
Choosing the Party Leader

Is There a Better Way?

David McFadden, MPP



The losing candidate Dennis Timbrell (left) and Alan Pope congratulate the new leader Larry Grossman after the 1985 Conservative Leadership Convention. (Canapress Photo Service)

When I adjourned the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party's leadership convention on January 26, 1985, following the election of Frank Miller as our new leader, I was happy to have completed three and a half months of tremendously challenging work in organizing and then staging the convention, fully expecting not to have such a responsibility again. With Mr. Miller's decision to retire as leader in August, I was called upon to organize a second leadership convention which took place on November 15 and 16 and saw the election of Larry Grossman as leader in a very exciting finish.

Serving as the chairman of two leadership conventions in one year and having been a delegate to four other leadership conventions at either the federal or provincial level has given me a unique opportunity to reflect upon the position and efficacy of leadership conventions in our political system.

Prior to considering whether or not there is a better way to choose a leader than through the kind of leadership convention we have developed in this country, I would like to focus first on the history, organization and impact of the current convention process.

The use of leadership conventions to elect a party leader did not start in Canada until after World War I. Before that, all leaders were chosen by the parliamentary or legislative caucus of the party in the same way as the British Conservative Party continues to do today. The first national convention to choose a party leader was held by the Liberal Party in 1919, at which Mackenzie King was elected leader. The first leadership convention in Ontario was held by the Conservative Party in 1920 when Howard Ferguson was chosen leader. The first leadership convention called by the federal Conservative Party took place in 1927 and chose R.B. Bennett as leader. It is interesting to note that in the case of each of these parties they went on to win major victories in the general elections which immediately followed the convention.

David McFadden is President of the Progressive Conservative party of Ontario. This is a revised version of an address to the tenth Regional Seminar held in Ottawa in November 1985.

While leadership conventions were not entirely accepted by party hierarchies in the 1920s and 1930s as the best method of choosing a leader, there is no question today of any party returning the power to elect a leader to the parliamentary or legislative caucus. The leadership convention has become a permanent and an essential part of our political life. There are three fundamental reasons for this.

First, leadership conventions are a democratic way to choose a leader in which a broad cross-section of the party's organization can participate. Some observers question how representative conventions really are of a party or of society as a whole. It is my experience that the delegates do in fact accurately reflect the broad range of opinions and concerns within a party. The delegates elected by each riding association when combined with members of Parliament, members of the legislature, the party executive and representatives of constituent organizations such as party campus, youth and women's associations, ensure that a leadership convention is representative of the diverse elements which make up any major political party.

Leadership conventions are not necessarily representative of all of society, nor should they be expected to be. All major political parties seek to encompass as many individuals, groups and interests as possible, but no party can honestly claim to have the involvement and support of all groups in proportion to their size and importance in society. Parties represent a particular political philosophy and approach which may secure greater support and membership from certain individuals and groups than others. Leadership conventions provide the opportunity for the supporters of a party to choose a leader to represent their philosophy and approach to the electorate. Properly and fairly organized, leadership conventions are an accurate expression of the popular will of a political party.

The second reason for the central importance of the leadership convention is its positive impact on a party's organization. The organizational efforts and campaigning leading up to a convention and then during the days of the convention give thousands of party members an exciting and memorable experience. While many party members may be disappointed by the results when their candidate loses, virtually everyone I have met after a convention describes it as an exhilarating opportunity to participate directly in an historic event. Even more than in general elections, party members who participate in leadership conventions feel they are contributing directly to the outcome of the results of a democratic process. This feeling of participation and involvement is essential to the morale of any party organization.

Related to the impact on party morale is the central and symbolic role that a leadership convention represents for party renewal. Every leadership convention allows new talented people to assume key roles in the party. Each convention is an essential point of departure which inevitably leads to a changing of the guard within the party structure. Such change is essential to the vitality of any party. A leadership convention gives party members the opportunity to participate directly and personally in this essential act of renewal.

The third and final reason for the essential importance of the leadership convention is its impact on public opinion. Leadership conventions historically appear to have had either a neutral or a positive impact upon public opinion. I have found no evidence that public support dropped for a party as a consequence of the holding of a convention. Gallup and other polls showed that the conventions which elected Bob Stanfield and Joe Clark as leaders of the Progressive Conservative Party and Pierre Trudeau and John Turner as leaders of the Liberal Party all lead to an immediate and significant jump in popular support for their respective parties. On the other hand, the convention which

elected Brian Mulroney to the leadership of the party had no significant impact on the party's popular support based on the polls taken shortly after the convention.

Experience shows, however, that a convention is only a useful launching pad. Once the warm glow of the convention dies away, it is up to the new leader to move quickly to consolidate and build on the new level of popular support or it may disappear quickly, as Bob Stanfield found out in 1968 and John Turner discovered in 1984.

This natural desire of parties to use their conventions as a means to reach out to the public and increase popular support inevitably causes convention organizers to accommodate the communications media to the greatest extent possible. Newspapers and radio can provide coverage relatively unobtrusively, with minimal disruption to the convention. The extensive requirements of television coverage can come into conflict with the comfort and even safety of delegates and potentially alter the format and program of a convention. At our convention in November 1985, we had some 1,400 accredited representatives of the news media, a remarkably high number when you remember that we had a total of only 1,686 voting delegates.

Television had a major impact on the floor of the convention. Four television networks built their own studios on scaffolding some 30 feet above the ground. The television networks and stations then built a total of eighteen separate camera locations on scaffolding about eight feet high at various locations across the middle of the convention floor. In addition, all of the television outlets had a large number of remote hand-held cameras which were employed during the broadcasting of the convention.

When you add to these television studios and camera locations the presence of seven radio booths on the convention floor, the convention site almost took on the appearance of a broadcast studio in which the candidates, campaign organizers and delegates were players in a live drama. While television has covered political events for over thirty years, technological developments combined with the increase in the number of television outlets over the past 15 years have made television a much more potent and exciting medium for covering conventions.

Every party wants to use the power of television to bring their convention directly into the homes of hundreds of thousands of voters. The challenge is to accommodate the needs of television while remembering that the fundamental reason for having a convention is to elect a new leader. Consequently, the need of the delegates to be able to see and meet the candidates and then vote in peace and the right of the leadership campaigns to reach the delegates without obstruction must remain uppermost in the minds of convention organizers. It is a difficult task to balance the contending interests of the convention itself and the broadcast media.

There are some people within our party who have started to advocate the election of party leaders directly by the party membership following the example of the Parti Québécois and the Social Democratic Party in Britain. The most compelling reason for the direct election of leaders is the involvement of every party member fully and equally in the selection of a new leader. While this proposal has a real philosophical attraction, it has some major fundamental flaws.

First, as noted earlier, the intense media coverage of the exciting events of a leadership convention reaches the voters in a concerted way over several days. People with only a limited interest in politics often follow a convention with great interest. The process of party members going to a hundred or more meeting places to cast their ballots lacks the kind of intensity and drama which the voting process at a convention holds. Such a

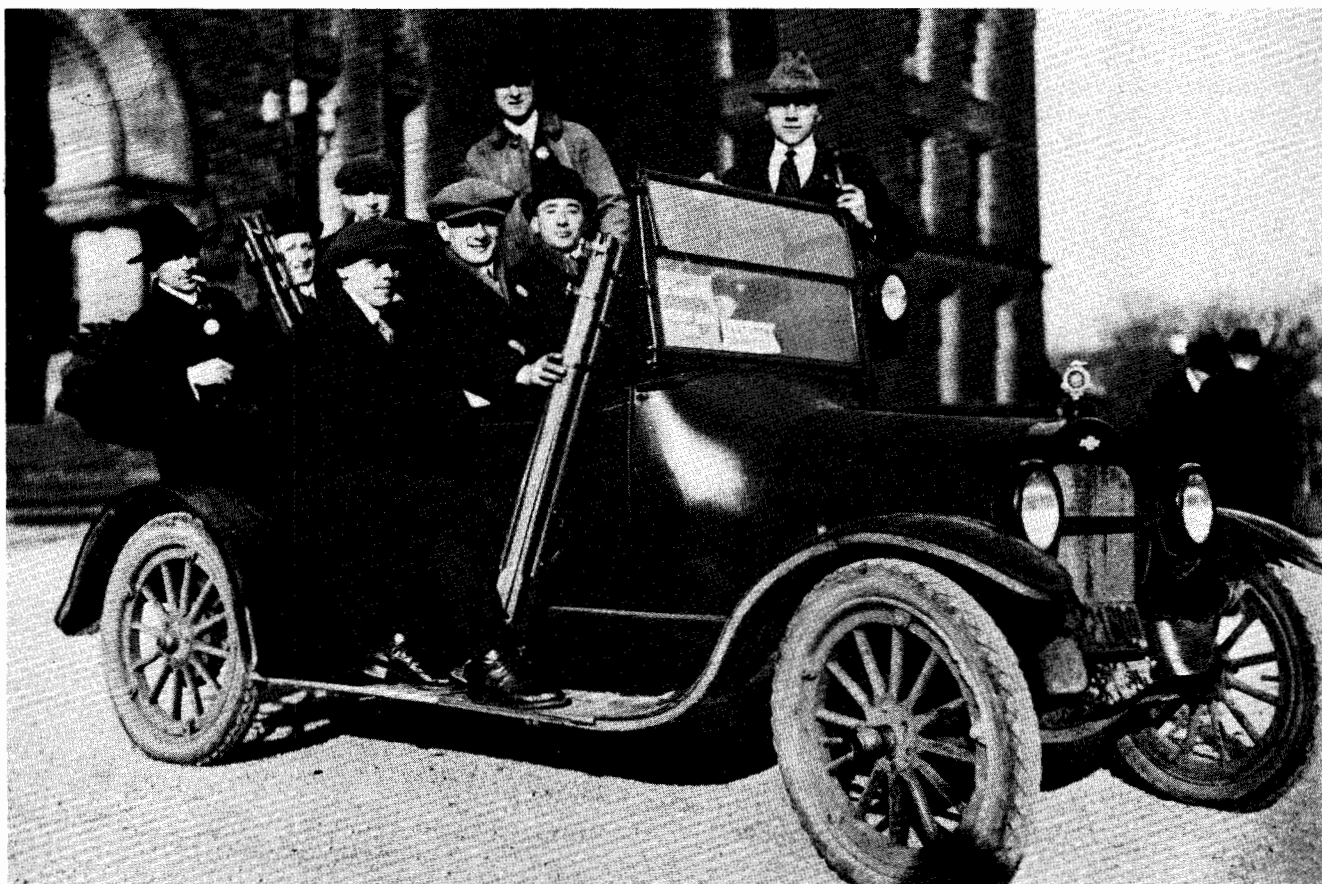
loss of media impact would clearly limit the positive effect which the process of leadership change has on party support.

The second flaw is the vulnerability which a party could have to various interest or lobby groups or opposition parties. Unless there were a membership cut-off date upon the resignation of a leader, special interest groups and even supporters of other parties could sign up en masse and have a major impact upon the ultimate outcome of the leadership vote. Today, such an attack is difficult to mount since outside groups would be forced to move from riding to riding, sign up members and then attend various delegate selection meetings. Under a system of direct

election, such groups would simply have to secure memberships from one or more ridings and then turn out to vote on the appointed day. With enough organizational muscle, outside groups could even put up their own leadership candidates. One can imagine the destructive effect which such an invasion by hostile or single interest groups could have on the strength and unity of a political party.

northern areas. Consequently, in the province of Ontario for example, it is very possible that well over 50% of the membership of a party could be located in the Toronto area while only a third of seats in the legislature come from there. Through a membership drive, the Toronto area could dominate the choice of leader, which is not allowed under the current system.

Moreover, strong ridings with a large membership would overwhelm weaker ridings. For example, my riding has 4,500 members which would be equal to the membership in several other seats. Under direct election, the strong ridings would simply get stronger and the weaker ridings weaker within the party



The Queen's Park press corp (shown here in 1919) has become an important factor in Ontario leadership conventions. (City of Toronto Archives)

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The final flaw in the concept of direct election is the potential monopoly of power which one or more regions or types of ridings could seize. It is easier, faster and cheaper to sign up new members in large urban centres such as Toronto than in rural or

since leadership candidates would inevitably concentrate their efforts on the areas where the votes are. This is not the pattern today, of course, since all ridings have the same number of delegates. Such potential concentrations or monopoly of power by certain regions or by strong ridings would hurt a party and undermine its ability to speak effectively for all regions.

Leadership conventions have evolved over the years to reflect changes within both parties and society and to reach out more effectively to the general public. After over 65 years of use in Canada I believe leadership conventions remain the best way to choose a party leader. ■