

James McLeod. *Turmoil, as Usual: Politics in Newfoundland and Labrador and the Road to the 2015 Election*. St. John's: Creative Publishers, 2016. isbn 978-1-77103-081-6

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importance of a sense of place to the creative life of the province. Finally, pathways routinely intersect, and in many of these essays we witness different forms of creative activity crossing with and influencing each other, reinforcing the view of an intimate but complex cultural milieu.

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The cottage industry of Newfoundland and Labrador political writings is a very small but passionate market. Every so often, one of the local presses publishes a work that fulfills a broader purpose of being both entertaining and of historic value. The splendidly named *Turmoil, as Usual* is one such book.

Turmoil, as Usual is a fun, easy read while simultaneously acting as a repository of information. James McLeod is a *Telegram* reporter who has been covering the province's political scene since 2011. The book, his first, is a compendium of events that transpired between 2012 and 2015, a tumultuous period resulting from a leadership vacuum after populist Danny Williams retired as Progressive Conservative Party leader and Premier. The politicking that McLeod describes would be laughable if it were not such strong evidence of the elitist and antiquated nature of Newfoundland democracy.

It is only by living through the political instability of that time that one can truly appreciate its absurdity. The list of events is too long to get into here. Suffice it to say the cast of characters included multiple

anointed PC premiers, a Liberal leader who avoids direct answers, an NDP opposition party that self-destructed, and a number of Members of the House of Assembly (MHAs) who crossed the floor. The many policy issues range from the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric megaproject to the maligned Bill 29 access-to-information provisions. Leadership contests and by-election campaigns provide some colour, interspersed with the spectacle of a mass power outage (the electrical kind) and falling oil prices. McLeod had a front seat for it all, and is bang-on in his assessment of the cyclical ebbs and flows of party politics in the province. The book fills in some information gaps, and can help scholars identify the list of variables that contributed to the political upheaval.

The biggest strength of *Turmoil, as Usual* is also a flaw. The journalistic style is engaging, dotted with tidbits of information that rabid consumers of Newfoundland and Labrador politics will appreciate. I particularly enjoyed the footnotes, which act as comedic relief and broaden the conversational narrative. But post-Watergate it is an occupational hazard for journalists that they cast dispersions on political elites without turning a critical eye inward. An intense competition for readership and ratings leads to the media becoming purveyors of infotainment, treating politics as part soap opera, part sporting event. McLeod concedes that he played a small role in fuelling the political mayhem, implying that this is honourable (57). It is here that academia performs an important function. For instance, scholars might argue that because of her gender Kathy Dunderdale was treated too softly on her way to winning the 2011 election and that she was treated too harshly when her missteps piled up. Related to this, the provincial media are worryingly captivated by public opinion survey data, treating politics as a game whereby the latest polling numbers inform the tone of ensuing coverage. Consequently, those in the lead receive deferential treatment while those in a freefall are piled on. It happens everywhere, but more so in a small polity, where even unscientific “question of the day” straw polls become barometers of the public mood. Fortunately, McLeod generally escapes this trap in the book, exhibiting no evident partisan leanings and writing in an impressively fair-minded manner about his subjects.

It is a problem for a healthy democracy when media business models involve turning political drudgery into sensationalism. In bold and underlined font, McLeod opines that “what happens in the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly doesn’t matter” (189). The media’s interest in stirring up unrest is exemplified in a passage about antics in the House of Assembly. McLeod relays that then-NDP leader Lorraine Michael was outraged that then-Justice Minister Felix Collins made a throwaway remark that human rights atrocities occur daily in Bulgaria and Mexico (46–48). The appropriate method to resolve concern would be for Michael to calmly educate the House why such a remark is inappropriate, and ask the Speaker to invite Collins to withdraw it. Instead, she proclaimed the comments were an act of “racism.” In the book, McLeod concludes that Michael’s charge was appropriate, and does not question her sensationalism. He somewhat skirts over his live tweeting from the press gallery where he erroneously tweeted that Collins was being called a “racist.” Mistakes are bound to happen, but that does not diminish a duty to report with care. Furthermore, it should be a concern that MHAS are following the play-by-play tweeting, which in this case led to more theatre over the use of the word “racist.” The Office of the Speaker would be well advised to explore supplementing its Hansard services with its own live tweeting, authored by dispassionate staff.

Throughout the book, McLeod offers plenty of other behind-the-scenes anecdotes, such as regarding the forthright e-mails from PC leadership candidate Bill Barry (100), or about the PCs cancelling a leadership event after selling only 12 tickets (153). In particular, the discussion in Chapter 14 about the Liberalist database is substantive. McLeod introduces Liberalist as “one of those super-important things that people never hear about because it can be really, really boring” (139) and aptly observes that “Part of the reason it doesn’t get much attention is because politicians don’t want to talk about it” (145). This is exactly why it deserves scrutiny, including the privacy implications of countless partisans accessing an elector database. A topic that warrants deeper discussion is the deal between the Tories and Liberals to reduce

the number of seats in the House of Assembly from 48 to 40 (Chapter 17). McLeod is unequivocal that this was a mistake and that more MHAS means better governance, and yet he later chortles at the PC Party's inability to run a full slate of 40 candidates in the ensuing election (227).

Around the time *Turmoil, as Usual* was released, my own description of the events surrounding the 2015 election appeared.¹ Looking at it now, I appreciate that McLeod has done quite well to cover such a wide range of events. Moreover, his initial observations about Premier Dwight Ball — that he is a difficult man to pin down — are prescient. That Ball is prone to “public statements laden with corporate jargon, caveats, weasel-words and very little in the way of specifics” (183) and nevertheless led his party to a majority government is astounding. The victory reflects Ball's astute awareness that vested interests will mobilize against anyone who promotes austerity, even when it seems obvious that bold actions are past due. Whether the people get the government that they deserve is a matter of opinion.

Sadly, the province's dire financial situation means that turmoil is likely to continue, providing an opening for another book. McLeod and Creative Publishers would do Newfoundland society a great service by publishing an equally interesting follow-up, ideally encapsulated within a list of thoughtful suggestions to modernize the many facets of its democratic system of government.

Note

- 1 Alex Marland, “The 2015 Newfoundland and Labrador election: Liberals have a ball as PC party suffers from post-Williams hangover,” *Canadian Political Science Review* 9, 3 (2016): 72–98.

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