

Commission of Government

What is the best system of government?

Under what circumstances do you think a government should be replaced?



5.51 Inauguration of the Commission of Government, Feb. 16, 1934

Governor David Murray Anderson speaks at the ceremony which was held at the Newfoundland Hotel in St. John's. As Governor, Anderson served as the Chairman of the Commission in 1934. The other members of the 1934 Commission were Sir John Hope Simpson (Britain), Natural Resources; Thomas Lodge (Britain), Public Utilities; E.N.R. Trentham (Britain), Finance; Frederick C. Alderdice (Newfoundland), Home Affairs and Education; William R. Howley (Newfoundland), Justice; and John C. Puddester (Newfoundland), Public Health and Welfare.

**The British commissioners were appointed to the senior departments that had the greatest relevance to reviving the economy and balancing the budget.*

Introduction

In February 1934, responsible government in Newfoundland was replaced by a Commission of Government. The Commission consisted of seven men appointed by the British government: the governor, who was also chairman of the Commission, three British* appointees, and three Newfoundland appointees. The six commissioners voted on government measures and the governor signed them into law. The British government could not initiate legislation in Newfoundland, but the Commission needed permission from the Dominions Office for any of its major policies.

The Commission governed Newfoundland for 15 years, from 1934 until Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada in 1949. During that period, it initiated a number of reforms in order to balance the budget, decrease unemployment, and improve the health and well-being of Newfoundlanders. Although it did make some reforms within the fishery, the Commission's ability to carry out economic initiatives during the 1930s was limited because the world was still in the grips of the Great Depression and the colony's resource industries depended on global markets. As well the government

was restricted in its spending by the British Treasury. Thus, the Commission devoted most of its energies to social reforms, especially in the areas of education, public health, welfare, and law enforcement.

As with its economic reforms, the Commission's social reforms were hampered by a chronic lack of funds until the Second World War improved Newfoundland and Labrador's economy. Assessments of the Commission's

achievements vary. As historian Peter Neary notes: "Like much else in history, the Commission of Government is perhaps best known by what its enemies and heirs, often one and the same, have had to say about it. Those who first governed Newfoundland after Confederation had a vested interest in spreading the notion that 1949 was the Year One, and that all good things began with their accession to power."



5.52 Bonavista Cold Storage, post-1939
Bonavista Cold Storage Company, opened in 1939, is the oldest surviving fish plant on the island.

5.53 Codfish on a trawler off the Grand Banks, 1949
Trawlers were another development in the fishery in the late 1940s.

Reforms in the Fishery

Part of the Commission of Government's larger plan for the rehabilitation of Newfoundland and Labrador was "a scheme for the reorganization of the fishery." Although the Amulree Report had suggested the truck system was the cause of many of the problems with the fisheries, it had offered no suggestions on how to abolish it. Instead, the report called for greater government intervention in the fishery. Its recommendations included having the government establish schooner bases and bait depots at strategic points, such as Bay Bulls and Bay of Islands, and studying ways to establish a local canning industry that could market cod fillets, cod tongues, smoked haddock, lobsters, capelin, salmon, and other local fish products.

Based on this, the Commission of Government looked for ways to increase centralization and efficiency in the fishery. In 1936 it established the Newfoundland Fisheries Board, which set the framework for future government involvement in the industry. The Board had

three main functions: 1) to reform the saltfish marketing system; 2) to regulate and enforce fisheries laws; and 3) to oversee scientific research. It also established bait freezing plants around the country and a bait service in which a motorized vessel, the *Malakoff*, delivered frozen bait to fishers for the hook-and-line fishery.

During the Second World War, the Commission of Government saw another opportunity for the fishery with the arrival of quick-freezing technology that created a demand for frozen fish, especially in the United States. To enable Newfoundland to participate in this market, the government provided loans for the construction and operation of frozen-fish plants across the island. By 1946, there were 14 such plants in operation. Companies that operated these plants also began to use offshore trawlers after the war; in the coming years, these powerful vessels increasingly replaced schooners on the banks.

5.54 A group of school and pre-school children at Haystack, 1942



5.55 A group of children in Conche, c. 1940s



5.56 A Methodist school in the Gulch, c. 1940

Dozens of schools closed in Newfoundland and Labrador during the Great Depression. Those that remained open were in a general state of disrepair, prompting the Commission of Government to build new schools and improve existing ones. However, these efforts were hampered by a limited budget.

**The government also hoped to replace the denominational school system with a secular system, but opposition from the churches prevented such reform.*

Education Reforms

The education system was already in very poor condition when the Commission of Government took over in 1934. Teachers were underpaid and poorly trained, the school curriculum was out of date, schools were dilapidated and lacked basic supplies, and school enrolment was low. In 1935, the Commission of Government initiated a series of reforms* designed to address these issues, including: 1) improving the quality of instruction; 2) improving the quality of the curriculum; 3) improving school facilities;

and 4) increasing school attendance.

Educational reconstruction during the Commission of Government period was slow, however, due to limited financial resources, the need to increase teacher's salaries before other reforms, and the poor condition of educational facilities which the government inherited in 1934.

Improvements in Instruction:

- Returned teachers' salaries to their pre-Depression level. (Teachers were paid reduced salaries during the Depression because of the Newfoundland government's financial difficulties.)
- Encouraged teacher training by reopening the teachers' school at Memorial University College and establishing a summer school program.

Improvements in Curriculum:

- Revised curriculum to place emphasis on understanding rather than memorization.
- Reorganized curriculum to address more practical concerns by including health education, social education, and industrial training. It was thought this kind of curriculum would better serve a population whose employment would likely be in the fishery or other primary resource industry.

Improvements in Facilities:

- Initiated a construction program to build new schools and improve existing ones. By 1949, the government had built 555 new schools and renovated 264 others. However, many of these buildings still did not have electricity or running water; more than half were one-room schools; and most did not have libraries, laboratories, gymnasiums, or other facilities.
- Established Book Bureaus to provide students with free books and other school supplies. Prior to 1935, half of all schools lacked basic school equipment and 85 per cent did not even have a single book on their shelves.

Improvements in Attendance:

- Passed a School Attendance Act in 1942. This provided free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of seven and 14, as long as they were within a reasonable distance of a school. Prior to this Act, many children did not regularly attend school because they either lived too far away, worked in the fishery or found other employment to help supplement the family income, and/or their families could not afford to pay school fees. (Although fees were not compulsory, many parents were too embarrassed to send their children to class without paying.) Many poorer families also kept children home because they could not buy suitable clothing or footwear, particularly for winter conditions.

*In 1933, the average salary of a teacher was \$331 yearly, which was comparatively low. (For instance, during the same period, the average salary for a teacher in Nova Scotia was \$741.) By 1945, the Commission of Government had raised the average teacher salary to \$992.

In 1933, a British school inspector reported some children in Newfoundland and Labrador schools had nothing to write on except brown paper bags.

The 1935 Census indicated that 25 per cent of Newfoundland children between the ages of six and fourteen did not attend school regularly.



5.58 Patients on the women's ward, Bonavista Cottage Hospital, c. 1947

The Bonavista Cottage Hospital opened in July 1940. A typical cottage hospital employed one or two physicians, a small staff of nurses, and had a bed capacity of between 10 and 30.



5.59 An operating room (possibly in the Military Hospital in St. John's), c. 1942

Following the Second World War, American and Canadian Armed Forces turned many of their military hospitals in Newfoundland and Labrador over to the Commission of Government for civilian use.

Public Health Reforms

The poverty that came with the Depression compromised the health of many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Without enough money to heat their homes or buy enough food to maintain a healthy diet, many people had become susceptible to nutritional diseases like beriberi and contagious diseases like pneumonia and tuberculosis. At the same time, there were not enough doctors, nurses, or hospital facilities to treat the population. The

Commission of Government took several measures to address this situation. In fact, some of its most progressive policies were in the area of public health. These included initiatives to increase medical personnel and medical facilities, particularly in rural areas; improve the detection and treatment of tuberculosis; advance child health; and promote dietary reform.

In addition to providing affordable medical services to the public, hospital employees offered public health education and midwifery training.

*Communities still had to contribute 75 per cent of the nurse's salary.

Initiatives Related to Medical Personnel and Facilities

- Increased the number of doctors and nurses within the country. The public health division of the Department of Public Health and Welfare appointed two permanent medical officers to provide curative and preventive medicine and oversee a nursing staff in St. John's. In rural areas, the government hired doctors as full-time employees. It also took over the nursing services of Newfoundland Outport Nursing and Industrial Association (NONIA),* hired nurses to fill vacancies, and opened centres that had not previously been served by a doctor or a nurse.
- Improved Medical Training. The government supported specialized training for medical personnel by encouraging medical and nursing leaders to attend North American conferences on health care and securing financial support through the Rockefeller Foundation to send nurses to advanced nursing courses in Canada and the United States.
- Increased health care facilities for people in rural areas. The Commission of Government increased the number of nursing stations in rural areas and established several cottage hospitals. By 1942 the government had established 13 **cottage hospitals** across the island, in such communities as Markland, Argentia, and Bonne Bay. In 1935, the government also created a 'floating hospital' – the MV *Lady Anderson* – in order to reach the more isolated communities on the south coast of the island between Fortune Bay and Port aux Basques. The medical staff on board treated the sick, provided immunizations against contagious diseases, and conducted public health work.

Initiatives to Fight Tuberculosis:

- Expanded the tuberculosis sanatorium in St. John's and built a sanatorium in Corner Brook.
- Established the Avalon Health Unit as a means to increase detection of the disease. The Avalon Health Unit was based in Harbour Grace but travelled throughout the Avalon Peninsula, taking X-rays of the population and isolating diagnosed cases.
- Launched the *Christmas Seal*, a ship with medical facilities, to increase detection of tuberculosis and establish preventive measures against the disease.

Improvements in Child Health:

- Initiated a school health program. To improve school children's diets, the government distributed milk, coco-malt, cod liver oil, and whole-meal buns in schools. The school health program also provided immunizations against diphtheria, typhoid, and smallpox, and public health initiatives. These included providing teachers with health manuals and establishing the Junior Red Cross to instruct children in first aid, the prevention of accidents, and good health in general.
- Created a Child Welfare Clinic in St. John's.
- Established a Child Welfare Division within the Department of Public Health and Welfare and passed important child welfare legislation. This included the Adoption Act of 1940, which formalized the adoption process, and the Welfare of Children Act** of 1944.

Dietary Reform:

- Improved the nutritional value of dole rations. To enhance the traditional Newfoundland diet of saltfish, salt beef, white flour, tea, and molasses on which many families lived, the government included vitamin-rich brown flour in its dole rations by the end of 1934. However, malnutrition rates remained high throughout the period, and there was significant public backlash about the "dole flour."

***The Welfare of Children Act allowed for the Division of Child Welfare to assist single mothers and care for abused, neglected, and homeless children.



5.61 The Commission of Government hoped that agricultural development might provide alternative employment for Newfoundlanders. The Commission established a demonstration farm and agricultural school near St. John's in the mid-1930s to help educate future farmers.



5.62 From *The Daily News*, July 13, 1934



“However low the scale may appear in English eyes, it is too near the average standard of existence in Newfoundland, for the Government to make idleness more attractive than work.”

– 1936 comment from Government House in St. John's to the Dominion Office on why the dole rations should not be increased

Welfare Measures

The Commission of Government's welfare division and programs were influenced by the Amulree Report's analysis of what needed to be done to improve the living conditions of people in Newfoundland. However, the Amulree Report had underestimated the colony's complex economic weaknesses and overestimated the ability of Newfoundlanders to subsidize their incomes – particularly through agriculture. Using this interpretation of the situation, the Commission's welfare division assumed that

people were poor because they lacked the initiative to work. As a result, the welfare division focused many of its efforts on ensuring its welfare measures were not abused by the poor, rather than on increasing its spending on welfare measures that would actually help people improve their living conditions. The welfare measures that were managed by the Commission consisted largely of public works initiatives and income transfers.

** Similar land settlement programs had been initiated throughout Canada, the United States, Europe, and Britain in order to relieve the high unemployment caused by the Great Depression.*

*** People had to apply for benefits and prove that they were in need; then the government examined each applicant individually and decided whether or not he or she deserved assistance.*

Public Works Initiatives:

- Established make-work projects for the unemployed. These had limited success, especially in the outports, as construction projects such as road building occurred during the spring and summer months when the labour force was already engaged in the fisheries or in other primary resource occupations.
- Encouraged agricultural development. The Commission of Government hoped that agricultural development would reduce people's dependence on public relief. As had been suggested in the Amulree Report, it offered cash bonuses for land clearing and cultivation, established a Demonstration Farm and Agricultural School near St. John's to train future farmers, and distributed livestock to promote animal husbandry. The Commission also initiated the Land Settlement Program*, which attempted to establish several new agriculture-based communities. (For more on these communities, see page 436).

Income Transfers:

- Provided indirect income transfers. Indirect income transfer was mostly tariff adjustments. For instance, the government lowered its duties on food (especially wholemeal flour and fresh fruit) and clothing, so that these essentials would be more affordable for people. It also permitted equipment for fishers, farmers, and loggers to enter the country duty-free.
- Provided direct income transfers. These included old-age pensions, able-bodied relief (the dole), and allowances for the "Permanent Poor" – widows, orphans, the aged, the sick, and the disabled. In many ways, these relief measures were more conservative than the programs of previous governments. There was no increase in the amounts that people received, and the Commission increased the supervision of these programs.** According to historian Terry Bishop-Stirling, "the benefits they [the Commission of Government] offered were far from generous; they cannot even be considered subsistence allowances."

THE DOLE UNDER THE COMMISSION OF GOVERNMENT

Able-bodied relief, or the dole, was the most common form of government assistance during the Great Depression. Through this program, the government provided vouchers with which people could purchase food and other necessities from a specified list. Relief allowances depended on the size of a family, but the average allowance was small because officials felt that if allowances were satisfactory it would be difficult to get people off the dole. The government wanted public relief to be an unpleasant experience that people would struggle to avoid. Historians have argued that this reflected the government's interest in disciplining or punishing the needy for not being able to support themselves.

5.63 Scale of relief allowances, 1935

Number of Persons in Family	Cost of Monthly Food Order
1	\$2.00
2	\$4.00
3	\$5.85
4	\$7.70
5	\$9.50
6	\$11.20
7	\$13.00
8	\$14.75
9	\$16.00
10	\$17.50

CASE STUDY

The Commission of Government's Land Settlement Program



5.64 Brown's Arm, 1939



5.65 Farmer with horse-drawn plough, Harricott

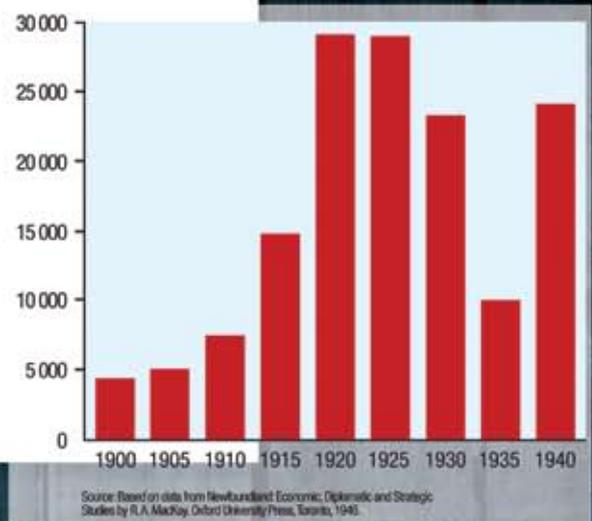
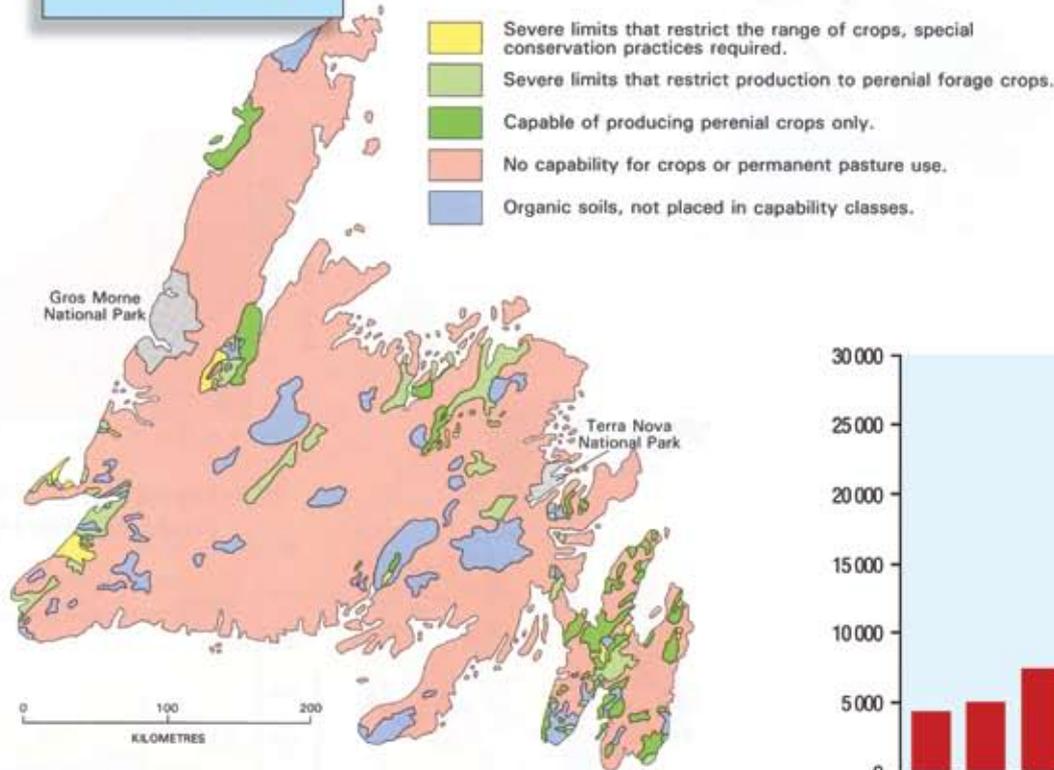
As part of its overall efforts to diversify the economy and to deal with the problems of high unemployment, the Commission of Government established a Land Settlement Program in 1934.

UNDER THIS PROGRAM, THE GOVERNMENT HELPED FAMILIES establish farms, raise livestock, and build rural communities. The Commission loaned successful applicants two years-worth of relief money to start the project, with the hopes that all families would become self-sufficient and be able to pay back the loan. Since the government intended this program to provide work for the unemployed, it only accepted applications from families on able-bodied relief who had at least one adult male capable of performing physical labour.



5.66 Communities created by the Land Settlement Program

5.67 Soil capabilities for agriculture



5.68 Agricultural export values (five-year averages in dollars)

(right) Farming did not evolve to become a significant part of the economy under the Commission of Government. For instance, the number of farmers recorded in 1935 was only 5.5 per cent of the total work force. Likewise, agricultural exports were fairly insignificant. In 1935, agricultural exports were worth less than \$10 000, while forestry exports were worth over \$14 million.

The government also provided families with a cottage, furniture, supplies, and clothing. In return, residents cultivated the land and worked together on community projects. The program emphasized cooperation and also attempted to dissolve denominational ties by establishing non-denominational schools. In the beginning, and especially in the cases of Markland and Harricott, it was also a social experiment in which the Commission of Government attempted to reform the character of rural Newfoundlanders.

In total, the Commission relocated 365 families and created eight communities: Markland, Harricott, Lourdes, Brown's

Arm, Midland, Sandringham, Winterland, and Point au Mal. Although Sandringham and Winterland both prospered as farming communities (and are still vibrant communities today), the program failed as a rural development policy overall. It lacked adequate planning, was poorly administered, and was plagued by social tensions and financial difficulties. Many of the farmers involved in these programs eventually took wage-paying jobs on military bases during the Second World War or in forestry-related operations at Corner Brook and Grand Falls. By the late 1930s, the cost of maintaining the settlements had become too high and the government abandoned the scheme.

Questions:

1. Why was the Land Settlement Program established? How were applicants selected?
2. What were the perceived benefits of the Land Settlement Program?
3. In 2007, agriculture accounted for 0.6 per cent of the total Newfoundland and Labrador employment by industry. What factors might explain why this is the case?

*The Force was modeled upon the Royal Canadian Mounted Police which provided policing services throughout northern Canada.



5.69 Newfoundland Ranger, Constable Danny Corcoran, 1935

This constable gave his life in the line of duty. While posted at White Bay, he became lost in the wilderness for 17 days and was badly frostbitten. He died just over a week after he was found.

5.70 Rangers were often the only liaison between a community and their central government.

This was especially true for many of the isolated communities in Labrador. Here a Newfoundland Ranger poses with some people from North West River, c. 1940s.



Law Enforcement

The Commission of Government realized that law enforcement in the mid-1930s was sparse and inadequate. The colony's only police force, the Newfoundland Constabulary, consisted of approximately 170 officers, half of which served on the Avalon Peninsula. To improve this situation, the Commission of Government reorganized law enforcement in Newfoundland and Labrador. First, it changed the Newfoundland Constabulary into an urban police force and restricted it to more heavily populated areas – St. John's, the Avalon Peninsula, Corner Brook, and Grand Falls. Then in 1935, it created the Newfoundland Ranger Force* (NRF) to provide policing and government services to the outposts. The Rangers replaced most of the Newfoundland Constabulary officers who had been stationed there, and for 15 years they provided a vital link between people living in rural communities and the central government in St. John's.

Although Rangers were told that their primary duty was to patrol and police the districts, police work was actually only a small part of their responsibilities. In reality, the Rangers functioned as an administrative extension of the central government. During the first five years of

“... the Newfoundland Rangers are a sort of super-police force which does a great deal of useful administrative and protective work in remote parts of the country.”

– St. John's *The Evening Telegram*, July 15, 1939

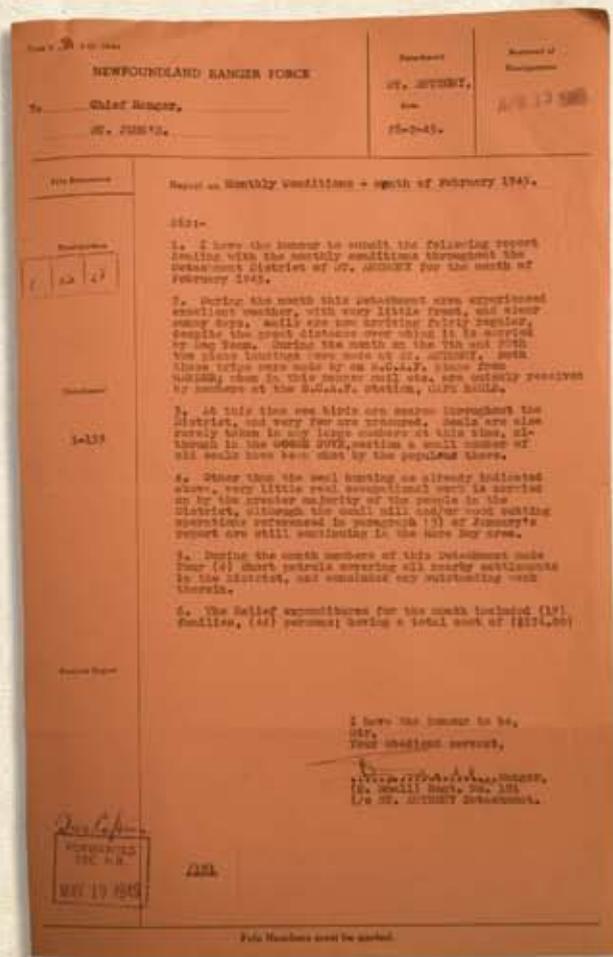
**Technically the Rangers worked directly under the Department of Natural Resources, but they performed a wide variety of duties for all government departments.*

the Commission of Government (1934-39), the Rangers spent most of their time doing tasks such as investigating relief applicants, distributing relief, and supervising relief projects – duties associated with the Department of Public Health and Welfare.* In 1937, the Rangers also were given the duties of District Officers, which further increased their administrative function.

The Rangers patrolled their districts every month and submitted four kinds of reports to the government based on the information they gathered: 1) Crime 2) Patrol 3) General Conditions, and 4) Miscellaneous. These reports detailed all activities in the communities. They noted the social and economic conditions in each settlement, including the number of people on public relief, the amount of money spent on relief, and the condition of the population in general. They provided information about the fisheries and stated other areas where men were finding

employment. These reports provided the Commission with essential information on all activities in rural areas.

The Ranger's duties sometimes increased according to changes in government policy and global events. During the Second World War, the Rangers became responsible for: enforcing rations and black-out orders; patrolling for enemy submarines and aircraft; arresting military deserters; issuing national registration cards; and recruiting volunteers for the Armed Forces. After the war, the Rangers surveyed their districts about the popularity of the Commission of Government in the outports. They also gathered information on people's attitudes towards the return of responsible government and confederation with Canada. After Confederation, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) gradually assumed the roles of the Rangers in the outports and the Newfoundland Ranger force was disbanded in 1950.



5.71 A Newfoundland Ranger report from the St. Anthony detachment, February 1945

5.72 Duties of the Newfoundland Rangers

Department	Duties of Ranger
Natural Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inspect logging camps and conditions Enforce game laws Issue small game and sport-fishing licences Enforce salmon, herring, and lobster regulations Organize forest fire fighting
Public Health and Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue public relief payments Arrange for medical treatment of patients Escort mental health patients to St. John's
Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enforce criminal law and all statutes of Newfoundland Investigate accidental/sudden deaths Investigate fires Escort prisoners Act as deputy sheriffs in designated areas
Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect customs duties and licence fees Inspect weights and measures
Home Affairs and Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act as truant officers Inspect schools
Public Utilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supervise construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, wharves, government buildings, and breakwaters Issue driver's licences Act as wreck commissioners

Questions:

- In which areas did the Commission of Government initiate reforms? Create a chart in which you give the five areas, and list the main reforms the Commission of Government hoped to initiate.
- In which of these areas was the government most successful? Explain.
- Overall, how effective was the Commission of Government in governing Newfoundland and improving the lives of Newfoundlanders? Explain.