
A Round Table Discussion

Reforming the Leadership Convention Process

Paul MacEwan, MLA; Stan Schumacher, MLA; Tony Whitford, MLA; Gary Farrell-Collins, MLA; Len Simms, MHA; Eric Cline, MLA; Doreen Hamilton, MLA

Elections are decided, to an increasing extent, on the basis of the party leaders. It is not surprising the method of choosing the leader is of crucial importance. Prior to 1919 the choice of Leader was the prerogative of the parliamentary caucus. Subsequently, Canadian parties moved to delegate conventions reflecting the democratization of Canadian politics. But the traditional convention process itself is open to criticism and several provincial parties including most recently Alberta and Nova Scotia have experimented with alternate means of choosing leaders. Should we move toward a process that gives more people a say in who is chosen Leader? This was one of the questions considered by delegates to the 33rd Canadian Regional Conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held in August 1993. Leading off the discussion were two legislators with first hand experience in recent leadership conventions, Paul MacEwan, Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly and Stan Schumacher, Deputy Speaker of the Alberta Legislative Assembly.

Paul MacEwan (Nova Scotia): The leader of a party is very important, much more important when you come to government than when you are in opposition. Because of the need for legitimacy for the leader and for the leadership selection process, those of us who belong to the Nova Scotia Liberal Party attempted last year to formulate a new mechanism which would deal with the new realities of politics in the 1990s. This culminated in the selection of a new leader by telephone.

It was the first time in history that any political party chose a new leader by a telephone technology ballot. We were presented with an offer by the Maritime Telephone and Telegraph Company, which provides telecommunication services in Nova Scotia. They felt that they had the technology to enable a leadership vote to be done by telephone. The mechanism was that each individual party member who participated would be given a random personal identification number. They would telephone a number that was given for the candidate of their choice, and when they heard a prerecorded message, they would tap in their PIN number on a touch-tone telephone, after which they

would get a signal that the vote had been accepted and recorded by way of a "Thank you for your vote" message from the candidate whom they were choosing. That would exhaust their ability to vote unless there was a second ballot.

Early in 1992, owing to an unfortunate situation within the Liberal Party of Nova Scotia, the leader resigned and our party was faced with a real crisis. Had the government of the day chosen to call a provincial election then, I do not know what would have happened. I doubt that the results would have been the same as when the election was finally held in 1993.

We were faced with a need to do something dramatic to revitalize the party, to achieve a high degree of party unity from that process, to involve as many Liberals as possible, and to attempt to ensure that the leadership race would have a legitimacy to its verdict, which we did not feel could be achieved by an ordinary delegate convention.

So the party executive weighed several alternatives. We had a paper ballot system as a back-up. If the telephone technology had not worked, we would have

then gone to a paper ballot. However, it was decided by the party executive in March, 1992 that we wanted to have universal suffrage within the Liberal Party.

It is not possible to set up a telephone vote mechanism that does not cost any money. This is one of the negative aspects of the telephone voting system, because with the direct suffrage system, as was used by the Alberta PC party, you set up polling stations across the province and all card-carrying members who present themselves at those polling stations get a ballot and vote right there. There is no additional cost beyond your party membership fee. In the Nova Scotia system, there was a delegate registration fee. It was \$25 for those who wanted to vote from home and \$45 for those who wanted to come to a convention where there would be the usual hoopla associated with conventions — meeting candidates, hearing leadership speeches and voting.

These amounts were established to cover the cost of setting up the system. The disadvantage to doing that was that we did not achieve universal suffrage. We only achieved suffrage on the part of those who could pay \$25 or \$45 respectively. That translated into approximately one quarter of the registered party membership. We had 30,000 card-carrying Liberals in Nova Scotia as of the cutoff date of April 15, 1992. The number registered to participate in this exercise after the cutoff was about 7,000 people. The number who actually voted in the final selection process was 6,999.

The disadvantage is obvious. Those who cannot afford \$25 or \$45, or those to whom it does not appear to be a sufficient priority, will not participate. I regret the disincentive to those who lack the means to afford that fee to participate.

I suppose too, there could be potential for abuse here in purchasing personal identification numbers on the part of people who do not have the \$25 themselves, but would allow somebody else to buy a number for them. To guard against that kind of abuse, the PIN numbers were mailed individually to the individual party members. We felt it would be very difficult to set up a vote-buying scheme on a large basis, because whoever did so would have to visit all these people individually, pick up their PIN numbers and attempt to cast a vote for them on a telephone. One individual whom you may have heard of, claimed to have actually done that. However, he claimed to have done it on behalf of a relatively small number of people as compared to the total number of voters.

When we decided to go with the system we found that it did not work the first time. Telephone lines were jammed. The Maritime Telephone and Telegraph Company was appalled because they felt the technology would work. However, it was apparently insufficiently

developed to handle the tremendous load that came in at one time. Rather than giving up on that system, we tried it again two weeks later. On the second attempt it worked. The voting was scheduled over longer periods of time. There were four hours provided for the first ballot and another four-hour window for the second ballot. The technology worked and the new leader was selected. He is now the Premier of Nova Scotia, John Savage, elected on the basis of the broadest leadership selection process that had ever taken place in the history of Nova Scotia. The Liberal Party is proud of that achievement and hopes that other parties will follow in the same path, whether it be by a telephone-vote selection process or by paper ballot with polling stations for individual party members. That is a choice that individual parties will have to make.

Whenever you are developing a new way of doing things, you have to iron out the creases as you go along.

Paul MacEwan

Possibly there could be improvements made yet. Here were the steps which we took in Nova Scotia. The voting for the leader was on June 6. The rules, as laid down by the party executive, stated you had to be a member in good standing of the Nova Scotia Liberal Party as of April 15 to participate, which was six weeks prior to the selection process. We had approximately 30,000 Nova Scotians who were members in good standing as of April 15. To be a member in good standing of the Nova Scotia Liberal Party, you must have paid a \$5 annual membership fee and signed a form giving your particulars and stating that you wish to become a member of the Liberal Party or that you wish to continue as a member of the Liberal Party. We do not yet have that stipulation that you must sign that you are not a member or a supporter of any other party, a stipulation which should be there and I believe will be there in the near future. That is one improvement we have to make. You did have to be a member six weeks before the voting.

Then there was a window of 30 days from April 15 to May 15 within which the member would register to participate in the leadership selection process and pay a fee of \$25 or \$45 as the case may be. We felt that the registration fee and the advance cut-off date were there as safeguards to prevent "instant Liberals" from showing up on election day and buying pin numbers. It is a concern and I think a very legitimate one that any party moving in this direction would have to watch carefully.

Increasingly, in this day of accountability, of the new politics, of mass participation and mass alienation from the political process, we have to do go in this direction. The old model of the delegate convention where a small number of people chose a leader that would lead a province or a nation will be increasingly out of touch with political reality as we advance into the twenty-first century.



Stan Schumacher (Alberta): The evolution of the leadership selection process can be divided into three phases. The first phase was in the early post-Confederation period. The selection of national party leaders was modelled after British practices. The retiring leader, in consultation with senior party notables, caucus members and, most crucially, with the Governor General, selected the new leader. The formal selection of the Prime Minister, and consequently the Leader of the governing party, was seen as the prerogative of the Governor General.

Eighteen ninety-six is an important year in Canadian party politics. Lord Aberdeen, the Governor General at the time, resisted pressures from the Conservative Party to have Sir Charles Tupper replace Sir Mackenzie Bowell as leader. However, as a result of the Conservative Party's persistence in its support for Tupper, Lord Aberdeen eventually agreed to appoint him Prime Minister. For the first time in Canadian history, "The governing party asserted with some success a claim to choose its own leader independent of Vice-Regal wishes".

Moreover, the role of the parliamentary caucus in leadership selection increased significantly when the Liberal Party was in opposition. Following that party's defeat in the 1878 election, Liberal MPs pressured Alexander Mackenzie to resign. Mackenzie did so, and the caucus voted in Edward Blake as his successor.

The second phase of the leadership selection process began with the election of Mackenzie King as Liberal leader at a national party convention in 1919. For the first time, the extra-parliamentary wing of a national party played a pivotal role in the selection of a leader. The move to a national leadership convention was partly a response by the party establishment to the deep divisions that had developed within the Liberal Party following the conscription crisis of the First World War. Sir Wilfrid Laurier was able to convince the party that a national convention attended by delegates from across the country would be the best forum for selecting a new leader who would keep the party united.

In 1927, the Conservative Party held a national delegate convention to elect Richard Bedford Bennett as

leader. Since then, national conventions have been used to select national party leaders. The only exception is Arthur Meighen, who took over the Conservative Party leadership briefly in 1942.

The national convention was adopted to ensure that the party's extra-parliamentary wing had greater participation in important party activities, to make the internal party organization more democratic and to offset the regional weaknesses of party caucuses. The adoption of national conventions also altered the relationship between the party leader and the parliamentary caucus. As a result of being elected by a large number of party delegates representing the various constituent parts of the party and regions of the country, the leader was elevated to a status shared by no other member of the party. Only the national party leader could claim to have been selected by a national constituency.

The move to having national leadership conventions as television events represented a third phase in the evolution of leadership politics. The 1967 Progressive Conservative convention, which saw the election of Robert Stanfield as leader, was the first to be nationally televised. As a result of changes in modern communication techniques, party leaders became the medium through which party policies and ideas were conveyed to the electorate. Leaders became public persuaders and assumed greater responsibility for mobilizing support for their parties.

The increase in the number of delegates attending national leadership conventions has not necessarily been accompanied by a balanced representation from the different socio-demographic groups.

Stan Schumacher

The increased prominence of leadership conventions in Canadian politics has been accompanied by changes in the competitive nature of leadership campaigns. "The critical factor in this change has been the growth in the size of conventions and the broadening of the base of participation in delegate selection."

Elaborate constituency mobilization and organization techniques have become critical to effective leadership campaigns. Indeed, leadership campaign organizations have become highly professional and sophisticated. This sophisticated approach to leader selection has been accompanied by intense media scrutiny and coverage. Major leadership aspirants receive considerable

prime-time broadcast coverage, and their leadership qualities and policy ideas are assessed in detail in the print media. The media also give equal attention to the tactics and methods of leadership contestants.

Recent leadership conventions have become highly controversial on two fronts. First, the practice by campaign organizations or special interest groups of paying party membership fees to recruit instant party members who help elect sympathetic delegates or slates of delegates has undermined the integrity of the leadership selection process.

The second controversial dimension of the selection process is the cost and financing of recent leadership campaigns. Large sums of money and resources are now needed by the campaign organizations for leadership contestants to mobilize support and to ensure the selection of delegates.

With the increased need for large sums of money, partial public funding, via the tax credit, has become commonplace and a source of controversy. Concern has been expressed that it is inappropriate for public funding to be used for leadership campaigns without implementing financial disclosure and accountability rules that match those in the *Canada Elections Act* on election campaigns and party financing. The use of a tax credit system introduces a clear public dimension to the process by enabling leadership contestants to raise funds from a broader base of party members and, in turn, may lower barriers for those who do not have access to substantial donors.

It should be pointed out that although the federal Conservatives and the provincial Liberal Party in Alberta utilize the tax credit system for their leadership selection, the constitution of the Alberta Conservatives prohibits such practice.

Several provincial parties have responded to public criticism by selecting their leaders through direct election by all party members in good standing. Leaders of the Parti Québécois were elected through direct elections in 1985 and 1987, as were leaders of the provincial Progressive Conservatives in Prince Edward Island in 1987 and in Ontario in 1990. The Liberal Party of Canada at its 1990 national convention adopted a policy resolution that supported the direct election of its next leader.

In Alberta, the Conservative Party leader, Premier Ralph Klein, was elected through a direct election process in December of 1992. Amendments to the Alberta Conservative Party constitution were adopted in April of 1991 at our annual convention.

The events that led to the adoption of a direct election process may be traced back to the 1985 leadership convention. It included 16 categories of delegates among

them the party executive, federal MPs, provincial MLAs, women and youth. The total number of non elected or *ex officio* delegates accounted for 17.5 per cent of the total delegate pool. Each constituency was entitled to 20 delegates. The 79 constituencies that existed at the time produced 1580 new delegates, or 82.5 per cent of the total. Given the numerical importance of constituency delegates, the leadership campaign tended to focus on the contest for these delegates' support.

At the time, the various leadership campaigns encouraged the use of slates of nominees for delegate positions, a provision consistent with the emerging pattern of selecting national party leaders.

In Alberta, the adoption of a direct election format has had a dramatic and rejuvenating effect on the Progressive Conservative Party.

Stan Schumacher

Of the constituency delegates, almost 65 ran as part of a slate. The use of candidate slates in and of itself is not necessarily a practice that elicits strong negative reactions; however, the issue became controversial at the 1985 convention when the policy was combined with a rule that allowed individuals to purchase a party membership with full voting privileges right up to the time of the delegate selection meeting. The intent was to create a more open party.

Unfortunately, the use of slates with a late cut-off date had a negative effect on the portrayal of the campaign in the media. In the urban centres, busloads of "instant Tories" shuttled back and forth between the ethnic-community association halls and the delegate selection meetings. None of the candidates could refuse to take part because the use of slates meant that, in most of these constituencies, it was a "winner take all" contest. If a candidate did not recruit large numbers of new party-members, he or she would be shut out of the delegate pool selected from that constituency. Consequently, the process of leadership selection itself became the most important issue in that leadership campaign.

The Getty campaign victory of 1985 demonstrated that the character of these battles and their scrutiny by the media can threaten the legitimacy of a new leader's claim to respect and authority. That served as an important lesson, one that has not been forgotten. Indeed, it was Don Getty who initiated an examination of the leadership selection process after the 1985 convention.

In the 1985 leadership convention, 2,000 members participated as delegates and 63,500 memberships were

purchased. In contrast, in the 1992 leadership contest, over 52,000 votes were cast in the first ballot and over 78,000 in the second ballot one week later. In total, 120,000 memberships were purchased, in stark contrast to the 12,000 memberships sold to the Conservatives in Ontario.

Unlike the Ontario Conservative Party, which set a cut-off date almost two full months prior to the election date, Alberta party memberships could be purchased up to the date of the second ballot. In fact, they could be purchased right in the polling place. In Alberta, almost 30,000 memberships were purchased between the first and second ballot which was one week apart.

One party official with whom I spoke pointed out that memberships sold between the first and second ballots represented the parties' profit margin of \$150,000 on the exercise.

More important, the 120,000 party memberships sold is the highest number in Canadian history. Moreover, the leadership race in Alberta was indeed a race. On the first ballot, only one vote separated the first and second place candidates. Ralph Klein went on to a landslide victory by a margin of almost 15,000 votes on the second ballot.

In Alberta, the direct election of the leader created genuine excitement and prominent media coverage. More important, any system of leadership selection should, at minimum, attempt to achieve the following:

- Open up the selection process at the riding level in order to give as many party members as feasible a direct say in the selection of party leader;
- Attract more people to the party;
- Make selection processes as fair, comprehensible, and accessible as possible;
- Codify the selection rules so as to allow for certainty without being inflexible;
- Construct a process which is financially feasible for the leadership candidate, the party, and the party membership.

Clearly, the process of leadership selection is still evolving, and, although it looks as if Canadian parties are moving towards the adoption of a direct leadership election, the costs and benefits of doing so are not always obvious. Nonetheless, it is evident that the direct election of a leader is the way of the future and represents a commitment to the ideal of democratization which effectively diminishes the power of the so-called establishment. It is truly the politics of inclusion put into practice.



Tony Whitford (Northwest Territories): In the Northwest Territories we have a unique method of

choosing the leader. It does not have the hype that Alberta had with its leadership convention or the national leadership convention a few months ago. It does not have the same costs.

In the territories every four years we have a general election and the people select 24 candidates, one from each of the ridings. Those elected people meet in Yellowknife as soon as possible. At the time they arrive they are all elected members, there is no leader or government. We do not have a party system. We have consensus government. The first order of business is to select a Speaker while meeting in caucus. Soon thereafter we select a leader. That is done through a process of submitting names. Perhaps people will lobby in advance, but in the end the 24 members will vote for someone to become leader. After that, the rest of the members will select seven more people to be the government.

Following the 1991 election, this process went public for the first time. It was done in the chamber rather than in the caucus room, as had been done on at least two occasions in the past. It was done because of the need and demand by the public to have accountability and to see how things were done. The people of the territories said that they wanted it done this way and the members responded. Many of the things that were once done in private are now done publicly. Prior to that time, it was something like selecting a Pope. People watched the chimney and if white smoke came out, we knew we had a leader. In this case the people were aware of who was running and what was said by the leadership candidates. In a nutshell that is the method that we have used for at least three general elections.



Gary Farrell-Collins (British Columbia): We are currently going through a leadership process in the Liberal party in British Columbia. When it becomes obvious that a leader no longer has the confidence of a caucus and no longer has the confidence of those people that he or she is supposed to work very closely with, it also becomes obvious to the party that something has to happen. Indeed, that is what has taken place in our province. We are currently going through a leadership campaign that was brought about as a direct result of the actions of the caucus members.

I believe the caucus can act to rectify a problem, even if that problem is not seen as a public problem or is not seen publicly. The caucus can make itself heard and the party can still play its role in choosing the leader. I think it is important that we allow the party members to have that right, that we allow the party members to choose the leader of their party. I do not believe that it should be the product strictly of an elected caucus, because as we have

often seen, and as we know in this country, the caucus is not always representative of the party itself. I think that is an extremely important provision to take into account.

We are also going the way of the tele-vote, as the Nova Scotia Liberals did. I think that was a very positive process. At a time when the general public is as detached from politics and politicians as they are now, I believe it is incumbent upon politicians and party members to try to encourage people to become involved in the process as much as possible. It seems that one of the most exciting things that the public finds in politics is the selection of a leader. They tend to watch leadership conventions on television closely. They tend to find them exciting and dynamic.

I think the route we are taking, following in the footsteps of the Nova Scotia Liberals, is a positive one. It has attracted a wide number of new members to our party from all over the province.

Given our terrain, one of the disadvantages that we have in a province the size of British Columbia is that it is very difficult to get people to 75 constituency polling stations to vote in the party process on election day. The advantage of the tele-vote system is that people will be able to have what I call Grey Cup parties at their homes or within their ridings and individual communities and vote by phone.

In addition, it is extremely expensive to fly from the northern to the southern part of the Province of British Columbia. It is virtually impossible to drive the distance in any reasonable length of time, and the train is not an option either. It is very difficult to get to the Lower Mainland to vote. This method allows many more people to participate in the process at a cost of about \$18, as opposed to a cost of \$500 to \$1,000 to attend a delegate convention.

We went through a lengthy battle at our convention to amend the constitution of our party to allow for this system. All these issues were brought up and discussed, sometimes in a heated manner. I think the party has been brave. It has taken this step, which we hope works. We are looking forward to a successful convention.



Len Simms (Newfoundland) I happen to be the leader of a provincial party and I thought perhaps the delegates would be interested to hear some comments from that perspective. First, I hate the American process for selecting a leader. I am not very fussy about the U.K. process either. In fact, if that process had been tried in any of the caucuses in which I have been involved over the last 14 years, I doubt very much if we would have ever selected a leader, particularly in the caucus that we have now in opposition.

It all boils down to practicality. The issues that you have to consider as a party are the costs associated with it and whether you can afford it, or whether you can somehow turn it into a fundraising venture, like Nova Scotia and Alberta did. You have to consider timing. If you are close to an election, I think the convention process is probably the best. People tend to watch the convention process. If, however, you are two or three years away from an election, I am afraid the public will never remember in three years how you selected your leader. All those factors have to be considered.

In Newfoundland, we in the Conservative Party observed what happened in Nova Scotia. We were impressed with the idea at the beginning, but a bit shaken after the first try was unsuccessful. We kind of enjoyed the Alberta process. It looked pretty good, but then we were not quite sure how it would end up. We had to wait awhile for another ballot. Those processes, as is the case with the normal leadership convention process with which we are all familiar, are flawed.

Let us be frank. If you are a half decent candidate, you will make sure that people will be out buying PIN numbers for your delegates. You will be buying membership cards for your delegates if you are in Alberta. Or, if you are having a leadership convention, you will be stacking the halls to get your delegates elected to go to the convention.

It all boils down to your personal preference. I do not think that Nova Scotia, Alberta or Newfoundland can tell the other provinces the best way to go. You can only share your experiences. What was done in Nova Scotia and Alberta has offered us other options for selecting leaders, particularly those of us at the provincial level.

I have had the privilege of having run in two leadership races. One was a few years ago when the prize was the office of premier and my party formed the government. We had access to lots of money then. That convention was a great one. Unfortunately, I lost, but I am still around. As a matter of fact, the person who beat me is no longer around.

The best process was the one I encountered the second time I ran for leader. That was the most successful and least expensive process, not only for me personally but for our party at that point in time because we had formed the opposition. That was the process that selected its present leader, the one who is now speaking. It was by acclamation, a process that I recommend to anyone!



Eric Cline (Saskatchewan): The panelists have given a very interesting description of the party-wide convention process. They have talked about the cost to the delegates, however, they have not addressed the

overall cost of a campaign which is designed to appeal to the public. The cautionary note which I want to express is that we can go from the traditional parliamentary caucus system of selecting a leader, which would be the cheapest — I suppose there is very little cost to the British Conservative Party in its system — or we can go to the other extreme; the U.S. primary system which selects a leader or a candidate for governor or senator.

One of the really shocking things about the American political system is that Congress members spend a lot of their time in the United States trying to raise millions of dollars which are necessary for them to compete in the primary system. I would argue that their system, although it theoretically involves the public at large, actually has an element which I find objectionable and that is the very big money and control by monied interests in the United States.

In contrast to the argument put forward here that broadening the system would mean greater accountability to the public and greater participation, I would argue that, if you look at the American system which, in theory, has the most participation, it also has the most control by big-money powerful interests and involves fewer people than in Canada. If you look at the participation rate in the political system in the United States, as we all know, it is not what we have enjoyed in Canada. I do not see any evidence that this system results in greater accountability to the public.

I would join then with those who would question, without concluding, that this supposed expansion of democracy that we hear about would necessarily be more democratic and would not have some drawbacks which perhaps we do not have in our system which, on balance, is not a bad system.



Doreen Hamilton (Saskatchewan): I think we are seeing a pendulum swinging away from a caucus or a limited number of people being involved in the choosing of a leader to a more populist deliberation when we are talking about all members come hither or yon. I would argue that, even with the spending limitation, that limits the ability to get a message out as well.

With the kind of move toward telecommunications and the touchtone telephone and so on, a 10-second clip becomes very important. The look and perhaps the personality, without much substance, has greater role to play. The swell of party membership, which we saw at its worst in Saskatchewan, reminds me of a pizza party generation when you instantly become a member and, in busloads, are hauled off to a nomination process. It is not necessarily telling our next generation that they should

become involved, knowledgeable and informed. Democracy has a responsibility of people being informed in casting their ballots as well.

We have to look at the old ways and maybe reform them or update the process. There are some parts of the grassroots process which should be retained and cherished.

Doreen Hamilton

If all we are trying to do is allow more people into the process, then do we not run the risk of running popularity contests at best? Or at worst, something which is manipulated? We can round up "x" number of thousands of individuals who will vote on this particular occasion but they have no long-term abiding interest in your party and, in fact, may show up on someone else's roles.

Indeed, in some states in the United States you can register both as a Republican and as a Democrat. Lots of people do that in order to cast their ballot for the leader of their choice for each party, not having any particular regard to philosophy or policies or anything else. It is simply part of the popularity contest.

In the long run, is that in a sense any better than what the Conservative Party in Great Britain is doing where one could argue that the group who made the selection is an informed group? That is the group who has worked most closely with the leader of the party and the Prime Minister and that is an informed group. Whether or not they made a good choice is not for me to decide. They certainly were an informed group and they were not instant members.

We seem to be leaning the other way and saying that every person who wants to vote, can vote. It does not matter whether they believe in the party or the policies. In fact, after you finish voting for this party, next year, if there is a leadership race for another party, you can get involved with them as well.

I am a little cautious about that. I am not saying that we should adopt the policy that says only caucus members choose. However, I do think that, if there is a rush towards allowing everyone to be involved, we have to be a bit cautious about who it is who actually has the privilege of voting. It is a privilege. If you are going to be involved in selecting the leader of your party, I hope you have some abiding interest in that party, in its policies, its philosophy, and what the long-term effects are of your voting.