

Democratic Reform on the Menu in Newfoundland and Labrador

What should democratic reform look like in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador? In advance of the provincial government's plan to strike an all-party committee to study this question, two Memorial University professors used a public engagement grant to create a first-of-its kind, independent grassroots initiative in hopes of supporting this committee's work. The *Democracy Cookbook* explores many options for better democratic governance in a way that is accessible to the public and in a manner that promotes greater public awareness of the committee's mandate. In this article, the authors inform readers about how this initiative was designed, why it may be an effective model for other small jurisdictions, and some of what people will find in the open-source publication that resulted.

Alex Marland and Lisa Moore

Conversations about democratic reform are stirring in Newfoundland and Labrador. In 2015, the provincial Liberal Party's election platform made the following commitment:

A New Liberal Government will form an all-party committee on democratic reform. This committee will consult extensively with the public to gather perspectives on democracy in Newfoundland and Labrador and make recommendations for ways to improve. The committee will consider a number of options to improve democracy, such as: changing or broadening methods of voting to increase participation in elections, reforming campaign finance laws to cover leadership contests, and requiring provincial parties to report their finances on a bi-annual basis.¹

Similar language appeared in the ministerial mandate letter issued by Premier Dwight Ball to government House leader Andrew Parsons in December 2015 and again in December 2017. During the Spring 2018 session,² the government intends to strike an all-party committee on democratic reform.

To kick-start the committee, we recently led an innovative, independent grassroots initiative called *The Democracy Cookbook*. The project represents a collective effort to sort out what changes to institutions, processes and rules can turn Newfoundland and Labrador from a democratic laggard into a democratic leader. To our knowledge, it is the first grassroots initiative of its kind and the first to support a parliamentary committee of this nature.

The systemic problems that characterize politics in Newfoundland and Labrador have been well-documented in *Canadian Parliamentary Review*.³ The province is currently mired in a financial slump that is dominating public discourse. Politicians need assistance to figure out what to change and the conviction to do something about it. But resources are not available to support the sort of democratic reform undertakings that have occurred in larger provinces such as British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec. So, what if a number of citizens came together to suggest solutions?

Memorial University awarded us a public engagement grant to find out. The result is an innovative community-oriented book called *The Democracy Cookbook: Recipes to Renew Governance in Newfoundland and Labrador*, recently published by ISER Books. The book is available free as Open Access or for purchase as a low-cost paperback. Yet, it is so much more than a book: the very act of inviting people to write generated awareness of the government's promise to look into democratic reform.

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The 89 authors of *The Democracy Cookbook* could fill two Houses of Assembly as well as a couple of legislative committees. They are academics and students from all around Memorial University of Newfoundland – they come from backgrounds in political science, English, sociology, economics, gender studies, history, anthropology, archaeology, classics, French, German, philosophy, business, education, engineering, music, and many others. Contributors were also drawn from the broader community, including journalists, activists, creative writers, former politicians and some restaurateurs. To demonstrate wide support for such an undertaking, a past leader of each provincial party signed the foreword. Former Progressive Conservative Premier Kathy Dunderdale, former Liberal Premier Roger Grimes and former New Democratic Party leader Jack Harris all immediately recognized the need for the project. John Crosbie, the former federal minister, is among other supporters who make an appearance on the back cover with an endorsement.

The Democracy Cookbook features dozens and dozens of succinct opinion pieces about how to improve democratic governance in the province. Authors came up with creative solutions that make better use of existing resources.

The book, including its title, cover and writing style, was designed to be accessible and attractive to people who may not otherwise pay much attention to politics. There is an overview chapter about how government works. There are poems. There are politically-themed food recipes. Each chapter begins with a short mini-abstract in the form of a tweet so that readers can move through the book quickly. Author bios are accompanied by their photos.

The St. John's-based *Telegram* was a key project partner. The newspaper ran daily full-page extracts in print and online, week after week throughout Fall 2017. A prominent banner appeared on its homepage. Months later site visitors are still greeted by a book icon. The newspaper and ISER Books shared the excerpts on social media including Twitter posts made to #nlpoli and grouped under #DemocraticReformNL. We gave talks around Memorial University, in St. John's and Corner Brook.

Connecting with parliamentarians and Assembly staff was a particularly important part of the process. We delivered briefings about the project to the Speaker's Office and to all three political party caucuses, including political staff. We coordinated

a photo exhibit in the foyer of the Confederation Building, just outside the entrance to the legislative precinct, which is a high traffic area for politicians and public servants. The photos featured information about the project and archival images from around Newfoundland and Labrador. Staff at the House of Assembly took photos of the exhibit which, along with the archival photos, were published in the book. In a further effort to promote civic education, there is a full page of information about the House of Assembly website as an information resource, prepared by Assembly staff.

We held two launches, both designed to get people engaged. In November 2017, we celebrated the release of the paperback version. In a packed room at the university, a CBC radio personality moderated conversations with contributors before the main event got underway. Government House leader Andrew Parsons, leader of the official opposition Paul Davis, interim leader of the third party Lorraine Michael and independent Member of the House of Assembly Paul Lane all participated in a Q&A session about democratic reform that was covered by local news outlets.

Then in January, we celebrated the release of the Open Access version, designed to connect with people who do not live near a bookstore or who might not have the financial capacity to buy the print version. This time the celebration was entirely digital. ISER Books rolled out six short online videos of authors talking about their contributions. We sent emails to federal, provincial and municipal politicians to ask them to spread the word to their constituents and subsequently generated social media chatter. Instructors in political science and geography adopted the book for their courses.

So, what is in *The Democracy Cookbook*, exactly? It is organized into 11 sections, dealing with themes such as the province's political culture, municipal politics, leadership, communication, engagement, scrutiny, finances and operations of the legislature. Among the many chapters:

- "Conflicts of dependence and independence in the press gallery," by journalist Michael Connors;
- "Motivating voter turnout," by economist Nahid Masoudi of Memorial University;
- "Youth vote," by Juno Award winning songwriter Amelia Curran;
- "Electing women to the House of Assembly," by Nancy Peckford and Raylene Lang-Dion of Equal Voice;

- “Democratizing the legislative branch,” by political scientist Paul Thomas of Carleton University; and
- “Creating spaces for Indigenous Labradorians in provincial governance,” by University of Toronto PhD student Erin Aylward and Elizabeth Zarpa of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

And it wouldn’t be a cookbook without some actual recipes. The food section has playfully titled creations such as “filibuster fried cod” and “by-election bakeapple dessert,” authored by restaurateurs and former politicians from all three main parties.

The appendix transparently outlines the processes to create the book, and makes mention of a number of challenges we encountered. For example, extra effort was needed to ensure that many women participated, ultimately achieving a goal of gender balance among authors. And, some submissions from community contributors were rejected because the writing style was not salvageable. It is our hope that others can learn from the experience.

What should democratic reform look like in Newfoundland and Labrador? The book concludes that the provincial government should explore creating a *Public Consultation Act*. The province’s Independent Appointments Commission should appoint a current or former judge to lead a small group of researchers to conduct a democratic audit. The rules governing political parties, campaigning and political finance need to be refreshed. The all-party committee should identify guiding principles that will steer proposed changes to democratic governance. Above all, the process of looking into democratic reform should not be hijacked by conversations about electoral reform, which is much narrower and has proven problematic elsewhere in Canada.

In our view, this distinctive made-in-Newfoundland approach should be on the menu anywhere that people want to engage the public in conversations about democratic governance. It is a particularly inspiring model for Canada’s smaller provinces and territories.

Notes

- 1 Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador, *A Stronger Tomorrow: Our Five Point Plan* (2015). https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformes/liberal_party_of_newfoundland_and_labrador_2015.pdf
- 2 See: <http://www.thetelegram.com/news/democratic-reform-on-menu-in-newfoundland-163888/>



Public exhibit, Confederation Building foyer, St. John’s (top); examples of full-page treatment in *The Telegram* newspaper (bottom).

- 3 Neil Penney, “The parliamentary tradition in Newfoundland,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 4:2 (Summer 1981), pp. 11-16; Alex Marland, “Scandal and reform in the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 30:4 (Winter 2007), pp. 25-29; Elizabeth Marshall, “The audit committee of the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 32:1 (Spring 2009), pp. 2-5; Alex Marland, “The Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 34:3 (Autumn 2011), pp. 13-24.