

# The Telegram

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## Leslie Harris admired and respected by community leaders Former MUN president dead at 78

**Nadya Bell**  
The Telegram

*A man who devoted his life to understanding Newfoundland and Labrador's history and preserving its heritage passed away Tuesday, leaving his own considerable legacy behind him.*

*Leslie Harris, former president of Memorial University, historian, and an officer of the Order of Canada died in St. John's on Aug. 26, 2008. He was 78 years old.*

During his life, Harris was never far from the public sphere in his role as a writer, university administrator or as the chairman of a number of influential bodies, particularly the head of the Review Panel on the Northern Cod Stocks.

In his writing, Harris' feelings about the province were clearly evident.

"Our history shows us that we are survivors. But, as we think of creating the New Jerusalem for our children, and our children's children, we must be clear that mere physical survival is not enough," Harris wrote in The Telegram on New Year's Day, 2000.

"What is more to the point, as we take command of our own economic and social destiny, we must also ensure the survival of civility and of strong cultural traditions that inform a distinct identity; the survival of neighbourliness and of a caring and

sharing society; the survival of shared community values of hardihood, and honesty, and independence and hard work; and, the survival of what is a very special Newfoundland characteristic, the ability, even in the hardest of times, to see the funny side of life, and to be ever ready to take up the arms of humour against a sea of troubles," he wrote.

Harris worked his way up the university faculty and administration from assistant professor, head of the history department, dean of arts and science, vice-president academic, all the way to pro-vice-chancellor, vice-chancellor and president.

His term as the university's fifth president was served between 1982 to 1990.

In his profession, Harris was known to many Newfoundlanders who attended the university.

"I had enormous respect for Dr. Harris," said Premier Danny Williams in a release Tuesday night. "He was the dean of arts and science during the time that I attended Memorial University, and he was admired and appreciated by all who dealt with him.

"He was especially appreciated for the extensive time he devoted to patiently mentoring students - clearly something he loved to do. He shaped

many a life in this province, and Newfoundland and Labrador is stronger because of the outstanding work he did, both at our university and in the community at large," Williams said.

"Dr. Harris will always be remembered in this province as one of the great presidents of our university, and we sincerely look forward to seeing an individual of his calibre lead Memorial in the future," he said.

The premier expressed his deepest sympathies to the Harris Family. Harris is mourned by his wife of 57 years, Mary Harris (nee Hewitt), his sister Ruby Driscoll and brother Norman Harris, as well as a wide circle of other family and friends.

James Hillier, a fellow historian at Memorial says family played an important role in Harris' life and academic perspective.

"I deeply respected him as a historian and as a person," Hillier says.

"I think of him as somebody who was immensely learned about Newfoundland history, and was also very much connected to his family, which was an old St. John's family, but which was an outport family as well," Hillier says.

"I think that that very much shaped his views of Newfoundland history and indeed of the future as well," he says.

Harris was born October 24, 1929, in St. Joseph's, Placentia Bay. He served as a school teacher from 1945 to 1958 in rural areas like Port Hope Simpson and Harbour Buffett, as well as St. John's and Bell Island.

Shane O'Dea, an English professor says he had first hand experience of Harris' teaching abilities, when he took an ancient history course from him in the 1960s.

"He was a very good teacher, and had a remarkable impact on the university," O'Dea says.

"More importantly, I think he had an impact as a kind of public person of the university, because he was very

involved in major commissions. Obviously the northern cod stocks research was critically important," he says.

"He was a person who let the leaders who worked for him lead in their own field. I wouldn't describe him as hands-off, but rather a person who drew the best out of the people who worked with him," O'Dea says.

Harris has left his name behind him at the university on the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development and the Dr. Leslie Harris Memorial University Alumni Association Scholarship.

Rob Greenwood, director of the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development says they were deeply honoured by the association with Harris.

"He always provided wise counsel. I think the most important thing for us was that Dr. Harris really did embody the values that we in the Harris center try to live up to," Greenwood says.

"His name represents the integrity and the independence of the university, while making a practical contribution to the needs of the province," he says.

The centre helps to direct the university's academic work into areas that are relevant to the province, by facilitating communication between the researchers and communities.

"As a speaker he was spellbinding, and yet he was very humble, and he was passionately committed to rural Newfoundland and Labrador. I don't think he can be replaced," Greenwood says.

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#### **Figure:**

Leslie Harris

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*This certificat is issued to Mr Michael Clair for personal and temporary display.*

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