

Newfoundland's politics loses gusto

ST. JOHN'S

By some quirk of fate, the Russian roulette of newspaper and television assignments across Canada had never before fired me into the special world of Newfoundland politics.

So I arrived here for the Liberal leadership convention last weekend in a state of unusual excitement and apprehension. Like most mainlanders, I had a mental image of Newfoundland compounded of the antics of Joey Smallwood, the stories of Farley Mowat, Newfie jokes and sea chanteys.

This had been reinforced in recent months by the incredible comings and goings of Newfoundland politicians between the Liberal and Conservative parties, culminating in the current preparations of Premier Frank Moores to go before the Newfoundland legislature this month with a government outnumbered by the Liberal opposition.

As soon as I arrived, everyone told me that I might as well forget about trying to understand what was happening. Orthodox political analysis was useless, they said. I was given to understand that only a Newfoundlander born-and-bred can fathom the intricacies of Newfoundland politics and that even he, on achieving this mystical comprehension, is usually unable or unwilling to communicate it to outsiders.

It required only a few days to discover that the the mystery is, to a large extent, deliberate mystification. This was particularly evident to someone like myself who comes from Quebec and has observed rural politics in western Canada.

Like Quebec, it contains an old, proud, conservative, rigidly structured and somewhat demoralized society now involved in a process of rapid change; and this society is small and tightly



Peter Desbarats

knit, afloat on the Atlantic like a prairie town on the Canadian steppe. It is a world where attachments of family, district, politics and even religion still matter.

This was brought home to me during a social evening in St. John's where I was the only stranger. After I had entered a living-room filled with unfamiliar faces, it took one of the women only a few minutes to discover that she was distantly related to the mother of a boy who had been one of my classmates for one year in a Montreal high school.

From that point, it was a simple matter to discover that we all shared a Roman Catholic upbringing. By the end of the evening, sitting over the remains of a Caribou ragout and empty decanters, we were all singing Latin hymns that I would have sworn had been erased long ago from my own memory.

For someone like myself, urban and highly mobile, it was an unusual and powerful experience, and my own reaction to it was confused. But it helped me to understand what was going on at the leadership convention.

The convention was held, suitably, in a parish hall. The model of the parish, or even the family, still fits the whole of Newfoundland with a population of about half a million.

When Joey Smallwood delivered his last speech as Liberal leader, he opened with the words, "My dear, dear friends." It was a literal translation of the traditional "mes chers amis" of the Quebec priest in the pulpit. In what

other province would it be used by a political leader?

In what other province could a man like Tom Burgess break away from his own party, start a new party, ally himself with an enemy party, rejoin his old party and then, several days later, contest its leadership?

For the explanation, you had to sit in that parish hall and hear Burgess saying, "Now I'm back home and I'll be staying home."

In a larger political world, Burgess would have been considered hopelessly inconsistent. In Newfoundland, he was the prodigal son.

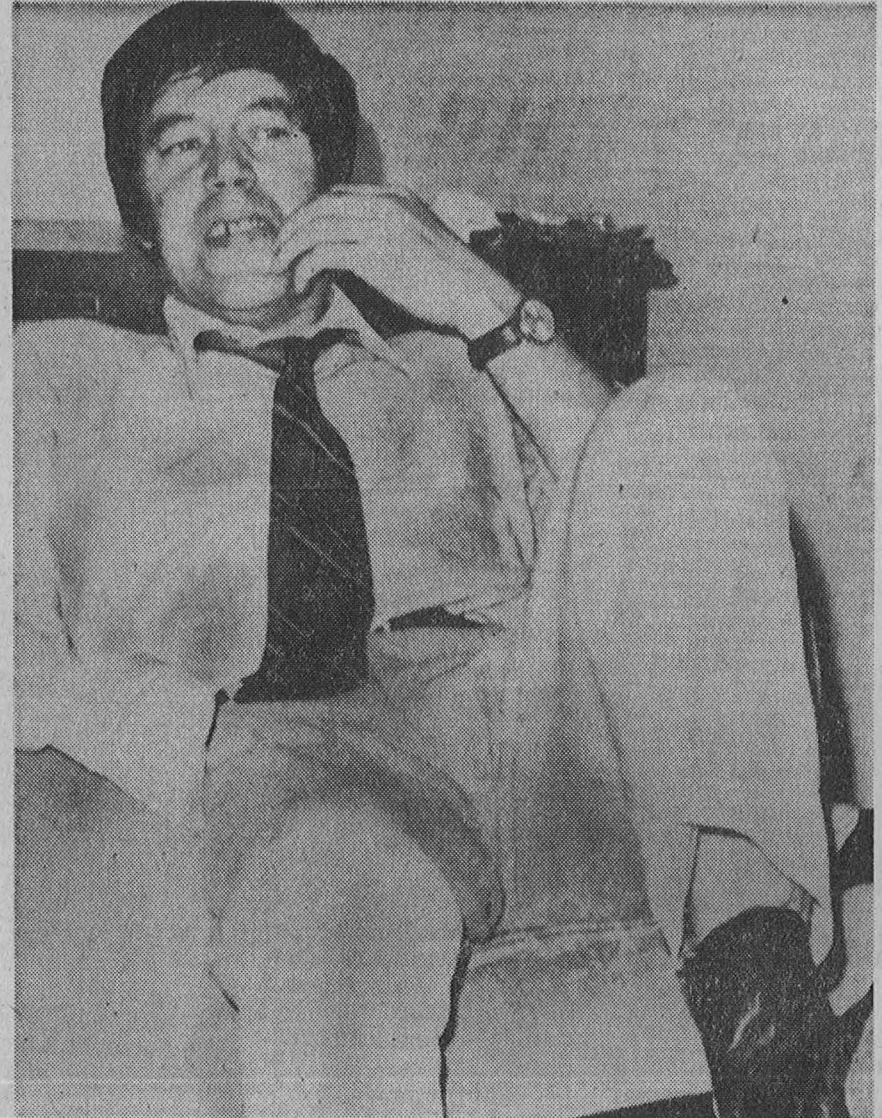
But only one out of six delegates voted for him. That was more significant for Newfoundland's future.

The man who won the leadership, 31-year-old Ed Roberts, bears little resemblance to either Smallwood or Burgess. He was educated in Toronto both as an arts undergraduate and law student. He has three years of cabinet service behind him.

In person, Roberts is cordial but reserved; on the platform, straightforward and unexciting.

The people in that parish hall last weekend yearned with their hearts to vote for Tom Burgess. But they had to vote for Ed Roberts.

Like the watery "screch" that the Newfoundland liquor commission now markets, the mystery of Newfoundland politics has become weaker and more palatable if a bit less piquant to the mainland palate.



ONLY IN NEWFOUNDLAND could a man like Tom Burgess be considered a prodigal son after his political somersaults, says writer Peter Desbarats.