders at podiums who talked over each other. It was the first time that many citizens gained familiarity with the leaders of the PCs and New Democrats. In both debates, Ball was assertive with Crosbie, attempting to portray him as someone who would cut health care spending. Crosbie was reserved, often pausing to listen as his opponents launched barbs at him. Coffin advocated typical NDP policy objectives. Pelly was excluded from the televised debate. He planned to release social media videos instead (McKenzie-Sutter, 2019a).

Five public opinion polls were published during the campaign. Most indicated the election was a close race between the Liberals and PCs. The first poll showed the Liberals ahead, but subsequent data suggested the PCs had leads varying from two to nine points. The latter hinted at a late surge in PC support that did not materialize (Grenier, 2019).

Election Results

On May 16, 2019 the Liberals won exactly half of the seats in the House of Assembly (20 MHAs) on 44 percent of the vote (Table 2). Most of the seat losses involved Liberal backbenchers. The party’s lone gain was Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune. Dwight Ball would head the first minority government since the short-lived Liberal (1971-72) and Progressive Conservative (1972) minority governments nearly half a century ago.

The Tories finished with 15 seats and 42 percent of the provincial vote.² They made substantial gains across the island, including Tony Wakeham winning in Stephenville – Port au Port in the West. The surprise was the NDP. With just 6.3 percent of the vote, it held its two St. John’s seats, and eked out a victory in Labrador West. It was the provincial party’s second-best seat performance ever despite running a paltry campaign with few candidates.³ The NL Alliance managed to obtain two percent of the vote; none of its candidates were elected.

A twist was the electoral success of the two former Liberal MHAs who sought re-election as Independents. Independents are rarely elected in Canada and no Independent candidates had succeeded in Newfoundland and Labrador since the mid-1990s – and yet two were elected in 2019. Joyce won Humber – Bay of Islands in a landslide. In 2015, he was elected as a Liberal with 85 percent of the vote; this time, he won as an Independent with 67 percent, fully 50 percentage points ahead of the Liberal runner-up. Lane was elected with 44 percent of the vote, a margin of 15 points above Hasan Hai, the runner-up. Combined, the two Independent MHAs tallied more votes than all NL Alliance candidates, and were not far behind the NDP. As a sign of the competitiveness of the election, voter turnout increased by 5.4 percent to 60.7 percent.

Table 22015 and 2019 Newfoundland and Labrador General Election Results

Party	2015				2019			
	Contested	Won	Votes	% vote	Contested	Won	Votes ¹	% vote
Liberal	40	31	114,271	57.2	40	20	93,746	44.0
NDP	40	2	24,176	12.1	14	3	13,432	6.3
PC	40	7	60,143	30.1	38 ¹	15	90,138	42.3
NL Alliance	Did not exist				9	--	5,086	2.4
Other	4	--	1,344	0.7	10	2	10,648	5.0

¹ The candidate on the ballot in Cartwright-L’Anse au Clair who was dropped by the PCs is treated as “other.”

Officially, the PCs received 42.6 percent of the vote and non-affiliated received 4.7 percent.

Source: Calculated from Elections Newfoundland and Labrador official results (www.elections.gov.nl.ca)

Two Liberal cabinet ministers were ousted from the House. Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development Allan Hawkins (Grand Falls Windsor – Buchans) and Minister of Municipal Affairs and the Environment Graham Letto (Labrador West) both lost. Letto’s defeat by just five votes to NDP candidate Jordan Brown meant that whether the Liberals would be able to form a majority or minority government hung in the balance. A judicial recount would favour the NDP by a mere two votes.

The electoral math—and the more efficient Liberal vote—would have shifted had the NDP fielded more candidates (which would have disproportionately bled support from Liberal candidates) or if the NL Alliance had not existed (whose supporters would have disproportionately voted for PC candidates). Under these assumptions, the presence of an NDP candidate might have flipped approximately three Liberal seats to the PCs (Burin –

² Excludes votes received by the former PC candidate in Cartwright-L’Anse au Clair. The party’s official vote total was 42.6 percent.

³ The NDP averaged 18.7 percent of the vote in the 14 ridings where it fielded candidates.

Grand Bank; Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune; Harbour Grace – Port de Grave), while the absence of an Alliance candidate might have resulted in the PCs defeating Liberals in two seats (Baie Verte – Green Bay; Mount Scio). The Liberal victory would undoubtedly have been narrower and possibly Ches Crosbie would have attempted to form a government.

Crosbie certainly did not behave in a statesmanlike manner on election night. At first, he refused to concede. Then, he made the gruesome prediction that Premier Ball's "head is going to be on a platter" within a year's time (Mackey, 2019). Crosbie stayed out of the public eye as anger grew in the days that followed. Nearly a week later he emerged to apologize and vowed to make the legislature work.

Post-Election: Dwight Ball's Second Term, 2019-2020

Premier Ball and his cabinet appeared confident as they were sworn in at Government House on May 30. Familiar faces in familiar roles were present. There was only one new minister, Brian Warr (Baie Verte – Green Bay), who took over the education and early childhood development portfolio vacated by Hawkins. Minister of Children, Seniors, and Social Development Lisa Dempster (Cartwright – L'Anse au Clair) absorbed the municipal and environment portfolios vacated by Letto, dangling the possibility that he might return in the event that the judicial recount declared him elected.

The first test of confidence arose in June. The Liberals passed the budget with the help of the three NDP MPs and Lane. A cabinet shuffle would happen months later, bringing the number of ministers back to 14 when Perry Trimper (Lake Melville) moved out of the Speaker's chair and back into cabinet. The appointment was short-lived. Within a week, Trimper resigned after the Innu Nation circulated an accidental voicemail recording wherein the minister made comments the organization deemed racist (CBC, 2019g).

An adage in politics is to under-promise and over-deliver. In the 2019 provincial election, the only leader who exceeded expectations was Allison Coffin. In the electoral aftermath, the media speculated that Liberals would mobilize to oust Ball, while Crosbie agreed to be subjected to a leadership review (Cowan, 2019; Gushue, 2019). Dysfunction resumed when the legislature reconvened. Suddenly, on February 17, 2020 local supertime news broadcasts ran a submitted video of the premier announcing plans to resign upon the selection of a new Liberal leader. Once again, Newfoundland and Labrador was thrust into political turmoil precisely when it required a steady hand.

References

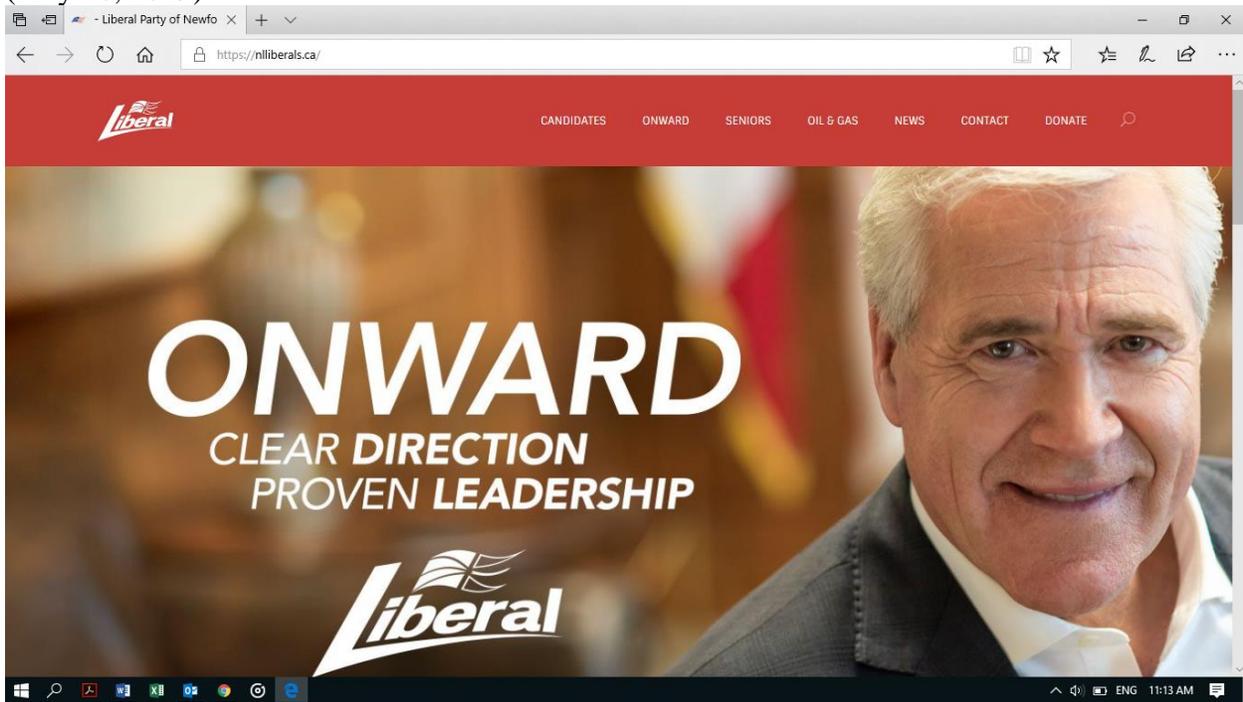
- Antle, Rob. 2017. "Coffey break: top N.L. bureaucrat's position became 'untenable,' premier says," CBC News, May 1. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/dwight-ball-bern-coffey-resignation-news-conference-1.4093614>
- Barry, Garrett. 2016. "Government 'expects' MUN to maintain tuition freeze," CBC News, April 14. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/tuition-freeze-budget-mun-2016-newfoundland-1.3535785>
- Canadian Press. 2016. "Newfoundland and Labrador scales back 'deficit levy.'" *Maclean's*, May 25. <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-and-labrador-scales-back-deficit-levy/>

- CBC. 2015. "Ball looks for more active, open government," December 30.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/ball-active-open-government-1.3383685>
- CBC. 2016. "'Resign' Dwight Ball posters email fuels fire for even more posters," June 27.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/resign-poster-email-fuels-fire-more-posters-1.3653994>
- CBC. 2018a. "Cathy Bennett calls out bullying by Liberals; not in my cabinet, says Dwight Ball," May 1, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/cathy-bennett-harassment-bullying-1.4642732>
- CBC. 2018b. "Graydon Pelley walks away from PCs to start new political group," November 14. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/new-political-party-1.4904572>
- CBC. 2018c. "Severance buyout for NAPE OK, but no layoffs 'dangerous,' warns employers' council," January 11. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/richard-alexander-government-nape-severance-1.4482092>
- CBC. 2019a. "Dwight Ball says he's not ready to don Muskrat jersey, as inquiry reaches milestone," July 5. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/muskrat-dwight-milestone-1.5201478>
- CBC. 2019b. "Critics concerned proposed budget is a placeholder for something else," April 16. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/ches-crosbie-alison-coffin-gerry-earle-nl-budget-1.5100583>
- CBC. 2019c. "Liberal bank account boasts 12 times more cash than PC war chest," April 11. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/ches-crosbie-pc-campaign-finances-1.5092556>
- CBC. 2019d. "Premier not ruling out spring election," January 25.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/dwight-ball-nl-spring-election-1.4992468>
- CBC. 2019e. "Robocalls, 'push polling' need to be addressed, say Liberals," May 20.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/poll-liberals-1.5140175>
- CBC. 2019f. "Liberals and PCs neck and neck with just months until election," February 6.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/mqo-january-polls-1.5007720>
- CBC. 2019g. "N.L. cabinet minister apologizes after describing Innu as playing 'race card' in leaked voicemail recording," September 12.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/innu-nation-perry-trimper-1.5281421>
- Corporate Research Associates. 2019. "Satisfaction with NL Liberal government at highest point in three years." March 6. <https://cra.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/19-1-NL-News-Release-voting-intentions.pdf>
- Cowan, Peter. 2017. "Cathy Bennett gets positive responses after speaking out on cyberbullying," CBC News, January 24.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/cathy-bennett-positive-reaction-1.3948497>
- Cowan, Peter. 2019. "Ches Crosbie calls for review of his own leadership, acknowledges lack of charisma," CBC News, November 21.

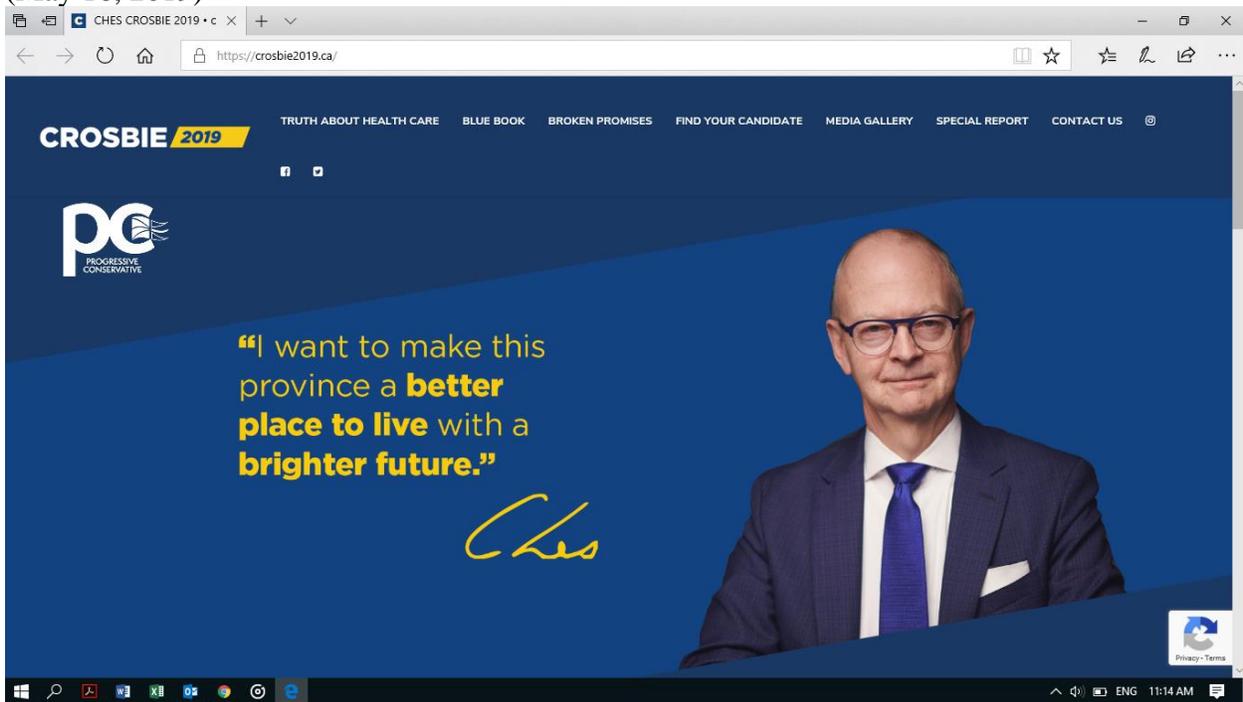
- <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/ches-crosbie-charisma-leadership-review-1.5368799>
- Cowan, Peter and Ariana Kelland. 2016. "Dwight Ball overhauls communications in premier's office," CBC News, August 11. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/nancy-oconnor-out-as-director-communications-1.3716994>
- Dangerfield, Katie. 2016. "Brian Pallister ranked Canada's second most popular premier: Angus Reid," Global News, May 25. <https://globalnews.ca/news/2720789/brian-pallister-ranked-canadas-second-most-popular-premier-angus-reid/>
- Feehan, James P. 2018. "The long-run price elasticity of residential demand for electricity: Results from a natural experiment." *Utilities Policy* 51: 12-17.
- Graham, Anne. 2017. "Learning from public consultation about the proposed closures of libraries." *The Democracy Cookbook: Recipes to Renew Governance in Newfoundland and Labrador*, eds. Alex Marland and Lisa Moore, 187-189. St. John's: ISER Books.
- Grenier, Éric. 2019. "What didn't happen in the N.L. election – and why that matters," CBC News, May 18, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/grenier-nl-election-results-1.5140825>
- Gushue, John. 2018. "When the cat's away, will rogue MHAs play? How Dwight Ball's shuffle sent a message," CBC News, November 10. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/weekend-briefing-rona-cabinet-1.4898595>
- Gushue, John. 2019. "After this wild election, both Ball and Crosbie are in rough spots," CBC News, May 18. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/weekend-briefing-leader-futures-1.5140571>
- Kelland, Ariana. 2019. "Liberal campaign's \$5M arts funding commitment draws mixed reaction." CBC News, May 9. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/arts-nl-funding-liberal-campaign-promise-1.5129056>
- Kinsella, Stephanie. 2019. "In a single week, just under \$339M worth of Liberal pre-election announcements," CBC News, April 14. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/liberals-one-week-millions-spending-projects-1.5095573>
- Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador. 2019. *Onward: Clear Direction, Proven Leadership*. [Election platform.] <https://nlliberals.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/NL-Liberals-Onward-Platform-forweb.pdf>
- Mackey, Gerri Lynn. 2019. "From 'head on a platter' to 'my apologies': Ches Crosbie walks back election night outburst," NTV News, May 17. <http://ntv.ca/from-head-on-a-platter-to-my-apologies-ches-crosbie-walks-back-election-night-outburst/>
- Maher, David. 2018. "Newfoundland and Labrador politicians file police complaint against Twitter troll," *The Telegram*, May 1. <https://www.thetelegram.com/news/local/newfoundland-and-labrador-politicians-file-police-complaint-against-twitter-troll-206744/>
- Maher, David and Glen Whiffen. 2019. "Newfoundland and Labrador provincial election set for May 16," *The Telegram*, April 17. <https://www.thetelegram.com/news/local/campaign-begins-as-premier-sets-newfoundland-and-labrador-provincial-election-date-for-may-16-303077/>

- Marland, Alex. 2016. "The 2015 Newfoundland and Labrador election: Liberals have a ball as PC party suffers from post-Williams hangover." *Canadian Political Science Review* 9(3): 72-98.
- McKenzie-Sutter, Holly. 2019a. "Newfoundland party leaders face off in first TV debate ahead of provincial election." *Globe and Mail*, May 1. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-newfoundland-party-leaders-face-off-in-first-tv-debate-ahead-of/>
- McKenzie-Sutter, Holly. 2019b. "Premier Dwight Ball defends decision to carry on with Muskrat falls megaproject despite ballooning costs," *Globe and Mail*, July 4. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-premier-dwight-ball-defends-decision-to-carry-on-with-muskrat-falls/>
- McLeod, James. 2016. *Turmoil, as Usual: Politics in Newfoundland and Labrador and the Road to the 2015 Election*. St. John's: Creative Publishers.
- McLeod, James. 2017. "Timeline: The Ed Martin severance scandal," *The Telegram*, February 20. <https://www.thetelegram.com/news/local/timeline-the-ed-martin-severance-scandal-127048/>
- New Democratic Party of Newfoundland and Labrador. 2019. "Election Platform 2019." https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8xpv133v_LXS19HaHAwUmU5TTcxbWtSdGF3aVEyaUJVV2FB/view
- NL Liberals. 2019. "Onward." (Election platform). <https://nlliberals.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/NL-Liberals-Onward-Platform-forweb.pdf>
- Osborne, Tom. 2019. "Budget speech." <https://www.gov.nl.ca/budget/2019/budget-speech/>
- Progressive Conservative Party of Newfoundland and Labrador. 2019. "Blue Book: Yes with Ches." (Election platform). <https://crosbie2019.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Blue-Book-V04-WEB-1.pdf>
- Roberts, Terry. 2016a. "N.L. budget: \$1.83B deficit, across-the-board tax hikes and layoffs," CBC News, April 14, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/nl-budget-bad-news-1.3535718>
- Roberts, Terry. 2016b. "It's official: Muskrat Falls a boondoggle, says Stan Marshall," CBC News, June 24. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/stan-marshall-muskrat-falls-update-1.3649540>
- Roberts, Terry. 2017a. "Nearly 300 jobs cut as N.L. looks to make 'flatter, leaner' civil service," February 22. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/management-public-sector-cuts-1.3993452>
- Roberts, Terry. 2017b. "'I wouldn't say I was drunk': Ches Crosbie hopes voters will focus on his leadership potential." *CBC*, October 25. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/ches-crosbie-apology-breathalyzer-1.4370737>
- Roberts, Terry. 2019. "All hail king Eddie How a tight election could mean a big role for estranged Liberal." *CBC*, May 9, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/eddie-joyce-candidate-1.5129574>
- VOCM. 2019. "\$2.5-Billion for NL over 38 years in renegotiated Atlantic Accord," April 2. <https://vocm.com/news/ottawa-commits-to-rate-mitigation-involvement-in-muskrat-falls-renegotiated-atlantic-accord-provides-major-cash-infusion/>

Appendix 1 Screenshot of Liberal Party homepage (May 16, 2019)



Appendix 2 Screenshot of Progressive Conservative Party homepage (May 16, 2019)



Appendix 3 Screenshot of New Democratic Party homepage (May 16, 2019)



Appendix 4 Screenshot of Newfoundland and Labrador Alliance Party homepage (May 16, 2019)

