

# HOW TO MAKE A NEW LIBERAL BEGINNING

Tom Kent

The main business of the Liberals at their Montreal convention isn't the election of a new leader, but the renewal of the party as an agent of progressive change, argues Tom Kent. Nearly half a century ago, in the convention that elected Lester Pearson as leader over the first Paul Martin, Kent edited the party's platform, which later served as the policy framework for the Liberal government of 1963-68. The party's progressive bent in those days, he writes, stunted the growth of the NDP on the left. Though the party had previously been in office for 22 years, its reform wing held the upper hand over the establishment. That has not recently been the case, writes our Founding Editor, who suggests that a party that has been transformed into a campaign machine needs to "restore itself to a democratic association in pursuit of the public good."

Le principal enjeu du congrès libéral de Montréal n'est pas la désignation d'un nouveau chef, estime Tom Kent, mais le renouvellement du parti en tant qu'agent de changement. Il y a bientôt un demi-siècle, lors du congrès qui avait élu Lester B. Pearson plutôt que Paul Martin père, notre rédacteur-fondateur avait mis en forme le programme qui servirait de cadre stratégique au gouvernement libéral de 1963-1968. À l'époque, l'inclination progressiste du Parti libéral avait freiné sur sa gauche la croissance du NPD, l'aile réformatrice ayant alors la main haute sur l'établissement d'un parti qui s'était maintenu 22 ans au pouvoir. Ce n'est plus le cas aujourd'hui, observe Tom Kent, selon qui le PLC s'est transformé en une machine à faire campagne et doit redevenir une « association démocratique au service du bien public ».



Choosing a leader and passing policy resolutions are not the most important business of the 2006 Liberal convention. Its dominant purpose should be to make the party again home to many people with enthusiasm and ideas for the progressive modernization of our federal public affairs. To do so it must cease to be the political machine of its recent years. It must restore itself as a democratic association in pursuit of the public good.

Dictionaries offer many shades of meaning for renewal, from "restoring to the same condition as before" to "making a new beginning." The first fairly expresses the nature of the Liberal Party's recovery after the defeat in 1957 that imposed due penalty for the complacency and arrogance that long exercise of power had bred at the top of the party. But within its ranks the reforming ideas developed from 1930s depression and 1940s war still ran strong. The party retained the membership, the internal capacity, to renew itself. It did so just in time. The rise of the New Democratic Party was headed off before it could achieve its intended replacement of Liberalism as the reforming force in Canadian politics.

That was nearly half a century ago. Liberal leadership has since been changed — to Trudeau, to Turner, to Chrétien, to Martin — without policy direction from the party convention. There was always talk, of course, of change, of doing things differently, but what and how would be up to the new leader. It is necessary to look back to 1958, to the convention that chose Pearson, for any kind of parallel to the current concern of its members that the Liberal Party be somehow renewed.

Looking back leads, however, to drawing poor lessons unless different circumstances are clearly understood. The difference crucial to Liberal renewal can be simply summarized. Fifty years ago, liberally minded people with an active interest in public affairs were almost automatically members or supporters of the Liberal Party. Today, a few are. Many are not.

Renewal in 2007 will not come by the process that worked before. The Liberal Party has changed too much. While in 1957 it had acquired, after 22 years of continuous power, characteristics of the establishment, it was still also a main home of reformers. The third and fourth parties were fringes. The Liberal Party was where realistic ideas for social causes and economic innovations were developed.

That was apparent in the torrent of more than 400 policy resolutions from the membership that preceded the 1958 convention. They were sorted into some kind of order, thematic summaries drafted, by a preparatory committee. Its member of most significance for the future of Canadian politics was Jean Lesage, who would become the father of Quebec's Quiet Revolution and Mike Pearson's interlocutor in cooperative federalism. But the mood of the party at that time was most sharply reflected by my recruitment as the representative from Manitoba; I was wanted because, as editor of the Winnipeg newspaper, *The Free Press*, I had expressed views very different from those of some of the former Liberal ministers.

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It would be folly to think that the same process of Liberal renewal can be set in motion now. The party's membership is not broad enough. It was too long a moneyed machine. Its policies have been too much improvisations, made from the top and for the moment. The fundamental problems of our federal state, positioned as we are in an ever-closer world under rapid transformation, have gone too thoroughly ignored.

The superficial contrast is that this time the party has been deeply hurt by the quarrel, and varied errors, of its two recent leaders. But only political organizers desperately yearning to regain power can imagine that a quick patching-up under new leadership will be enough to recover public support. If the Harper government were to be

defeated in an early election, it would be thanks to Harper's deeds, not to new words from different Liberal lips.

This time renewal, if it comes, will have less the character of a restoration, more that of a new beginning. The party will have to attract again to its membership a good many of the purposeful reformers who now pursue their causes in more congenial and more effective organizations. They will come to a party built on the ideas and work of its members. They will not come to the Liberal Party as it is.

That much is recognized in the recent report of the so-called Red Ribbon Task Force, on the party's constitution and organization. Its mandate was to evaluate how the party structure could be "streamlined and made more effi-

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cient," but it has bravely written about "a party built for everyone, a party built to win." The title is a come-on, for the party elite as well as the public. The actual text is that such a party has to be radically different, a party rebuilt.

At present, policy development in the party is a "process too tightly controlled, disconnected from the grassroots, and unable to harness ideas." Renewal must therefore begin with a "return to ridings." Though the riding association is "the most vital organism in the body politic" the party's "structure has left us" (presumably this means

the party elite) "disconnected from members and small-donation supporters" (as distinct from big donors). So "we have lost our way" as to how "party members, volunteers and potential supporters are engaged and made to feel" (or perhaps even to be?) "part of helping to shape the party."

And so on. The attitudes of hierarchy are too embedded for complete concealment but the need for change is made plain. The "Red Ribbon" diagnosis is compelling. Its prescriptions, however, are not. The party convention gives the opportunity to add a necessary, fundamental reform. This article is about why and how.

Meaningful work for renewal will start from recognition of a simple statistic. Of all the Canadians qualified by age and citizenship to vote on the nation's business, fewer than one in four has in recent elections chosen to go to the polls to mark a cross for a Liberal candidate. There are several reasons for the scarcity. Our federal politics as a whole are out of joint with the democracy of a society growing in sophistication and diversity.

But one factor in particular has caused the diminution of the Liberal Party. Decades ago it began to weaken, and in recent years it has destroyed, its own democracy. It has lost all relation to a voluntary association of members pointed toward some common public purpose.

It has become a machine organization controlled from the top, directed to whatever use of power is meanderingly chosen there.

It should not escape the notice of Conservatives, now rejoicing in Prime Minister Harper's decisive leadership, that an accelerated version of the Liberal fall from democracy to dictatorship could be the peril ahead of them.

One cause of Liberal diminution is indeed common to all our political parties. It is the revolution in communications. Until the rise of the personal computer, there was one clear



Montreal Gazette archives

Former prime minister Lester B. Pearson with his successor, Pierre Trudeau, in 1972. The party of Pearson and Trudeau, where the progressive wing always maintained control of the political agenda, in later years gave way to an electoral machine. Tom Kent writes that at its coming convention in Montreal, the Liberal Party needs to restore itself to a politics of purpose.

channel through which to express an active interest in public policy. You belonged with a political party. While there have always been other organizations with public purposes, the largest were charitable rather than policy-directed. The others were mostly narrow in their concerns, often elitist in membership and mode of operation.

Now there are countless broad, active groups in which to join. Their causes cover every aspect of public affairs. Thanks to e-mail and the Internet, people with common interests can communicate readily, can build effective organizations nationally and internationally, at little cost and on a scale unimaginable even a generation ago. They can make themselves powerful advocates for their causes. The competitive stirring of their ideas should have been a wholly

welcome development in a free society. But that is not the present nature of our political system. The parties have been unable to cope with the scope and speed of the change. Liberals, professedly reformers, might have been expected to manage it better than others. In fact they have been particularly resistant to fresh ideas from new people.

The party has indeed been fervent in grasping the new techniques of communication, but not to encourage wider involvement in its policy-making. The contrary purpose has been to manipulate opinion from above. Continual polling identifies the issues that lend themselves to the improvisations of the moment, to burying solid policy under the propaganda blanket of 30-second television ads and leader photo ops.

The Liberal response to the readier spread of ideas has been, in short, not involvement and democracy but centralization and dictatorship. Until the 1970s the leader's office and the party's headquarters were handfuls of people. They have become an army of political mechanics surrounding the leader: pollsters, advertising specialists, spin doctors, lobbyists, handlers, organizers of instant meetings but tortuous proceedings. For example, you may apply to your riding association for membership, but the acceptance has to come from a provincial office. As the task force reports, "in some provinces, membership cards, if they are sent at all, take six months to be received." Complex procedures have been invented and manipulated, the report admits, to enhance one party faction over another.

In sum, the party's present power structure could hardly have been better designed to discourage the active participation of policy-oriented members. People with active ideas are far more at home in advocacy organizations. Most of those give a much better sense of mak-

cratic party, of their riding associations, not by fiat of the party leader. The choice is sometimes heavily influenced by experience elsewhere, in public service or profession or business, but almost all of the candidates who get to Parliament have earned some of their

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ing a difference, of effectively advancing the public interest, than Liberal politics has lately done. Party commitment has faded, skepticism about politicians has mounted, not because people are less concerned about what government should or should not do, but because top-down organization frustrates them.

The Liberal Party is especially hard hit because it has hitherto had more power and money with which to centralize. The Conservative Party, having come to its present dictatorship so much later, may prove capable of undoing it sooner, or will otherwise come to the same diminution.

Political parties are voluntary associations of people sharing some views about public policies. There are, of course, other motives for belonging, from family tradition to personal gain, but it is the members with viewpoints who make the parties different from each other and thereby shape what choices, of people and policies, are offered to the electorate for decision.

Our government was not designed to be a prime ministerial dictatorship. The apex of executive authority is supposed to be the cabinet, a committee of leading members of the leading party or parties. They have been candidates for Parliament by the choice, in a demo-

credentials by work within the party. Consequently, while the party leader as prime minister picks which MPs become ministers, the choices are made within a range set by status in the party. St. Laurent, for example, had to have Howe and Harris, Gardiner and Garson.

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In such circumstances what matters most about this convention is that it should make the future of the party more democratic. The party's formal preparation for renewal has produced back-to-basics essays on a wide range of issues. They should be helpful later but are beside the present point. What policies are espoused now will have slight significance for Liberal renewal. That requires policies developed and backed with new firmness by additional people.

The convention will no doubt endorse the Red Ribbon recommendations, but those are shuffling steps. Certainly they would make an almost unbelievably cumbersome organization less inefficient. They would reduce petty fiefdoms created in the luxury of power.

They would shift some authority from people somehow appointed to people elected at least indirectly by the membership. The party's national executive would become smaller, more representative, more effective, instead of "a ratification entity for decisions made elsewhere." The presidents of riding associations would be formally taken into consultation. The party would at last

have a standing committee "dedicated to ongoing policy and platform development," a large committee partly elected and partly appointed by the leader. There would even be a sub-committee of four with which the leader would be required to "consult...before rejecting any approved party policy."

Such arrangements would indeed be improvements, but they are far from securing close membership involvement in making policy. They are largely negatives where the need is for positives. A lively democratic organization is not built on checks and balances. It requires more than voting now and then for a leader and various officers. It is not secured by convention resolutions that the party brass may or may not heed. The Liberal Party will be revitalized, will become again a home for people with policy objectives, only to the extent that membership provides a far greater opportunity for effective participation.

The Red Ribbon report refers archly to the key to such renewal, the key that the party's last successful leader belatedly created for it. "It is no secret," says the report, "that for years we have been hard-wired as a party to rely on large donations from corporate donors." The wiring was torn out three years ago but the party has not yet adjusted to its absence.

The Liberal Party became little concerned with its members because it could run on the big money from corporations and from the few individuals rich and interested enough to cement political connections by digging deeply into their own pockets. Such donors decided exactly who got their money. Not much of it went to riding associations or run-of-the-mill candidates. Most went where it might best serve the donor's interest, where its influence mattered, to party headquarters or to a leading politician. The inflation came to its bursting point with the \$12 million that turned the last leadership race from competition to Martin monopoly.

In today's expensive politics, power is where the money is. Big corporate and personal donations concentrated power in the Liberal Party at its top. They have now gone from leadership candidates. In party finance they have been replaced by greatly increased funding from the federal treasury. How the money is distributed is no longer a private matter for donors. It is a public decision. At present the funding all goes to the parties as such, to their headquarters. Power is still concentrated there, indeed even more so than before. I have suggested, in a previous *Policy Options* article and elsewhere, that the legislation be amended in the interests of democracy. Each party should be required to conduct a membership vote to determine how its treasury funding will be distributed within its organization.

Such legislation seems unlikely to come soon from the present government. But the Liberal Party does not have to wait to be driven to reform. It can establish its own democracy anyway. It can do it now. The convention can pass a binding resolution that the party must allocate its treasury funding in accordance with regular membership votes.

"Our ridings," the Red Ribbon document declared, "should be viewed

as the centre of our party's universe." The membership would surely rule that a significant part of the party's funding should be put under the control of the riding associations. This would be the empowerment of membership, the key to building a democratic party. Public funding has made it possible. To miss the opportunity would be to set Liberal renewal aside.

There would no doubt be a lively debate about the fair way to share funding among the ridings: equally; or according to their membership; or in ratio with their Liberal candidate's share of the constituency vote in the last election. In any event the members of the association would then have local, democratic control of its political activities. There could also be a provision that part of the funding retained centrally should be used to finance a policy research and development unit mandated to service requests from the riding associations.

The NDP and the Green Party could have made such reforms at their recent conventions. In fairness, they did not have the same pressing need to decentralize power. The consequence, however, is that the Liberal Party now

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has the opportunity to move ahead of them in the rejuvenation of political democracy. To do so will not in itself bring about Liberal renewal. It is the necessary prerequisite.

Renewal will follow if and as more people are able to feel that the Liberal Party is where their ideas and effort are

welcome, where they can best make a difference. Meanwhile the present membership will need to recognize that their delegates can frame only some interim, urgent policy positions. The leaven of new democratic discussion will need time to work. But this convention can prepare the ingredients for it. Next to the recasting of financial power, the convention's most valuable innovation would be to establish a policy council designed to stimulate and inform thought and discussion throughout the membership.

To illustrate: One member of such a council might be elected to represent the riding associations of each of the smaller provinces, with the larger provinces divided into districts of ten or so ridings, each providing a member. The result would be a council of some 30 members; they might be elected for, say, two-year terms, but for the sake of continuity half of the seats could initially be opened after one year.

This council would be a forum, a focal point for the party-wide exchange of policy ideas. That it should be entirely elected is essential to its role. The mixed committee proposed in the Red Ribbon report is apparently intended to make decisions

provided the leader agrees with them. It would be, in the present state of the party, premature and probably counter-productive. Liberal renewal calls for first putting in place what the party now lacks: widespread, meaningful consideration of policy. Sound decisions will follow after.

It is important, moreover, to be clear that membership involvement cannot suborn the decision-making of a shadow cabinet, when the party is in opposition, any more than that of the actual cabinet when in office. As in all effectively operating organizations, what is done by a party must be what the executive is happy to do, or otherwise resign. Democracy is the process of ensuring that what is done is also in line with most of the viewpoints of party members who have had full opportunity to develop and express them.

The Liberal renewal of the Pearson period was possible because he inherited a party whose years in power had not expunged progressiveness from realistic purpose or impaired virility in membership. Today Liberals have to

begin by drawing in many of the people of liberal intent who have despaired of its politics. Only then will it give firm shape to a consensus sufficient to implement a new round of successful Canadian government.

The campaign for leadership has not offered strong grounds for hope. Nor, however, need there be despair. If the convention were to insist on the simple financial reform that would empower the party's membership, public opinion is ripe for change. There would soon be no shortage of people and ideas. If in that faith the convention also initiated a process for stimulating and fuelling further policy development, people now concentrated on particular causes would increasingly direct their energies, skills and communication arts to the central,

decisive matters of public policy. If the Liberal Party offers effective participation to its members, they will come.

A renewed Liberalism could be up and running within a year or two.

Without that, the Liberal Party might still regain power thanks to the errors of a Conservative government imitating its decline into dictatorship. But if that makes the road again easy for the familiar governing party, real Liberal renewal will still be a work ahead: unless, that is, it becomes impossible because too many liberally minded people are driven to see more hope in an alternative party, greening or yet to be born.

*Tom Kent, Founding Editor of Policy Options, was senior policy adviser to Prime Minister Pearson.*



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