

The 2006 Provincial Election in New Brunswick

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Introduction:

New Brunswick's 36th General Election was held 18 September 2006 (on provincial party system compositions see Appendix). Shawn Graham's Liberals defeated incumbent Bernard Lord's Progressive Conservatives (PC), winning 29 seats to the PCs' 26. Just seven of the 55 MLAs were women, as in 2003. Only one other party – the New Democrats (NDP) led by Allison Brewer – contested the election, as did four Independents; however, none won any seats. Although the PCs won fewer seats than the Liberals, they received more votes: 177,582 (47.1%) to the Liberals' 176,443 (46.8%). The 2006 election also saw a reapportionment of seats, with southern NB gaining two seats at the expense of the north.

Table 1: Party standings and election results: 1999 to 2006

	1999	at dissolution	2003	at dissolution	2006	Present
<i>PCs</i>	44	47	28	28	26	23
<i>Liberals</i>	10	7	26	26	29	32
<i>NDP</i>	1	1	1	0	0	0
<i>IND</i>	0	0	0	1	0	0
<i>total</i>	55	55	55	55	55	55

The Players:

Bernard Lord became premier of New Brunswick in 1999, when his PC party upset the incumbent Liberals (Table 1). Lord, the PCs' first Francophone leader, was just 33 that year when he captured 44 seats and reduced the Liberals to just ten. Young, dynamic and effortlessly bilingual, Lord soon attracted national attention, many regarding him as a potential leader for what was then the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada (Aubin, 2002; Desserud, 2003).

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Shawn Graham won the Liberal leadership in 2002. While not as fluently bilingual as Lord, he is comfortable in both languages. He is also youthfully dynamic (youth is apparently an asset in New Brunswick politics: since 1960, when Liberal Louis Robichaud defeated PC Hugh John Flemming, no premier elected to office for the first time has been over the age of forty).¹ Graham's first test as Liberal leader came in 2003, when he surprised many by coming within a few votes² of upsetting Lord's PCs (Table 1). His success in that election is likely why he was able to stay on to fight the election in 2006. Not since the 1950s have the Liberals and the PCs fought successive elections with the same leaders. Graham was just 39 when he became premier (Desserud, 2007b).

Allison Brewer succeeded the popular Elizabeth Weir as leader of the NDP in 2005. Brewer is an award-winning community activist and organizer, but she inherited a party that needed much more than her organization skills. It continues to be chronically short of funds, and has yet to build riding associations province-wide. Only 48 ridings fielded NDP candidates in 2006. Unlike Lord and Graham, Brewer does not speak French.

Lead up:

Lord's misfortunes began with the 2003 election, one that many thought Lord would easily win. The Liberals were still recovering from the shock of their 1999 defeat, and were furthermore led by the young and relatively inexperienced Graham. As well, once in power, New Brunswick governments are difficult to dislodge: not only has no government been defeated after just one term, since 1956 no government had been defeated after just two terms.³ However, the PCs might have remembered that, with less to lose, young leaders take more chances. After all, that is how the PCs won the 1999 election. The Liberals attacked the Lord government throughout the 2003 campaign while the PCs, never seeming to find their game, could only defend. The Liberal's aggressive campaigning almost paid off, resulting in one of New Brunswick's closest elections.

The PC government that met the legislature in 2003 was a pale reflection of the confident and energized party that took power in 1999. Once the Speaker was chosen, the PC government found itself in a tie with the combined opposition, and outnumbered in the legislative committees. Then NDP leader Elizabeth Weir resigned to become CEO of the newly-created New Brunswick Energy Efficiency and Conservation Commission. There is widespread speculation that Lord created the position with the express purpose of enticing Weir out of her seat, with the hopes the PCs could win the resulting by-election. However, this was not to be and the Liberals won the seat, bringing their total to 27.

Over the next year, the PCs suffered the usual round of policy missteps and cabinet resignations. The government closed hospitals to save money, incurring the wrath of rural New Brunswickers. Their 'Orimulsion' deal with Venezuela provoked environmentalists, but then the Venezuelan government reneged on the deal, provoking a 2-billion dollar lawsuit.⁴ The economy continued to sputter along as key resource sector industries such as forestry and mining suffered serious losses. These were not happy days for the PCs.

Then things became a little silly. Overlooked in a rare cabinet shuffle in the early months of 2006, PC backbencher Michael 'Tanker' Malley threatened to vote against the government if Premier Lord did not add him to the list. Lord (properly) refused, and so Malley announced his decision to sit as an Independent. This meant the PCs now had 26 seats (27 counting the Speaker). At this time, the Liberals also dropped back to 26 seats when MLA Frank Branch left the Liberal caucus in the wake of an investigation of his financial dealings while general manager of North Shore Forest Products. Still, the seat count did not favour Lord, and the standings were: PCs 26 (plus the Speaker), Liberals 26, and two Independents. If Malley and Branch voted against the government, it would fall; the Speaker's vote would be of no help were the government defeated 28 to 26, or 27 to 26 with one abstention.

A range of parliamentary conventions were then ignored. First, the Premier asked Speaker Bev Harrison to resign, and then promptly appointed him to cabinet. Second, Malley was proposed as Speaker but no other PC was allowed to run against him.⁵ Malley was acclaimed, and then announced from the Speaker's Chair that he was rejoining the PC party and would return to its caucus meetings (Franks, 2006). Soon after, Malley's deciding vote saved the government's budget. Still, when the Assembly finally recessed for the summer, observers wondered how much longer the government would survive (Hagerman, 2006).

Not long, as it turned out. During the recess, two events convinced Lord to abandon his claim that he would never call an election just to take advantage of favourable circumstances (Desserud, 2007a). The first was a bump in the polls, showing that despite the debacle of the last legislative session, the PCs were once again favoured by a majority of New Brunswickers – the first time since 2003. The second was the resignation of the PC member for Tantramar, Peter Mesheau (Hagerman and Shipley, 2006; Jardine and McHardie, 2006).

Lord now faced the prospect of meeting the Assembly with only 26 members, not counting the Speaker. The Liberals, with 26 seats, could likely rely on the vote of the Independent MLA. This would give them 27 votes, and, once again, the Speaker's vote would not help if and when the government faced a vote of non-confidence. A quick by-election was a possibility; however, with the popular Mesheau gone, the PCs were not confident of a win. Were the Liberals to win back the seat (they held it from 1987 to 1999), they would have more seats than the PCs.

However, the polls suggested that support was moving back to the PCs. In November of 2005, support amongst decided voters bottomed out at 34%. By August of 2006, they were polling at 45%. Satisfaction with the PC government also improved, from 50% satisfied in November 2005 to 57% in August 2006. The number of those 'undecided,' 'didn't know' or 'wouldn't answer' was very high: as much as 40% in some of these polls. Still, the trend likely convinced the PCs they could win a fall 2006 election. So the Legislature was dissolved 18 August, with an election scheduled for 18 September (Davies, 2006a).

The 2006 Campaign:

After the ruckus of the preceding spring, the fall campaign was somewhat anticlimactic. Further, unlike the 1999 and 2003 campaigns – both hijacked by special interest groups – in 2006 the parties tightly controlled the campaign agenda. Indeed, pundits⁶ soon complained that the Liberals and PCs sounded like they were reading from identical scripts, with only the most nuanced differences between their respective platforms (Daily Gleaner, 2006; Shipley, 2006). NDP Leader Brewer wondered why they did not consider saving money by campaigning from the same bus (Telegraph-Journal, 2006). Otherwise, for the record, the Liberal platform contained three planks: education, energy and the economy. The PCs campaigned on what they called the ‘Five in Five’ initiative: education, investment, wellness, the environment and inclusion, the latter referring to a promise to decrease the poverty rate.

The similarity of platforms and the tightly scripted campaigns are easily explained. In 1999, Lord went into the election with just nine seats; he was young, untried, and had little to lose by making rash promises. In 2003, it was the Liberals’ turn to fight a campaign with a young and untried leader, and with seven seats, little to lose with an all-or-nothing campaign. But in 2006, with the parties pretty well tied, even the smallest movement of votes would mean the difference between winning and losing. Indeed, this is precisely what appears to have happened. The Liberals won because they picked up some votes from the NDP and because reapportionment placed enough Liberal voters in different ridings to tip the balance.

Opinion Polls:

The lack of movement amongst NB voters can be seen in the opinion polls taken during the campaign. In polls taken just before the election was called, the PCs led the Liberals 47% to 40% in terms of support amongst decided voters, although 41% were undecided or would not answer the question. Lord also enjoyed more personal support than Graham with 37% preferring him as premier to Graham’s 27% (20% undecided or wouldn’t answer).

Polls taken during the first two weeks of the campaign showed that support for the PCs was holding, with 45% supporting the PCs and 38% supporting the Liberals. The NDP remained at their historic 10%, while ‘undecided’ or ‘don’t know / won’t say’ voters remained at 41%. Lord was also the preferred choice as premier, enjoying 37% personal support compared to 27% for Graham.

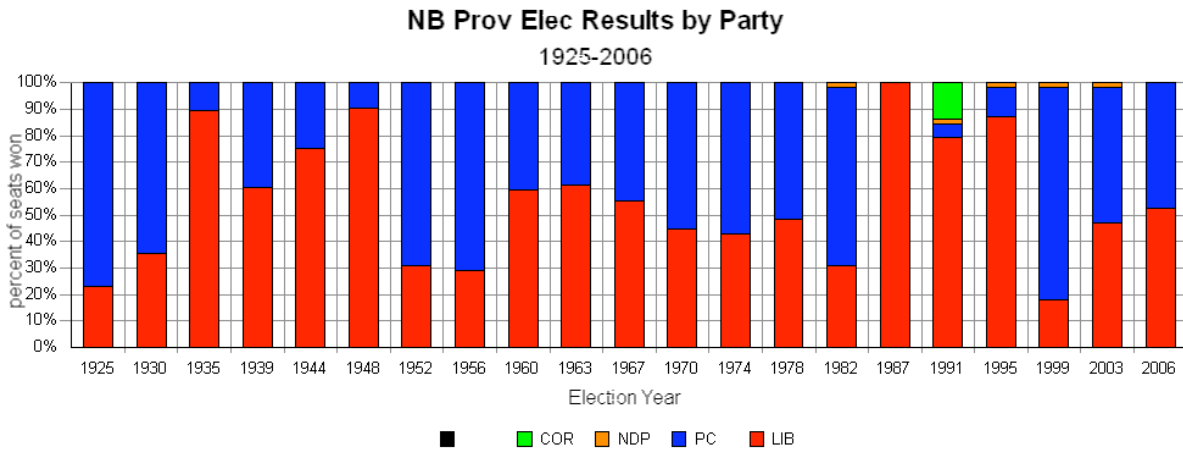
It is unclear whether the leaders’ debates had any effect on voter preference. The first leaders’ debates were pre-taped and broadcast 7 September, while a roundtable discussion was shown 10 September. Polls taken during this time showed that support for the PCs slipping, down to 42% of decided voters, while the Liberals’ support increased to 44% (the NDP stayed at 10%). However, surveys targeting the debate itself gave Lord the lead amongst those who had ‘read, seen or heard something about the debate’ (39%). In any case, when the votes were tallied election night, the PCs received 47.1% to the Liberals’ 46.8%. The PCs, then, returned to the support they had before the election was called’ while the Liberals improved slightly.

Only the NDP showed much of a change, a drop from 10% to 5%. Brewer cannot speak French, and this matters in New Brunswick. When Radio Canada refused her request for a translator, she was forced to sit out the French-language leaders' debate (Morrison, 2006). This hurt her campaign in Francophone New Brunswick, particularly in the predominantly Francophone region of the province represented federally by NDP MP Yvon Godin.⁷ Indeed, not all of the provincial ridings falling within the boundaries of Acadie Bathurst even had NDP candidates in 2006. That most Francophones in New Brunswick are Roman Catholic, and Brewer is an outspoken pro-abortionist, was also a liability.⁸ It is, perhaps, interesting to note that she has since been succeeded as NDP leader by Roger Duguay, a Francophone and former priest.⁹

Analysis of Results:

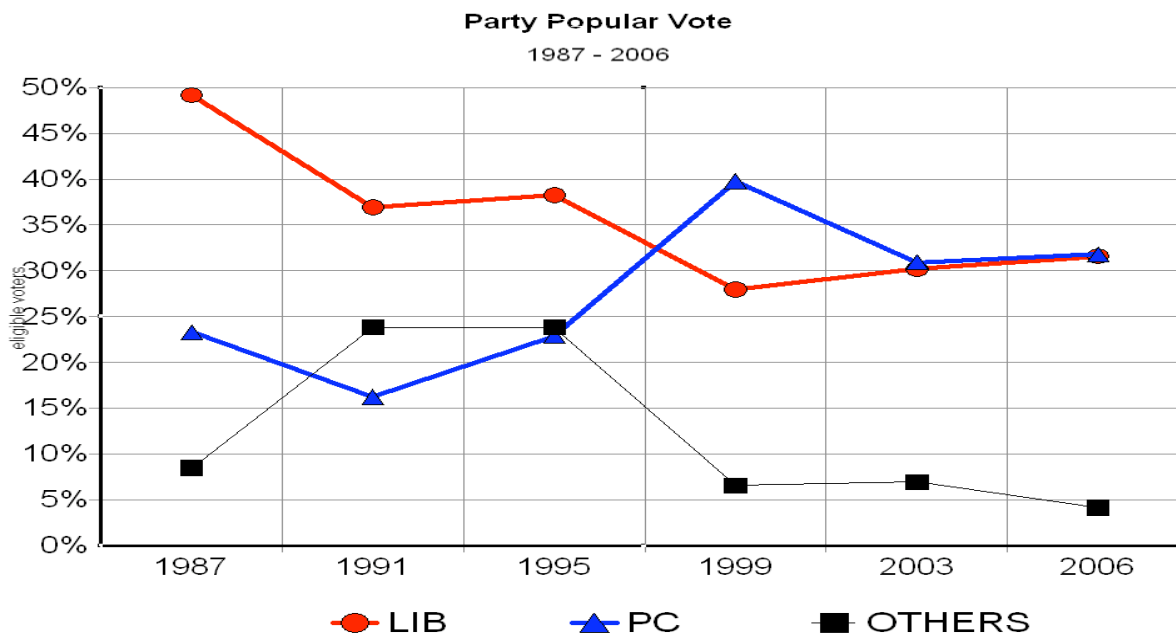
After many years of entrenched voting behaviour, with voters choosing the same party election after election, New Brunswick electoral politics became 'unstuck,' as it were, in 1987 when the Liberals won every seat (Figure 1). In the three elections that followed (1991, 1995 and 1999), electoral volatility remained very high, with large numbers of seat turnovers and great swings in party support (Table 2). In 1999, for example, 37 of New Brunswick's 55 seats changed hands, the highest number since 1987 when 39 of 58 seats switched, all to Liberals .

Figure 1 – New Brunswick Provincial Elections Results by Party 1925-2006



However, there is now evidence that 'Canada's most perfect and durable two-party system' (Dyck, 1996:177) has returned. Although language no longer dominates voting choice (and hasn't since the 1970s),¹⁰ voting may have become entrenched once more (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – New Brunswick Party Popular Vote 1987-2006



In 2003, only 18 of 55 seats changed hands, and the volatility score was only 8.4 compared to 22 in the previous election. With reapportionment in 2006, seat turnovers are difficult to calculate; however, the volatility score for 2006 was even lower than in 2003, at 5, the lowest score since the 1970s (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: Volatility 1987 - 2006

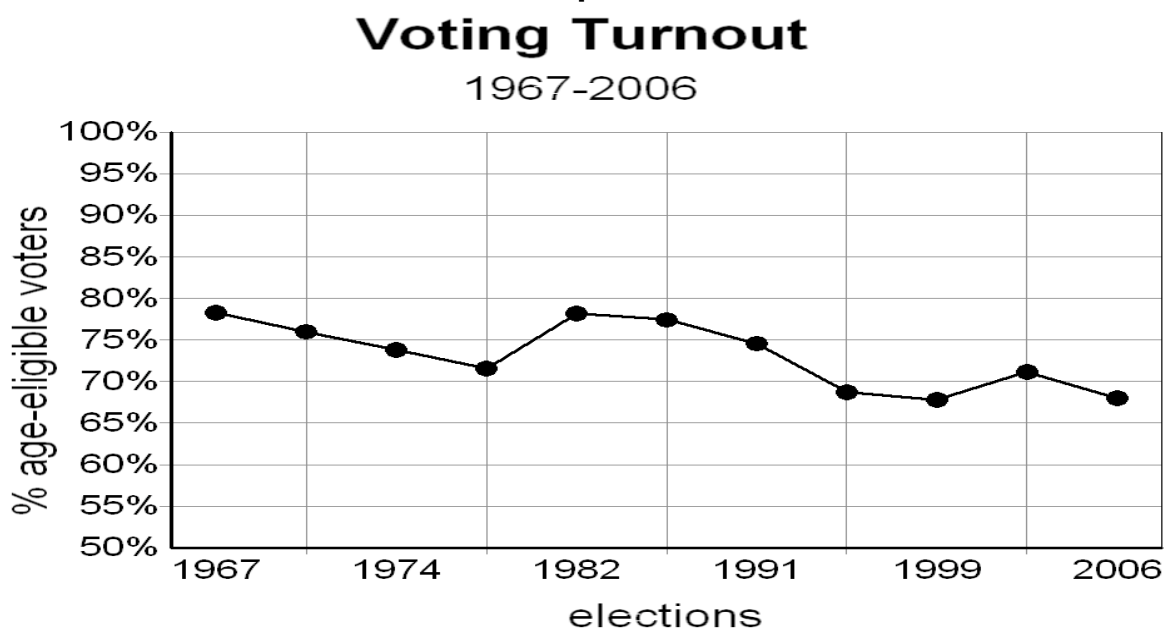
Election Year	Score
1987	19.6
1991	21.3
1995	15.1
1999	22.0
2003	8.4
2006	5.0

Table 3: Seat Turnovers 1987 – 2006

1987	66%
1991	21%
1995	reapportion
1999	67%
2003	33%
2006	reapportion

Both parties marginally increased their popular vote in the election, with the Liberals receiving 46.8% to the PCs' 47.1%. (for the situation with respect to voter turnout, see Figure 3).

Figure 3 – New Brunswick Provincial Voting Turnout 1967-2006



However, the Liberals picked up key votes in the new ridings in southern New Brunswick. Otherwise, familiarity seemed to be the key to victory. Of the 55 ridings, only seven were not contested by incumbent MLAs. In two of those, a candidate who had represented that riding previously (albeit with

different boundaries) ran again in 2006. Of the 48 incumbents, 43 were re-elected, as were the two former MLAs. To put it another way, of the 55 MLAs who convened when the Legislative Assembly opened in February of 2007, 45 had been there before. Only five incumbents were defeated in the 2006 election, and that includes one MLA who, because of the boundary revision, found himself running against another incumbent.

Female Candidates:

In 1991, a record number of female candidates sought election (Table 4). The NDP led the way with 25 of 58 (43%) candidates, while the Liberals fielded 10 of 58 (17%), the PCs 8 of 58 (14%) and the CoR nine of 48 (19%). Of the 222 candidates running in 1991, 52 or 23% were women. Eleven, or 19% of the MLAs elected in 1991 were women. In 1995, the actual number of female MLAs dropped to just nine, but since the Assembly was also reduced to 55 from 58 seats, the percentage of women MLAs went up, to 22%. Since then, the percentage of women both as candidates and as MLAs has declined. However, there was little change between 2003 and 2006 (Table 4). The NDP did not field a full slate of candidates in 2006; however, they managed to file the same number of female candidates. The PCs ran one fewer female in 2006, but the Liberals ran one more, their highest percentage ever and matching their total for 1991. Still, it does seem things have become stuck, and the breakthrough for women promised by their successes in the 1990s yet to materialize.

Table 4: Women in NB Elections 1987 - 2006

	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2006
Lib candidates	8	10	8	9	9	10
Lib elected	8	9	8	1	1	3
PC candidates	8	8	5	10	9	8
PC elected	0	0	0	8	5	4
NDP candidates	14	25	20	24	15	15
NDP elected	0	1	1	1	1	0
CoR candidates	0	9	5	1	0	0
CoR elected	0	1	0	0	0	0
Grey candidates	0	0	0	0	1	0
NLP candidates	0	0	8	2	0	0
Ind candidates	1	0	1	0	0	0
Total candidates	31	52	47	46	34	33
Total elected	8	11	9	10	7	7

Aftermath:

The leaders of both the PCs and the NDP resigned soon after the election. The NDP chose Roger Duguay to replace Brewer on 13 October 2007 (Patten, 2007). Duguay, a Roman Catholic priest 'defrocked' in 1999 when he ignored an order from his bishop to stay out of politics (MacKinnon, 1999), is also a Francophone. Furthermore, his home riding falls within the boundaries of the NDP-held federal riding of Acadie Bathurst, a chronically poor region in Francophone New Brunswick. It is possible, then, that the NDP will finally be able to capitalize on Acadian dissatisfaction with the distribution of wealth in New Brunswick.

Bernard Lord resigned his seat and his position as PC leader 31 January 2007 (CBC News, 2006b). He is now a Senior Counsel at McCarthy Tétrault, a law firm based in Montreal and Ottawa. On 3 December 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper appointed Lord to lead a 'cross-Canada official languages consultation' (OPM, 2007; McCarthy, 2007). Some see this move as an indication Lord will soon be joining Harper's cabinet, and will run in the next federal election as a candidate in Moncton. Meanwhile, the PCs promise a convention to replace Lord sometime in the fall of 2008. At the time of writing (January 2008), no one has formally announced his or her intention to seek the leadership, although MLA Paul Robichaud is considered the unofficial frontrunner. However, local news has reported that a number of Anglophone PC MLAs have begun French lessons, with varying results. The Leader of the Official Opposition and Acting Leader of the PC party is veteran PC MLA Jeannot Volpé.

The Liberals reclaimed Lord's former seat in a by-election held 5 March 2007. As well, two PC MLAs (husband and wife) crossed the floor to sit with the Liberals, one (Wally Stiles) being named to cabinet. So in January 2008, the Liberals' seat total has reached 32 and the PCs have dropped to 23.

The government's main policy focus since coming into power has been 'self sufficiency,' which they hope to achieve by 2026 (McHardie, 2007). A self-sufficiency report has been released (GNB, 2007b). It is difficult to find tangible examples of the government's self-sufficiency agenda. However, one might include moving the office of the Energy ministry to Saint John, a city the Graham government has named the 'energy hub' for New Brunswick. This move was meant to complement several huge industrial initiatives in Saint John, including the possibility of a second nuclear reactor at nearby Point Lepreau, the completion of the natural gas pipeline through the city, the construction of an LNG Terminal and the construction of a second Irving Oil refinery.

Graham's proposed education reforms have been both the most controversial and the least specific. Two commissions, one on post-secondary education (PSE), the other on teaching French as a second language, were struck in 2006 and 2007 respectively.¹¹ The commission struck to 'review of French second-language and programming services' (GNB, 2007a) has yet to make its recommendations; however, many fear it will call for the cancellation of New Brunswick's popular early French immersion programmes.

The PSE commission's report, presented 14 September 2007, was met with unprecedented protests across the province, mostly because of its recommendations that the satellite campuses of the University of New Brunswick and the Université de Moncton sever their links with their parent institutions, lose their university status, and combine with local community colleges (PSE Report, 2007; Hobson, 2007; Desserud, 2007c, 3 parts). In response to the protests, the government struck a 'working group' involving the deputy minister and the presidents and principals of the province's universities and community colleges. That report has now been presented to the government, but no decision has been formally announced.

Meanwhile, New Brunswick's forestry industry is in crisis, and several pulp and paper mills have either closed down or are under threat of closure. Health care and hospital reform is also on the government's agenda, and this promises to be (as usual) controversial. It has been quite a learning curve for the new premier, as Premier Graham explained to this author: 'It's like trying to take a drink of water from a fire hose.'

Appendix: New Brunswick Facts

Population (2008): 719,650
English mother tongue: 463,190 (64.4%)
French mother tongue: 232,975 (32.4%)

Registered Political Parties:

Liberal Party of New Brunswick
Progressive Conservative Party of New Brunswick
New Democratic Party of New Brunswick

Deregistered Political Parties:

	<i>(date of deregistration)</i>
The Grey Party of New Brunswick	22 October 2004
Confederation of Regions Party	31 March 2002
Natural Law Party of New Brunswick	13 July 1999
Parti Acadien	1 December 1986.

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Endnotes

1. A point not lost on Graham. See his article on youth and New Brunswick politics (2000-01). See also DeMont (1999).
2. I mean this literally: In 2003 the Liberals lost the riding of Kennebecasis by just 18 votes (following a recount). A victory there would have meant the Liberals had 27 seats, the PCs 27 and the NDP one.
3. However, as Christopher Page (2003) points out, an electoral defeat after just one term is very rare in any Canadian province.
4. Which the PC government eventually dropped in February 2005 (Davies, 2005).
5. Speakers in the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly have been elected by secret ballot by the MLAs since 1994. Harrison had been reelected Speaker 29 July 2003.
6. Including this author. See Davies (2006b).
7. Six provincial ridings fall within the federal riding of Acadie Bathurst, and three others overlap its borders. The riding is about 84% Francophone.
8. Brewer is also an outspoken advocate for gay rights. When she was chosen leader of the NDP, the *Telegraph Journal's* headline read: 'NDP chooses lesbian activist as new leader' (Kaufield, 2005). For media coverage of Brewer, see Camp (2007).
9. Duguay received the most votes among any of the NDP candidates, securing 26.1%. After the election, he criticised Brewer for her inability to speak French and her pro-abortion stance (CBC News, 2006a).
10. Although it seems to matter to voters that leaders can speak both languages, studies show that equal percentages of Francophones and Anglophones support both the Liberals and PCs. See Cross and Stewart (2001-2002) and Desserud et al. (2004).
11. Graham's penchant for commissions and studies has been criticised. See Casey (2008).