

Clement Attlee's Visit to Newfoundland, September 1942

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INTRODUCTION

ON 14 JULY 1942, THE GOVERNOR OF NEWFOUNDLAND, Sir Humphrey Walwyn, was informed by London that the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Dominions, Clement Attlee, proposed to visit Newfoundland soon, if the war situation allowed.¹ The purpose of Attlee's visit "would be to inform himself of conditions in the Island" and to discuss with the Governor and the British appointed Commission of Government, which had been administering Newfoundland since 1934, "the large questions of policy which are likely to arise in relation to the Island as soon as the war is over". No announcement, Walwyn was told, was to be made of Attlee's plan until he arrived in Newfoundland, when the object of his visit was to be "related to the present rather than to the future in order to avoid embarrassing speculation in the Island". To avoid any discourtesy to the Canadian government and to allay further curiosity in Newfoundland as to his intentions, Attlee proposed to continue on to Ottawa from Newfoundland for an informal visit.² In seeking Mackenzie King's approval for this latter arrangement, however, the British High Commission in Ottawa was instructed not to say anything for the moment to the Canadian prime minister about the "main object" of Attlee's visit to Newfoundland.

Originally Attlee proposed to travel to Newfoundland by air about August 8th, but his departure had to be postponed and he did not in fact arrive in St. John's until 14 September.³ He was accompanied by Arthur Jenkins (Labour, Pontypool) and J.J.S. Garner, his parliamentary and personal private secretaries. In the meantime, P.A. Clutterbuck, a senior official of the Dominions Office and one of its leading authorities on Newfoundland, had travelled to St. John's to prepare the ground for the discussions Attlee proposed.⁴

The purpose of Attlee's surprise visit, the readers of the St. John's *Evening Telegram* were told on 15 September, was "to discuss current matters relating to Newfoundland with the Commission of Government".⁵ On the evening of 17

1 Dominions Office [DO] series 35, File 744/N230/8, pp. 106-7, Public Record Office. All subsequent DO references are to material in the Public Record Office. Transcripts of Crown-copyright records in the Public Record Office appear by permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-2.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 101; *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 15 September 1942.

4 DO 35/744/N230/8, pp. 69-70; Commission of Government Minutes, 29 August 1942, p. 1155, GN9/1, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.

5 *Evening Telegram*, 15 September 1942.

September in an address broadcast from Government House in St. John's over radio stations VOXM, VONF and VONG, Attlee praised Newfoundlanders for "maintaining the age long tradition of loyalty and courage which is their heritage from their forefathers".⁶ When victory was won, "a new chapter" would open in their country's history.⁷

During his stay in Newfoundland, Attlee visited a number of centres near St. John's, including the iron ore mining town of Bell Island.⁸ He also travelled by train to the pulp and paper manufacturing towns of Grand Falls, in central Newfoundland, and Corner Brook, on the west coast of the Island. Proposed visits to Argentina, where a large American naval base was now in operation, Grand Bank, Burin, Bonavista, Twillingate and Botwood had to be cancelled because of weather conditions. On 22 September, at a luncheon given in his honour at the Newfoundland Hotel in St. John's by the Commission of Government, Attlee was presented by R.B. Herder, the president of the Evening Telegram Ltd., with a bank draft for £11,300.⁹ This draft, issued on the Bank of Nova Scotia and made out to the First Lord of the Admiralty, represented \$50,511.05 of the proceeds of a fund the newspaper had launched the previous March. The object of this fund was "to pay for the armament of the triple torpedo tubes" of a cruiser the Royal Navy intended to call H.M.S. Newfoundland. On his departure from the Island via Port aux Basques, Attlee sent a message to the Governor expressing gratitude "to all those who have done so much to make my visit both pleasant and instructive".¹⁰ He then arrived in Ottawa on the afternoon of 26 September, where he was met at Rockcliffe airport by Prime Minister Mackenzie King.¹¹

The note that follows, now filed in the Dominions Office papers at the Public Record Office, is Attlee's succinct and witty account of his Newfoundland findings.¹² The coming of war in 1939 had lifted Newfoundland out of continuing economic depression and into boom times — a sudden change that could not but have constitutional and political consequences.¹³ In June 1942, just a few months after Attlee had become Secretary of State, an official of the Dominions Office had written that the wartime situation made "a new and vigorous policy with

6 *Evening Telegram*, 18 September 1942.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Evening Telegram*, 23 September 1942.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 William Lyon Mackenzie King Diaries, Transcript/Typescript, microfiche 178, p. 794, (Toronto, 1980).

12 DO 35/723/N2/73, pp. 58-67. Reprinted, with thanks, by permission Dr. J.B. Post, Copyright Officer, Public Record Office.

13 For the history of British policy towards Newfoundland during the war see my "Newfoundland's Union with Canada, 1949: Conspiracy or Choice?", *Acadiensis*, XII, 2 (Spring, 1983), pp. 110-19.

regard to Newfoundland" essential.¹⁴ Attlee concurred and it was to prepare himself to frame such a policy that he went to Newfoundland. The effect of his visit was twofold. On his return to London the proposals were drawn up which led to the major parliamentary statement of 2 December 1943 on Newfoundland's future. It was within the framework of this declaration that all subsequent British policy towards Newfoundland down to that country's union with Canada in 1949 was defined. The other lasting effect was the firsthand knowledge of and interest in Newfoundland affairs which Attlee carried with him to the Prime Ministership in 1945. Newfoundland may have been a small item on the agenda of the 1945 Labour Government, but the country had an informed and sympathetic arbiter at 10 Downing Street in the crucial immediate post-war period. Above all, the socialist Attlee was determined that the tightly knit and conservative business and professional interests of St. John's he had so cannily assessed in 1942 would not dictate the choice Newfoundlanders would now make about their political future. In this his government achieved a notable success.

PETER NEARY

14 DO 35/723/N2/73, p. 5.

NEWFOUNDLAND

In Newfoundland a population rather less than that of Cornwall inhabits an island rather larger than Ireland.

The capital, St. John's, is the size of a small county town. It is the principal port, shopping centre and seat of Government. Its general level of architecture and amenities would be comparable to the meaner parts of a British seaport.

Bell Island is a mining town of some 6,000 inhabitants, but would not compare well with an English mining village. Grand Falls and Cornerbrook are two company towns and are conspicuous examples of enlightened capitalism. In their way they are as good as Port Sunlight¹ having regard to the lower standard of living and of cultural development.

Apart from Buchans, a mining village, and the hutments of the two big airports, the rest of the island consists of villages or hamlets known as outports, the inhabitants of which are engaged in fishing, lumbering and agriculture either separately or in combination.

It is from this population that the personnel for a full system of Dominion Government has to be drawn.

There is practically no leisured class and in the absence till recently of any organised labour movement, the work of Government has fallen upon the lawyers and merchants with some professional politicians.

1 An English company town on the Mersey, built by Lever Brothers.

St. John's has a Mayor and six councillors who exercise a restricted range of functions. For historical reasons there has been no local government even in the rudimentary form of churchwardens etc. which one might have expected in a people who had come from the British Isles.

Government has been regarded essentially as a thing out of which the citizen got *something*, not as something to which he contributed service. This attitude has been enhanced by the financial basis of the Government which has mainly depended on indirect taxation. The people, it is said have an unconquerable aversion to paying direct taxes or rates and are also in many instances, owing to the method of financing the fishing industry, entirely unable to pay any direct taxes. (It is worth remarking that despite this, in every village there are churches, often costly, and schools provided and supported by the members of the three main denominations to which almost all the population in equal proportions subscribe.

While each village and each individual in the village has tended to disregard the interests of other localities and individuals, national politics appears to have been regarded to some extent as a national sport. The advent of commission Government has therefore removed both the practice of self government and a form of amusement. For the last nine years the population, except in the municipality of St. John's, has had no practice in democratic self government. None of the younger members of the community have ever taken part in elections. This absence of the practice of democracy has not been in any way balanced by any teaching of its theory as far as I could ascertain.

Economically the island is at present, owing to the demand for labour on the American bases and on the aerodromes and the absence on war service of some 30,000 men, enjoying an unexampled prosperity. When these abnormal activities come to an end the island will have to rely on its own resources which have never provided an adequate standard of life for the inhabitants and cannot support an advanced administration with the full attributes of a Dominion unless great changes take place. Its resources may be classified as under:-

- (1) As a sea port and air port base strategically but not climatically well situated, it may make some profit from the services which it supplies
- (2) As a naval and military base it may profit by supplying commodities to the troops.
- (3) Bell Island and Buchans may continue to yield a certain amount of ore. At any time other deposits may be found of metal or coal, though the geological survey does not bear out the optimistic forecasts of local residents.
- (4) A development of water power on the south coast might attract an industry such as aluminium. There are possibilities in the development of glass and cement.
- (5) There might be utilisation of the large supplies of birch and other woods for some form of manufacture.

(6) There might be a development of a tourist and sports industry, but flies and mosquitoes are unfavourable factors.

(7) There remain lumbering with its concomitant paper making, fishing and agriculture.

(a) The paper making trade is highly organised and the workers when fully employed are well paid. The lumberers are badly paid. If despite competition from Scandinavia and elsewhere the price paid for paper is remunerative, and if a better allocation of wages is made between lumberers and operatives, this industry should continue to provide for part of the population for part of the year. There might also be an increase in the provision of pitprops for British and other mines.

(b) Fishing is dependent to some extent on the caprices of nature (this year the squid necessary for bait has not put in an appearance). The market has hitherto been largely that of the poorer Catholic countries and negroes. For them the traditional salt fish has sufficed. The supply of fish seems to be ample but clearly there must be more modern methods employed and efforts must be made to develop the production of fresh fish for markets with a higher purchasing power. Steps in this direction are already being taken.

(c) Agriculture. While there are areas in which good crops are grown and good stock raised, the soil in most of the island is shallow and poor, but it would appear that there are great possibilities in the Humber Valley, and the West coast generally which, owing to historic reasons, has not been developed to the same extent as the poorer land of the Avalon Peninsula.

To sum up, unless there is some great discovery of minerals, the island is unlikely to afford anything but a modest standard of life to its inhabitants, having regard to the long winter which restricts agricultural operations. The population is unlikely to increase greatly with the consequence that the overhead expenses of communications etc. are bound to be high in proportion to its resources.

The island for decades suffered through its being exploited by English merchants who in their own supposed interests prevent the growth of a settled community. It still is dominated by the merchants of St. John's. Without denying the necessary services which the merchants have rendered in the past and without attributing to them any evil motives, it appears to me that they take to themselves far too high a proportion of the income of the community. There are, I understand, some two hundred families who comprise the merchant class. There is also a large class of lawyers who absorb an unnecessarily high proportion of the income of the community. There is thus added to the poverty of the island a maldistribution of purchasing power.

Another element is that of the churches. The division into three sects results in a multiplication of ministers, churches and schools. The poor hamlets with large churches and parsonages suggest Southern Ireland.

There is in my view a division of interest between St. John's and the rest of the island. 'Water Street' is to the rest of the island as Wall Street is to the United States and 'The City' to the United Kingdom. Water Street and St. John's having the economic power have had also the political power. Much of the opposition to federation with Canada comes from the merchants who fear the competition of Canadian firms.

POLITICAL

I found that the opinion was held by some experienced commissioners that the corruption stressed by the Amulree report² had been exaggerated. The overseas standard of probity is not so high as that in the United Kingdom. I doubt if Newfoundland politicians were worse than those of Canada or Australia, but they had a narrower margin to work on. For instance the practice of successive ministries of raising loans in order to buy popularity can be paralleled in New South Wales vide Dr. Evatt's 'Life of Holman'.³ It is, on the other hand, clear that the islanders generally got a bad shock and welcomed the suspension of the constitution. No-one likes the Commission. All acknowledge that it has done some good work particularly in the reform of the Post Office and the Customs. They expected that when the Commission took over large sums would be available for development. They expected British capitalists to come in and develop the island. The Commission was set up under Treasury influence at a time when retrenchment was all the rage and when the world was slowly emerging from a great slump. Their expectations were therefore unreasonable but their disappointment is none the less real. Hardly anyone thought that it was possible during the war to return to full responsible Government. Very many desired to find some half way house between the Commission and full responsibility, but such ideas as were offered would clearly breed irresponsibility.

I sum up the attitude of most Newfoundlanders as being that of a man who having had a spell of drunkenness has taken the pledge he is tired of it and would like to be a moderate drinker but does not quite trust himself.

There was general agreement that the Commission's chief failure was that it was aloof from the people. I think there is substance in this. The reason is given which is quite valid that the Commissioners have had to build up an administrative machine from poor material, that they are at one and the same time Cabinet ministers and permanent secretaries of their departments. They have to do everything themselves and therefore have not time to make contact with the people.

I think inevitably civil servants tend to think more of administrative efficiency

2 The 1933 royal commission that had recommended Commission of Government had been chaired by Lord Amulree.

3 Herbert Vere Evatt, *Australian labour leader: the story of W.A. Holman and the labour movement* (Sydney, 1940).

which is their job than of public relations which is at home the job of the politician. It was, I think, a mistake not to have placed on the Commission at least one member who had been a member of Parliament and preferably a Minister in the United Kingdom.

There was a pretty general opinion that the Governor ought not to preside over the Commission, but this was due to a mistaken constitutional conception. They wanted to have the Governor as a court of appeal "a something quiet over Setebos" who would in the popular interest overrule the Commission.

The Commission has, I understand, never divided on the lines of English v Newfoundlanders and it is denied that there is any lack of collaboration, but I am inclined to think that in fact there is a tendency to work in watertight compartments and a certain lack of leadership inevitable under the existing set up. I have always held that a collection of ministers with heavy departmental responsibilities is not a good instrument for deciding general policy.

I did not find that the Commission, either as a whole or as individuals, had ever clearly pictured to themselves to what end they were working. This is the reality in the phrase ticking over. The machine was running but it was not progressing to any clear goal and there was no one at the steering wheel. All were busy keeping the engine running.

From this has followed what I regard as the most serious omission on the part of the Commission, i.e. that they have not prepared the people for the resumption of self government. Mr. Emerson⁴ for instance thought that the Commission should continue for twenty years until the people should be fit to govern themselves again but offered no suggestion as to how this fitness was to be achieved. He would keep his football team all the season in the dressing room without even a punt about and expect them to be fit to win a match at the end.

The Commission had indeed made efforts to create local self government, but unsuccessfully, but here, I think, they were attempting to plant a tree without having prepared the ground. Live self government cannot be imposed from above, it must come as the expression of the wants of the people.

Aside from the Churches and to some extent the schools, there is no kind of institution in which any practice of democracy can be had except two movements which are still rather new and weak.

Co-operation which might in course of time replace the merchant is only beginning. In the paper towns it has been encouraged in its distributive form. Elsewhere partly by Government effort and partly by a movement originating among the Catholics under an ethical impulse other forms are developing. Co-operative selling of fish and co-operative credit organisations are making some headway on the West Coast.

Trade Unionism is young. There are some independent unions such as the stevedores in St. Johns which did not seem very intelligent. There are the railway

⁴ Lewis Edward Emerson (1890-1949), a Newfoundlander. Member, Commission of Government, 1937-44. In 1942 he was Commissioner for Justice and Defence.

brotherhoods and a number of craft unions affiliated to the A.F. of L. and there is fairly fully developed unionism in the paper towns also affiliated to the A.F. of L. There has recently been formed a trades council for the whole island. We met the leaders of all these unions. They were sound, honest but rather inexperienced men with a strong sense of public duty. It is unfortunate that their American affiliations should lead them to eschew 'politics' which means in effect 'civics' and this is, I think, realised. It is unfortunate that so much of their scanty funds should go out of the island to the parent unions. The opinion was expressed to me by people of standing including managers of big businesses and officials that the growth of a Labour Party would be a healthy thing for the island.

The fishermen have a union which is not quite a trade union, but acts politically. It has been the victim of adventurers but with good leadership might represent these highly individualistic workers.

I think that it has been a mistake to draw all the commissioners from the east of the island. The west is more awake.

It would be well to draw the next Newfoundlander commissioner from the West Coast.

THE COMMISSIONERS

The Commissioners have been set a difficult, perhaps an impossible, task. Full credit should be given them for what they have done. In my view the whole conception of the Commission was wrong and devised by persons who, however skilled in administration, were inexpert in the practice of democracy.

In the present set probably the Governor more nearly represents vox populi than anyone else.

Sir W. Woods⁵ is clearly a very able man but essentially a bureaucrat. He is now 66 years old. He has done good work but should, I think, be replaced.

Mr. Wild⁶ struck me as being pretty good.

Mr. Dunn⁷ is the best of the lot and the one who had made most contacts with the people. He is full of ideas and is forward looking.

Sir John Puddester⁸ probably knows the people better than any one else and has the advantage of having been brought up in an outpost. He is a former politician and a man of very considerable ability.

Mr. Emerson is a pleasant but rather finicky lawyer. He has not a very constructive mind.

5 Wilfrid Wentworth Woods (1876-1947). Member, Commission of Government, 1937-44. In 1942 he was Commissioner for Public Utilities.

6 Ira Wild (1895-1974). Member, Commission of Government, 1941-46. In 1942 he was Commissioner for Finance.

7 Peter Douglas Hay Dunn (1892-1965). Member, Commission of Government, 1941-45. In 1942 he was Commissioner for Natural Resources.

8 John Charles Puddester (1881-1947), a Newfoundlander. Member, Commission of Government, 1934-47. In 1942 he was Commissioner for Public Health and Welfare.

Mr. Harry Winter⁹ is still young. He is a keen educationalist not over well balanced but might train on.

It should be noted that Puddester belongs to the United Church, Emerson is Roman Catholic and Winter is Church of England. This trinitarianism runs through all the institutions of the island. It is inconvenient, but Newfoundland is to be congratulated on the absence of sectarian bitterness.

The problem which we have to face is this. We can with general assent continue the Commission till the end of the war. There will then be an irresistible demand supported by all the weight of democratic sentiment for a return to self government. If we accede to this we shall probably have a Government which will spend the available balances in an effort to cope with depression with a consequent return to bankruptcy.

We can refuse self government with the result that we shall have to meet all the odium of the post-war slump which will be laid to our charge because we refused to let the people run their own affairs.

We can try to formulate some system less than full self government keeping the brake in our own hands. We shall then promote irresponsibility and probably get the blame for everything that goes wrong.

We can concede self government now while the going is good and while war conditions impose a certain restraint on the Government.

We can try to devise some different form of Government which, while democratic, does not conform to the Westminster model. We can put off the evil day by appointing a commission of inquiry.

⁹ Harry Winter (1889-1969), a Newfoundland. Member, Commission of Government, 1941-47. In 1942 he was Commissioner for Home Affairs and Education.