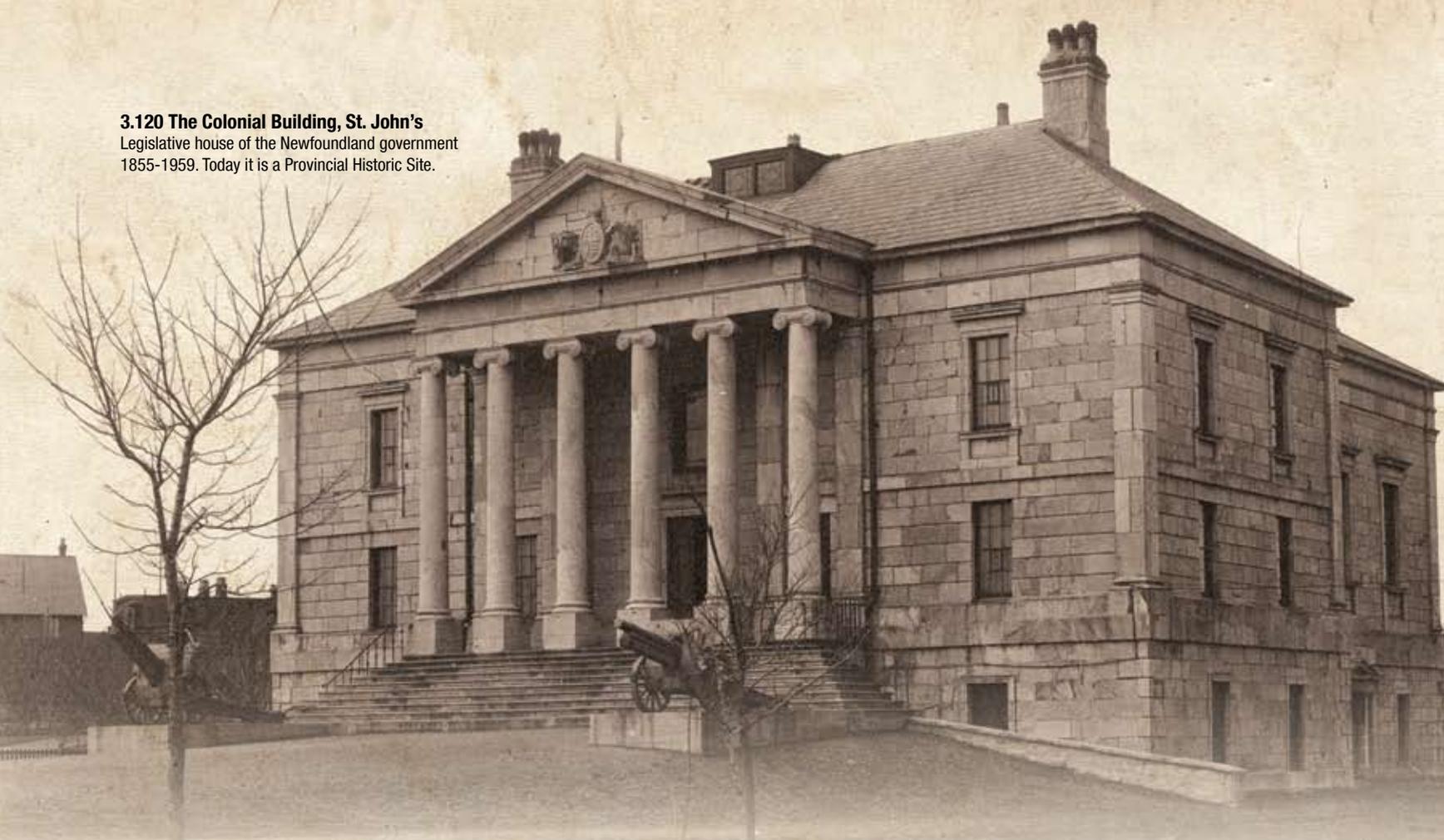


**3.120 The Colonial Building, St. John's**  
Legislative house of the Newfoundland government  
1855-1959. Today it is a Provincial Historic Site.



### TOPIC 3.8

# Responsible Government

During responsible government, politicians attempted to diversify the economy. Why would this be an important goal?

One of the initiatives of responsible government was the construction of a railway. Why are transportation infrastructures important?

## Introduction

Responsible government was modelled on the British parliamentary system. The Executive Council (which today we call Cabinet) had to be drawn mostly from members of the political party holding the most seats in the elected House of Assembly. Most times, the leader of that party became the premier or prime minister.

## The Structure of Responsible Government

The idea of responsible government, in some ways very similar to the system we use today, was proposed as a solution to the constant deadlocks in all settled

colonies between elected assemblies and appointed legislative councils. The Executive Council (“the government” or “cabinet”) was to be drawn from the political party holding the most seats in the House of Assembly. The leader of that party then became “premier” or, after 1909 in Newfoundland, “prime minister.” The Legislative Council became a separate but still appointed body, with the power to reject and review legislation.

Responsible government did not mean complete autonomy. The British government retained the final say on colonial legislation and on external affairs.

# RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

(1855-1934)

## MONARCH

- head of government is the King or Queen
- monarch normally grants Royal Assent to the requests of British government

## GOVERNOR

- appointed by British government
- reported to the Colonial Office in London, England

*The number of ministers grew over time; initially there were six departments: Attorney General, Colonial Secretary, Receiver General, Surveyor General, Solicitor General, President of the Legislative Council.*

*Most were from England, appointed without consultation with the colony. While viewed as a fairly important posting, it wasn't "high on the list" due to rate of pay and weather.*

## EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

(Cabinet)

- recommended by Premier; appointed by Governor
- most were members of House of Assembly; some were from Legislative Council
- assumed portfolios for various departments
- were responsible to House of Assembly
  - drafted bills and sent them to House of Assembly for debate and approval
- from the 1860s, the custom was to ensure that all major denominations were represented

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

(Upper House)

- recommended by Premier; appointed by Governor
- members served for life, or until they resigned
- reviewed bills sent from House of Assembly; approval required for all bills
- seen as a body of "sober second thought"
  - could defeat or amend bills related to finances (until 1917)
- most appointees were influential citizens: lawyers, merchants, sea captains, etc.

*No women were ever appointed.*

## JUDICIARY

- recommended by Premier; appointed by Governor
- included supreme court (which went on circuit every summer to hear cases) and **magistrates' courts** (which dealt with minor offenses)
  - it became custom to ensure that all major denominations were represented
- magistrates frequently dealt with other issues, such as poor relief and road works

*The Newfoundland Constabulary was created in 1871. While peace officers are part of the civil service, their work helps ensure the presence of justice in the community. (However, many communities in this time period did not have a police presence.)*

## CIVIL SERVICE

- expectations of government responsibilities changed over time
- consequently, the civil service grew as government assumed more duties; e.g., Department of Fisheries (1890s)

## HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

(Lower House)

- members elected (usually) every four years
  - number of seats changed over time; initially some districts had multiple members; by the 1920s trend was to have smaller districts with one representative
- legislation was introduced, debated, passed, and then sent to Legislative Council for approval
- elections normally held in fall after fishing season; House usually met in winter

*The government normally sits on the right but in NL they sat on the left because that is where the main heating was located. This practice is still evident today.*

## ELECTORATE

- males aged 21+ who "occupied" a house for one year prior to election
- women (until 1925), French Shore (until 1882), Labrador (until 1946) were excluded

*Efforts were made after 1855 to ensure that the boundaries of districts were defined in such a way as to allow for denominational representation.*

## Early Governments

One of the first challenges facing the newly formed government was how to accommodate ethnic and religious differences. The population was divided along denominational and ethnic lines; most Roman Catholics were of Irish descent, while most Protestants were of English or Scottish descent. The push for responsible government had been driven by an alliance between the Roman Catholics, represented by the Liberal Party, and members of the Methodist Church. Both groups resented what they perceived as an unfair exclusion from power and therefore access to government jobs, which seemed to be dominated by members of the Church of England.

The first administrations under responsible government were Liberal, built on a Catholic-Methodist alliance, but by 1860 this coalition was falling apart. The largely Protestant Conservatives, who had opposed responsible government, took power in 1861 and began a process of accommodation with other groups and parties. This resulted in an informal but enduring **denominational compromise**, whereby seats in the house, government offices, judicial appointments, and grants for education were shared proportionally between Catholic, Church of England, and Methodist denominations. This compromise remained the unwritten rule in Newfoundland and Labrador politics for a century.



3.122 Philip F. Little (1824-1897)

Little was the leader of the Liberal Party in the 1850s, and the first premier of Newfoundland.

## Sovereignty and Economic Development

During the first 50 years of responsible government there persisted two main areas of concern: **sovereignty** and a desire for economic development. Although Newfoundland was internally self-governing\* from 1832, its relations with other countries were controlled by the British government. This was the case not only in Newfoundland, but for all British colonies. All initiatives from the colonies that related to international issues had to be approved by the Colonial Office, whose mandate was to consider issues in the larger context of the whole British Empire.

In relation to sovereignty, there were two matters where the government of Newfoundland wanted to exercise control: the French Treaty Shore and the negotiation of a trade agreement with the United States. These were significant areas from London's perspective, but approval

would be granted only if it served the interests of the British government. Although Newfoundland clearly desired greater autonomy in these matters, it remained staunchly loyal to Britain.

A second concern was economic development. Many people realized that dependence on the fishery was problematic and believed future growth should be based on the North American model. Many Newfoundlanders supported politicians who advocated economic diversification through such measures as the construction of a railway across the island. The Newfoundland government decided, after a bitter and divisive discussion, to build a narrow-gauge railway from St. John's to the west coast. It would be expensive, but its supporters argued that the line would promote land-based industries, firmly link the east and west coasts, and

3.123 Reid Newfoundland Company passenger train, c. 1900

The island of Newfoundland had to wait until 1882 for its first railway line to be built. The first passenger train ran across the island in 1898.



\* although the Colonial Office had the power to overturn all legislation passed in the colonies

## THE PUSH FOR RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

The campaign for responsible government in Newfoundland was started by a coalition of Reformers – both Roman Catholic and Methodist – and some of the native-born. They felt that Newfoundland should enjoy the same constitutional status as other colonies, which began to receive responsible government in the late 1840s. They wanted elected Newfoundlanders, rather than Crown appointees, to set government policy. The reformers were opposed by the Tories and their allies, all of them Protestant, who feared both loss of office and a government dominated by Roman Catholics.

### 3.124 French fisherman, c.1900

In addition to its own territory at Saint-Pierre-Miquelon, France had fishing rights in Newfoundland along the French Treaty Shore, which between 1783 and 1904 extended from Cape St. John to Cape Ray. Because the Newfoundland government did not have control over international issues, any concerns it had over the French Treaty Shore had to go through the British Colonial Office.

better join Newfoundland with the mainland through a regular ferry service.

While the desire for economic development, along with the belief that the colony should have more control over its territory and resources, arose in the early days of self-government, they have remained important elements of political life to present times.

**“... a railway was required in Newfoundland ... to bring us into closer contact with the civilization and superior advancement of the Continent ... the go-ahead America of to-day.”**

— D.W. Prowse in *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial, and Foreign Records*, 2nd edition, 1896

### Questions:

1. What was the most significant difference between representative government and responsible government? Explain.
2. Economics continues to be a concern for all citizens. What economic issues affect the province today?

### 3.125 An editorial pushing for responsible government in *The Patriot*, July 13, 1850

connexion but a similar concession. The irresponsible system and the rule of our “seven Governors” must be given to “the moles and bats,” and to sustain our old affections for the British monarchy we must be permitted to enter upon the progressive system of entire self-government. All the resources of the country will then be in the people’s own hands, and all the institutions of the Colony will be improved, and purged of their corruptions. The fisheries now languishing for want of encouragement will be protected. Education will be advanced, and the Laws, codified and made to suit the exigencies of the people, will be so simplified that every man may be “his own lawyer.” But it is impossible to calculate the many blessings which will follow in the wake of Responsible Government in Newfoundland. Let the people act as we have pointed out in our last number, and before another General Election we shall possess the great boon for which all enlightened men are clamorous.