

***Regime Change in a Resource Economy: The Politics of Underdevelopment in Newfoundland Since 1825.* Valerie A. Summers.**

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## JAMES OVERTON

VALERIE SUMMERS SUGGESTS that political institutions in Newfoundland have been volatile. Her aim in this book is to account for "major transformations in the structure and functions of political institutions" by linking what she calls "regime change" to Newfoundland's "persistent underdevelopment" — defined as "external dependency" and "internal dualism." (16) For Summers, it is the changing nature of Newfoundland's political and economic integration into the "world system" that is the key to understanding regime change. In particular, it is "resource politics" that is the main focus of her study, which concentrates on the period since 1919.

It is a worthwhile and ambitious task to try and explain how and why changes in political regime occur. But exploring the nature of the relationship between something like the end of democracy and the introduction of government by Commission in Newfoundland in the early 1930s and what was happening economically in the 1930s is a big and complex undertaking. While Summers' discussion contains many insights, it falls short of adequately answering the question of the relationship between regime change and changing patterns of economic development and economic affairs more generally.

The great strength of Summers' work is its discussion of the relationships between foreign capitalists and the Newfoundland government. The examination of the politics of resource development, in general, and of big business's involvement in mineral development in the 1920s is fascinating and I think the best feature of the book. This is the familiar story of weak government and powerful corporations that repeats itself over and over, even as politicians try to persuade us that "this time around, things will be different."

One of the main weaknesses of the book is that the discussion of the key concept of "regime change" — and indeed of the concepts of "dependency" and

“dualism” — is inadequate. On page 25 Summers comes as close as anywhere in the book to defining regime change. Here she apparently uses the terms to include everything from “relatively minor adjustments in the rules of the [political] game such as routine amendments to the electoral law or adjustments in parliamentary rules of procedure” to “relatively major transformations in state functions and structures.” Confederation, she suggests, was the most fundamental of Newfoundland’s twentieth-century regime changes. A close runner-up for this title would be the establishment of Commission of Government in 1934. Another regime change occurred in 1972, she suggests, when the Smallwood regime was replaced by that of Progressive Conservative Frank Moores. Another such change took place when the Liberals under Clyde Wells replaced the Progressive Conservative regimes of Brian Peckford and Tom Rideout in the late 1980s.

A more thorough discussion of the notion of regime change should have been provided. It seems quite proper and useful to use the term to describe the major transformations in the structure and functions of political institutions that occur with the establishment of responsible government, the introduction of Commission of Government in 1934, or confederation. But Summers does not restrict the application of the notion of regime change to such transformations. Can the concept be used productively to describe both the changes identified above and the change in government from Smallwood to Moores in the early 1970s and from the Conservatives to the Liberals in the late 1980s?

The problem of deciding what are important changes in the rules of the political game is a difficult one, in part at least, because of the tendency for observers to focus on what politicians say rather than to examine what they do. There is the politics that is about gaining and maintaining support both in political parties and among voters. There is also the politics involved in the day-to-day running of a country, province, or municipality. The politics of support is about what Murray Edelman calls “political spectacle” — where problems are constructed, enemies demonized, messages massaged and solutions sold.<sup>1</sup> Those seeking political power aim to convince the electorate and even their own party members that what they are doing is new. Very often elections are run and won or lost on a political party’s ability to present itself as a new broom, sweeping into power with fresh ideas and innovative approaches to old, vexing problems. Out with the old and in with the new is a standard part of the rhetorical baggage of politicians.

Day-to-day political practice involves uncertainty, indecision, lack of information, compromise and often failure. The problem of deciding whether major change has occurred involves sifting the essential from the inessential, of distinguishing between rhetoric and reality.

Because Summers’ discussion of “regime change” is weak it is not clear whether all changes in political party are to be considered regime change, or whether regime change can take place without a change in the elected government. This is an important point. If regime change is defined as some relatively important

change in the rules of the political game, then many of these changes take place at the federal level in Canada. And they may or may not precipitate a change in the party in power provincially. Did 1977 involve regime change because it heralded significant changes in the Established Programs Financing scheme on the part of the federal government?

Some of the difficulties of using the concept can be illustrated by means of a brief discussion of one of Summers' examples of regime change, the transition from the Smallwood Liberals to the Moores Conservatives in the period 1971-72. First, it is by no means clear how and why Summers chooses to include this — or the election of the Clyde Wells Liberals in 1989 — as an example of regime change when the election of the Peckford government in 1979 is not so designated.

There are those who, like Rand Dyke, argue that the election of Moores involved a "radical transformation" of Newfoundland politics; there are others who argue that the significant break with Smallwoodism came with the election of the Peckford government.<sup>2</sup> In looking at Liberal support in provincial elections during the Moores period, it is by no means clear that there was a radical shift in voting patterns. In fact, it has been suggested that if the Liberal vote had not been split between the Liberal Party, led by Ed Roberts, and the Smallwood-led Liberal Reform Party then the Progressive Conservatives would not have won the September 1975 election.

Newfoundland voters had, by that time, seen enough of the Moores regime to realize that it was not going to be "the best thing since sliced bread." In fact, within a very short time of the Moores government taking office, many people were pointing out that really nothing much had changed. The rhetoric of the Conservatives may have been radical — plugging government into the people and administrative and political reform — but the reality that it was business as usual was clear to even those, like Ted Russell, who had voted for the Conservatives.<sup>3</sup> Under Moores corruption and patronage burgeoned while democracy languished. The Moores slogan may have been "no more Doyles or Shaheens," but by 1973 there was a Shaheen oil tanker named the Frank D. Moores to complement the tanker already named the Joseph R. Smallwood.

The extent to which the 1972 Moores victory represents a major shift in the rules of the game of politics and the state in Newfoundland is debatable. Looking back at the 1970s I am struck by the extent to which Moores' regime and policies were just like Smallwood's. The continuity impresses, not the discontinuity. Perhaps Summers bases her judgement that Moores' election represented a significant shift in politics too much on the Moores regime's descriptions of itself.

How is this example of regime change related to underdevelopment — dependency and dualism — in Summers' account? The answer is by no means clear. (190-193) However, we are told that "Smallwood's modernization program had created a dual economy" — modern and traditional sectors side by side. We are told that there was opposition to Smallwood's development policies. We are

told that rural Newfoundland had been “ravaged by the rural resettlement program” and that there was a “state-induced decline in the fishery,” as well as labour strife. The Conservative opposition to Smallwood was, however, to be found among the urban-based and the young and more highly educated voters. Liberal support, although declining somewhat, was still relatively strong in rural areas.

While all this is relevant to any explanation of regime change it is by no means clear exactly how and why the Smallwood era ended when it did. Certainly, the Newfoundland case fits a wider pattern which in the 1970s saw the demise of many labour and liberal — social democratic governments — in Canada and elsewhere. These changes are clearly linked to the emerging crisis of capitalism and the demise of Keynesian policies. But the question of how and why such changes translate into shifts in voting patterns has not been adequately explored.

Summers’ book suffers from a failure to give more attention to global economic crises and their implications for regime change. The crisis of the 1930s, for example, put great strain on democratic institutions everywhere. There was, in many countries, a significant shift away from democratic politics whether this took the form of the introduction of coalition governments, governments of national unity, or various forms of dictatorship. Similarly, World War Two created conditions that led to significant political changes in country after country, both in the industrial world and in the colonies and former colonies. Most of these changes involved a significant move in the direction of greater democracy and improved social welfare measures. Clearly, in such cases, as indeed in most cases of regime change, there are large forces operating, even if such forces work themselves out somewhat differently in different countries. An account of regime change in Newfoundland should take such forces into account and situate what happened here in relation to what was happening elsewhere.

The problems involved in identifying and explaining regime change are huge. Does the election of the Wells government in 1989 provide us with another example of regime change? Certainly Summers seems to think so. She tells us that Wells’ “solid victory” in 1993 “suggests that the earlier victory in 1989 marked a change in the provincial political regime” — a change in which there was “a backlash against the quiet revolution that failed under Peckford and a reactionary return to more traditional centralist federalism policies.” (197) But how credible is this analysis? In the last few years the federal Liberals, aided and abetted by the likes of Wells and Tobin, have provided us with a remarkable dose of decentralization as part of their strategy to both offload responsibility for everything from unemployment and poverty to health and education, as well as deal with the Quebec crisis. Newfoundland Liberal governments have done little or nothing to oppose these policies even though they are already wreaking havoc on the province. These kinds of changes would seem to represent regime change, but the direction they take us in is the opposite of that indicated by Summers.

Summers' analysis rests on the idea that "the internal functioning of the peripheral social formation [Newfoundland] is distorted by relations of external dominance." (16) Like most who use dependency arguments, Summers suggests that Newfoundland's path of political and economic development has been distorted by outside influence. Of course, the notion of distortion implies an ideal path of development or set of political arrangements that should or could have been taken if there had been no distorting outside influences. The implication is that without dependency, no dualism and no political volatility and no collapse of democracy or confederation. There is, of course, a hidden nationalism tucked away here. The outsiders did it, even if with local collaboration. Implicit in the analysis is the idea that, if they had been kept out, then perhaps another, more desirable, path could have been taken.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>Rand Dyke, *Provincial Politics in Canada* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 68.

<sup>3</sup>Ted Russell, "Newfoundland's Black Friday: The day they restructured the government." *St. John's Evening Telegram*, 10 February 1973. 7-8.