

The National Convention

A referendum is a direct vote in which an entire electorate is asked to accept or reject a particular proposal. What types of issues would prompt a government to hold a referendum?

Why are some people apathetic towards politics?



5.111 Excerpt from *The Daily News*, Dec. 12, 1945

5.112 Governor Gordon MacDonald at the formal opening of the National Convention, Sept. 11, 1946, Colonial Building, St. John's.



Introduction

Newfoundland and Labrador's 1933 agreement with Britain stated, in effect, that the Commission of Government would stay in office until the country was once again financially self-supporting and a request was made for the return of responsible government. However, the Commission of Government remained in power for 15 years – much longer than most people had expected. This was due to the continuing effects of the Great Depression on Newfoundland's economy during the 1930s and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

Although the Second World War temporarily suspended political change, it also gave Newfoundland the financial resources it needed to end Commission of Government. Wartime prosperity brought full employment and greatly increased government revenues. The Commission reported the first of several surpluses in 1941 and made a series of interest-free loans to Britain in the following years. By 1942, Newfoundland, British, and Canadian officials recognized the Commission would likely disappear when the war was over. But what form of government would replace it?

A New Path

The British government began to consider this question in 1942. Officials were pessimistic about Newfoundland's ability to exist as an independent country and worried that, once the wartime boom ended, its economy would again deteriorate and Britain might once more be called on to financially help out Newfoundland. Officials in the Dominions Office soon thought that Newfoundland should join Canada and benefit from that country's more stable economy. This possibility also appealed to many Canadian officials. The war had shown Canada that it had important and permanent interests in Newfoundland, which needed to be protected. Apprehension also existed in Ottawa that Newfoundland might draw closer to the United States than Canada once the war ended.

It would ultimately be up to the Newfoundland people to decide their own political fate, however, and in 1943 a "goodwill mission" of three British Members of Parliament visited Newfoundland to determine which form of government residents favoured. Their investigations indicated that a fair degree of uncertainty existed – although very few people seemed interested in confederation, there was also widespread unease about an immediate and unconditional return to responsible government status. Recognizing that no form of elected government had existed in Newfoundland since 1934 and people were no longer accustomed to party politics, British officials decided that a process of political education was needed before Newfoundlanders and Labradorians decided on their future. In November 1943, the Dominions Secretary recommended that once hostilities ended, the British government should provide "machinery ... for enabling the Newfoundland people to examine the situation and to express their considered views as to the form of Government they desire."

The exact nature of this "machinery" was revealed on December 11, 1945, when British Prime Minister Clement Atlee announced in the House of Commons that the Newfoundland public would elect representatives to a National Convention. The mandate of this National Convention would be to investigate Newfoundland's economic, social, and political status and recommend which forms of government should be placed on a referendum ballot. The referendum was tentatively scheduled for the fall of 1947.

5.113 The Second World War highlighted the importance of Newfoundland and Labrador's strategic defensive position to North America.

Shown here are civilians mixing with Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) members at a dance at the RCAF Station in Gander, in March 1945.



WHY DID CANADA WANT NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR?

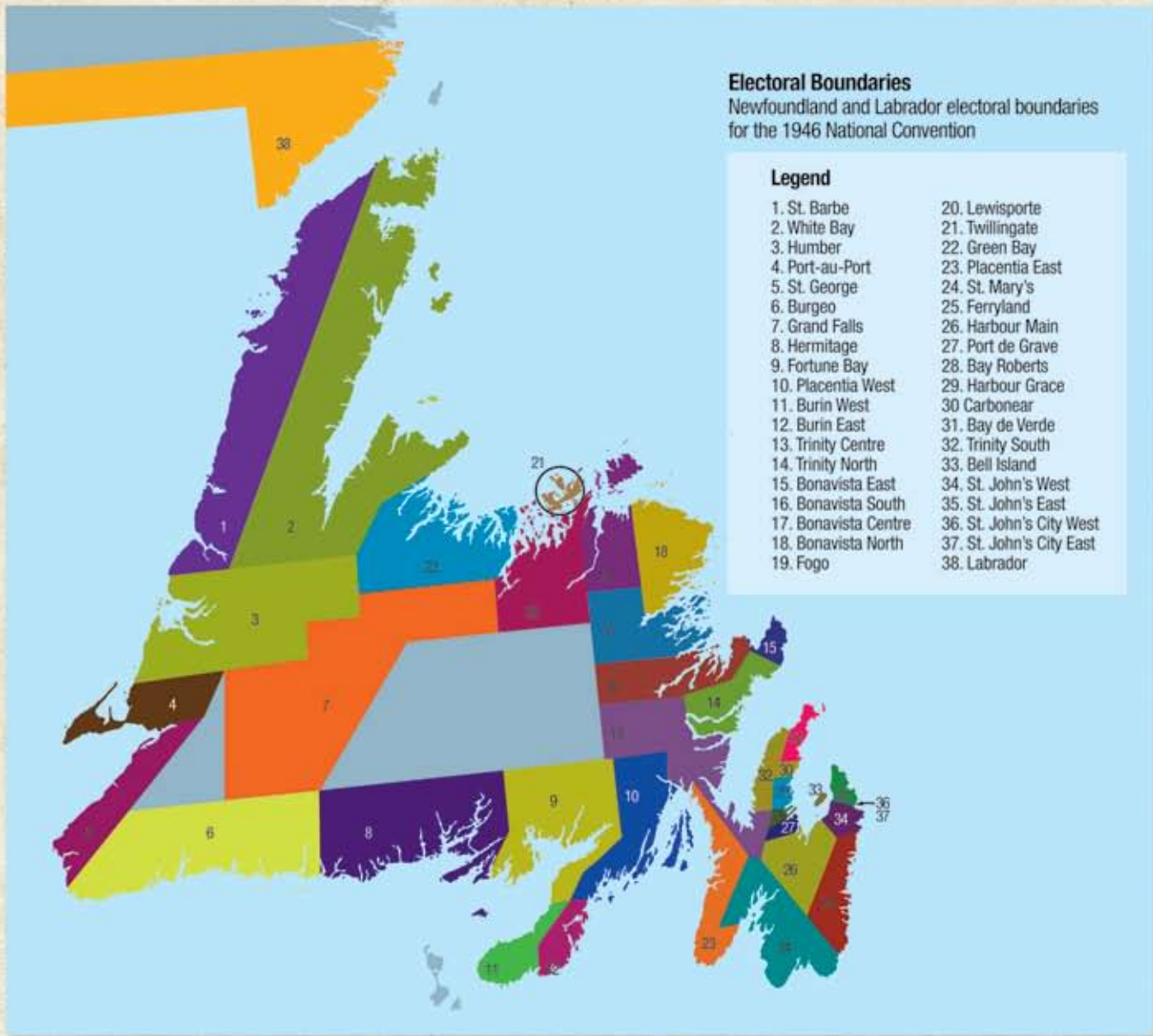
Canada had several key reasons for wanting Newfoundland in confederation:

- to gain control of its natural resources
- to improve national defence
- to prevent the United States from acquiring undue influence in the region

As historian Peter Neary explains, "... Confederation would secure Canada's eastern frontier, simplify her defence administration, and head off the looming threat of a Newfoundland ever more closely tied to the United States. The transformation of Newfoundland into a 'garrison country' during the Second World War and the entry of the United States into the region had fundamentally altered Anglo-Canadian Newfoundland relations."

After the war, unease grew in Canada about the continued American military presence in Newfoundland. In 1903, Canada had essentially lost out to the United States in a bid for an area along the Pacific Ocean now known as the Alaska Panhandle. It wanted to avoid being similarly hemmed in on its Atlantic coast. Embracing Newfoundland within confederation would not only give control over such strategic locations as Gander airport and St. John's harbour, but also positively affect Canada's national outlook and show that Canada was just as serious in world affairs during peacetime as during war.

*Labrador voters sent United Church clergyman Rev. Lester Barry to the National Convention; he was the region's first political representative.



5.114 Newfoundland and Labrador electoral boundaries for the 1946 National Convention.

The Creation of the National Convention

On June 21 1946, voters in Newfoundland and in Labrador elected 45 members from 38 districts to the National Convention. This was the first general election since 1932 and the first time in history that Labrador residents were able to vote. Nevertheless, voter turnout was low in most districts, excluding St. John's, where about 60 per cent of voters went to the polls. About half of all the candidates elected were businessmen or merchants; the others included journalists, teachers, union leaders, lawyers, and clergymen.

The National Convention met for the first time on September 11, 1946. It established 10 committees to examine various aspects of the country's economy and society. Their reports were to be brought to the full Convention for discussion and adoption. When this process was completed, it was the responsibility of the finance committee, using the information provided in the reports, to write a consolidated report on the economic and financial situation and the country's outlook.

“It shall be the duty and function of the Convention to ... examine the position of the country and to make recommendations to His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom as to possible forms of future government to be put before the people at a national referendum.”

— From Section 3 of the *National Convention Act* of 1946

**The National Convention debates were broadcast to thousands of listeners over the government radio station VONF.*

Ottawa/London Delegations

It was assumed that discussion of possible future forms of government would occur only after committee work was finished. However, this orderly program was upset on October 28, less than two months after the Convention's first meeting – when Joseph R. Smallwood moved that a delegation should visit Ottawa to ascertain possible terms of union with Canada. Smallwood's motion had only 17 supporters, and started a bitter and divisive debate* that split the Convention into pro-confederate and anti-confederate groups. In these circumstances, an impartial assessment of the country's condition and prospects became a near impossibility.

In the end, the Convention decided to send delegations to London and Ottawa, with both to be led by the Convention's chairman, F. Gordon Bradley, who was an active confederate himself. The London delegation was composed mainly of anti-confederates, of whom the most vocal was Peter Cashin. It left Newfoundland on April 25, 1947,

and had three meetings with a British delegation headed by the Dominions Secretary. The British made it clear that if Newfoundland decided to return to responsible government, it could expect no financial or economic assistance. This attitude enraged anti-confederate leaders. Cashin delivered an emotional speech to the Convention on May 19, claiming that a conspiracy existed “to sell this country to the Dominion of Canada.”

5.115 Peter Cashin



5.116 The London Delegation of the National Convention, May 1947



The Ottawa delegation departed on June 19. Bradley told the Convention its members would be back within a month. However, he and Smallwood, who also was a member of the delegation, had no such intention. Their plan was to stay in Ottawa until they obtained acceptable draft terms of union from the Canadian Government to

be discussed by the Convention and then placed before the electorate. This process would, they hoped and expected, postpone the referendum from the fall of 1947 until sometime in 1948 and give confederates more time to promote their cause.



5.117 The Ottawa Delegation of the National Convention, 1947
Shown here (left to right): G.F. Higgins; J.R. Smallwood; T.G.W. Ashbourne; Louis St. Laurent; F. Gordon Bradley; Rev. Lester Burry; C.H. Ballam; and P.W. Crummev.



5.118 Counting telegrams requesting that Confederation be placed on the referendum ballot, 1948
Part of the Confederation petition team. Standing (left to right): J.R. Smallwood and Irving Fogwill. Seated (left to right): Jen Fogwill, Harold Horwood, Clara Smallwood and Roy Pike.

The End Result

Finally, the Convention had to recommend which forms of government should appear on the referendum ballot. All members agreed that both responsible government and the continuation of the Commission of Government should be on the ballot. Smallwood then moved a resolution on January 23, 1948 that confederation with Canada should be a third option. The debate that followed was the climax of the Convention. Long and emotional, it did not end until 5:30 a.m. on January 28. The motion was defeated by 29 votes* to 16, and the Convention dissolved two days later. However, the anti-confederate victory was short-lived. The British government overruled the Convention and announced

in early March that confederation would be placed on the ballot after all. It was not going to let the chance slip away that Newfoundland might join Canada.

While some historians have played down the importance of the National Convention, others feel that it had a significant role in our history. As Convention debates were broadcast by radio, the National Convention served as a vehicle of political education. The political apathy so evident in 1946 was replaced by the enthusiastic involvement of an electorate that was much better informed on the country's options – and particularly about confederation and what joining Canada might offer.

**Smallwood later described the opponents of the motion as the "29 dictators."*

... and oh, what a battle it was!

the debate, motion and vote on Newfoundland's entry into Confederation



Joseph Smallwood speaking at the National Convention

I pledge myself to this House and to this country that I will base my ultimate stand in this whole question of confederation upon the nature of the terms that are laid before the Convention and the country. If the terms are such as clearly suggest a better Newfoundland for our people I shall support and maintain them ...

These, then, are the conditions of my support of confederation: that it must raise our people's standard of living, that it must give Newfoundlanders a better life, that it must give our country stability and security and that it must give us full, democratic responsible government under circumstances that will ensure its success ...

If you adopt this resolution (that the Convention send a delegation to Canada to investigate union), and Canada offers us generous terms, as I believe she will, and Newfoundland decides to shake off her ancient isolation, I believe with all my heart and mind that the people will bless the day this resolution was moved.

Peter Cashin speaking at the National Convention

I say that there is in operation at the present time a conspiracy to sell, and I use the word "sell" advisedly, this country to the Dominion of Canada. I repeat, some people may think I am talking wildly, but I would ask them to remember that long before this I made statements in this house which were regarded at the time as wild prophecies, but time proved that I was right.

All I ask you then to do in the present instance, is to watch events develop in the coming two months, then pass your judgement on the statements I make today. Watch in particular the attractive bait which will be held out to lure our country into the Canadian mouse-trap. Listen to the flowery sales talk which will be offered you, telling Newfoundlanders they are a lost people, that our only hope, our only salvation, lies in following a new Moses into the promised land across the Cabot Strait.

By the way, I note by recent papers, that there are 30 000 men unemployed in the Maritimes alone. Can it be that things are so wonderful in this Paradise that men don't need to work? Gentlemen, before leaving this matter I would say just this, look out for those amongst us who would take ourselves and our country on a one-way ride ...

Questions:

1. Why did Britain establish the National Convention instead of immediately returning Newfoundland to responsible government after the war?
2. What was the National Convention? What were its roles?
3. Why might voters have been more apathetic in 1946 than they were in 1948?
4. What role did the media play in the National Convention? How does the media affect your understanding of, and interest in, municipal, provincial, and federal politics?