

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Conservative Leadership Race

By Stephen Somerville

By the time that you read this, the Federal Conservatives will have a new leader.

This past Saturday, the Conservatives announced the results of their Leadership vote.

This overly drawn out contest had fourteen contestants.

According to media reports, the party went from 90,000 members to now over 250,000 members and each one of them had an opportunity to vote for the leader.

Most pundits believe that former Conservative Cabinet Minister Maxime Bernier, a Member of Parliament from Quebec will win.

I chose to vote for my long-time good friend Erin O'Toole. He represents the riding of Durham. He was a former Veterans Affairs Minister in the Harper government. Prior to entering public life, he was a captain in the air force and worked as a lawyer.

Unlike previous leadership contests that were done by a delegated convention, whereby each riding association in the country sent representatives to a national party convention to vote, this was a one person one vote operation.

This process did not elicit much interest from the general public on a national level and was far too long. There was no excitement of a convention; the last minute speeches that could make or break a candidacy and no in between balloting last minute deal making for support.

Instead, a preferential ballot was used. Each voter could rank up to ten candidates (or only one). The lowest ranked candidates fall off the ballot and their choices get allotted among the remaining candidates. A candidate needs 50 per cent, plus one to become party leader.

This process also did not really generate any local excitement.

The riding association hosted a fundraiser and invited all the leadership candidates. I believe that six of the fourteen attended. And while the respective candidates did hold smaller meetings in town, they were modest and low key events.

As a longtime volunteer in the Conservative party, I would suggest the following changes the next time that a party leader is chosen: First, real, substantive debates on issues cannot be undertaken when you have fourteen candidates on the stage. You need to both make the bar higher to enter and propose incentives for the candidates to know when to exit the race.

This time out each candidate had to submit nomination forms signed by 300 party members from at least 30 electoral districts in at least seven different provinces and territories. This was a good idea.

Further, according to Wikipedia, each candidate had to pay a \$50,000 non-refundable entrance fee, half of which must be paid when filing nomination with the other half due by the close of nominations on February 24, 2017.

They also had to pay an additional \$50,000 compliance deposit, by December 31, 2016 or when filing nomination for those who register in 2017, which is refundable provided the candidate complies with campaign rules.

To me this amount of money is not enough to keep marginal candidates out of the race. I would have increased the initial amount to \$100,000 and I would have also increased the additional amount by \$150,000. I would also change the mechanism for the refundable part of the entrance fee.

As you get closer to the leadership voting date, I would have decreased the amount of refund that a candidate gets. If a candidate leaves the race in February, then he/she gets more than if they quit the race in late April. There was no such incentive in this race.

I would also make use of polls help to assist eligible voters. The party should poll party members once every two weeks from about February through to voting day and publish these results. This will help voters to focus on who can win. It will also help the candidates in both fundraising and in making a decision to drop out or who to throw their support behind.

Most importantly, I would also propose some type of hybrid process that contains the best elements of a delegated convention with a one person, one vote election system. I will lay out a detailed plan for this in my next column.

In the end, however, it is not about the voting process itself. It is about electing the best potential leader to take on Justin Trudeau and the Liberals in 2019.

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