

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Choosing a political leader

By Stephen Somerville

A couple of weeks back the Federal Conservatives chose Saskatchewan MP Andrew Sheer as their new Party Leader in an extremely close race over Montreal MP Maxime Bernier.

According to published reports, over 144,000 of the 259,000 party members did cast a ballot; pretty impressive!

Although the votes were tallied beforehand, the timely release of results made for pretty good television. There was just enough time between ballots for the broadcasters and pundits to weigh in with their respective analysis.

I felt for Mr. Bernier. Just before the release of the final ballot, Party officials must have told him the results; you could see the pained look on his face. To his credit, Mr. Bernier was gracious in his remarks about the new Leader after the vote was made public. All in all, the event was satisfactory from a television viewer perspective, and it did give every party member a vote.

However, I think we can do better. We should be available to have an event that excites and intrigues Canadian coast to coast while also providing party members the opportunity to vote for whomever they want on successive ballots.

As a thirty-four year volunteer with the Conservatives I have been involved in many local nomination races and have attended both federal and provincial leadership conventions.

I attended two political leadership conventions in 1985 in downtown Toronto where Frank Miller, and then Larry Grossman were elected leaders of the Provincial PC party.

I was not chosen as a delegate to either convention, but I attended anyway and volunteered for Dennis Timbrell in both his leadership quests. One of my jobs was placing Dennis Timbrell stickers on the apples that would go into the voting delegates' lunch boxes!

I also attended the June 1993 Federal PC Leadership Convention that chose Kim Campbell as Leader and Prime Minister. I voted for Etobicoke-Lakeshore MP Patrick Boyer on the first ballot and then for Quebec MP Jean Charest on the second and last ballot.

I also attended the final Federal PC Party leadership which occurred in 2003. I voted for Peter McKay on the final ballot.

The conventions are fun for the delegates; there are hospitality suites every night and also you get to meet people from all across the province or across the country.

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, there has been a movement to a one person one vote operation.

In the case of the Federal CPC leadership two weeks back, 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 needed 50% plus one to become party leader.

This process did not really generate much local excitement. The riding association hosted a fundraiser and invited all the leadership candidates. I believe that six of the fourteen leadership contenders attended. And while the respective candidates did hold smaller meetings in Town, they were modest and low key events.

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 far higher to enter and propose incentives for the candidates to know when to exit the race.

We need to introduce incentives to keep marginal candidates out of the race. I would increase the amount of money it takes to get into the race and also have a 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. Much more importantly, however, is that we need to incorporate today's internet technology into the voting.

I was thinking about the introduction of a hybrid solution that takes into account the good elements of a one person/one vote system with a delegated convention.

However, in thinking some more about this, combining both elements will prove very difficult logistically, would be costly and would be tough to manage.

We can still provide potential drama though by using the internet for the final votes.

Each voting member should be provided with a code and password.

The Master of Ceremony would announce to the people in the convention hall and at home (through the television set), that voting is now open and only give everyone say 20 minutes to vote.

As the votes would be done electronically and the results tabulated instantly, every party member could vote.

You would keep doing this through successive ballots until a candidate achieves 50%+1.

A voter would not have had to rank (up to) ten other candidates, but rather would be able to see up-to the minute balloting results and make their choice on the candidates left in the race.

I have a feeling that if this system was employed by the Federal Conservatives a few weeks prior, then the final result would have been different.

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

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