

FROM HARRIS TO HUDAK: THE RIGHT STUFF

Robin V. Sears



The Progressive Conservatives were Ontario's ruling party for most of the last century. But under the leadership of Dalton McGuinty, bidding for a third term in 2011, the Liberals have stolen the centre and maximized the advantages of incumbency. The Conservative leadership campaign was an opportunity to revive a tired old party and produced two fresh faces, Christine Elliott and the eventual winner, Tim Hudak. Robin Sears examines the entrails of a race that determined McGuinty's principal rival in the next campaign in Canada's largest province.

Les conservateurs ont régné sur l'Ontario pendant la plus grande partie du dernier siècle. Mais depuis l'arrivée de Dalton McGuinty, qui briguera en 2011 un troisième mandat, les libéraux ont conquis l'électorat centriste et maximisé les avantages du pouvoir. Mais la campagne à la direction du Parti conservateur a permis de régénérer une formation défraîchie et de révéler deux nouveaux visages : Christine Elliott et Tim Hudak, qui l'a emporté. Robin Sears examine les coulisses d'une campagne qui a désigné le principal rival de Dalton McGuinty dans les élections à venir dans la plus grande province du pays.

Nothing reveals the decline of a political party more cruelly than a leadership contest. First there is the candidate field. Recall the sad parade of "star candidates" who apologetically bowed out when the bell rang last fall for the Liberal leadership race. That non-contest shrank to three candidates — two imports and an unknown — and then to one before it even began. The leader of Canada's most successful political party, who may be prime minister within months, was chosen by a few dozen party elders on a phone call.

Another long-term Canadian success in the political wars, the Saskatchewan NDP, went through the renewal process a few months later. Its political legacy — going back to the Second World War — includes more years in power at the provincial level than any party other than the Ontario Tories. Defeated after more than a decade in power, the party chose among one retired politician, returning from a career in the Alberta oil patch, one mid-level cabinet minister and two unknowns. Dwain Lingenfelter, a star from the 1980s, returned from success as an executive at Nexen and easily trounced the unimpressive field.

The Ontario Tories were next at bat. Their candidate field was more home-grown and marginally richer in serious contenders. A curiously American-sounding faux farmer from the sleepy little town of Perth, Randy Hillier, was the spoiler. Two hard-edged Harris-era cabinet ministers jostled with a more centrist newcomer, Christine Elliott.

The next embarrassing veil that drops when the leadership gun goes off is the revelation of how many voters there will be, which shows how many individuals are members of the party. Up to the mid-'80s, party membership in serious parties of government such as the Saskatchewan NDP and the Ontario Tories rarely slipped below 40,000 to 50,000. There were years when the Ontario PCs' membership exceeded 100,000.

Parties and leadership campaigns always lie about membership, so the specific numbers are less interesting than the comparisons between them and over time. Then the astonishing collapse in political participation cuts the party spinners' fudge like a laser.

In the 1990 federal Liberal leadership battle between Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien, however, party membership at all levels was probably in excess of 300,000 across Canada. In December last year, when the Liberals national executive had to decide how to conduct a leadership contest, it claimed the party had 40,000 national members. The Saskatchewan NDP's embarrassing total was less than 10,000. Most incredible of all was the total of Ontario's party of government for more than half a century in the same period: less than 9,000!

Then there is the bizarre nature of the rules for leadership election, set by all of Canada's current generation of party managers. It is hard to imagine a greater distortion

of democratic choice than the Rube Goldberg creations invented by each of the parties as they abandoned delegated conventions. The Ontario Tories have crafted one of the more creative.

thought to be with brie eating voters in the Annex, this seems as perverse as the vote discount rules.

That Internet thing is “too risky,” I was assured by party insiders. When

model. If the race was too close to choose a likely winner in round one, voters had no way of knowing who would be available for the role of late bloomer, because they had no way of knowing the ranking after the first ballot. They had to guess in advance.

This is the political equivalent of betting on your second-favourite ball team in a game you don't know they are going to play!

So some delegates voted once, and were counted out of the decisive ballot. Some delegates voted for two candidates

and still lost out on the deciding ballot. And some followed the bizarre polling station instructions to “rank the candidates from one to four.” This caused one socially liberal South Asian investment banker to moan that it was only after he left the voting booth that he realized that he had just voted for someone as offensive to his values as Randy Hillier, “even if it was only my fourth preference!”

In an old-fashioned, allegedly undemocratic delegated convention, campaigns and voters make complex and nuanced choices, based on how the votes fall. In the PC's Monty Python world, you are asked to make three rounds of ballot decisions without knowing what happened on the first! Would a saner set of rules have made a difference to the outcome? Probably not this time; the winner's lead was too great. In a closer-run campaign? Absolutely.

The most visible damage of this improbable system was the impact it had on campaigning and therefore on media attention. Each campaign needed to protect its prospects for a second-ballot preference among the 50 percent of voters who were likely to turn out. This kept this campaign polite, low-profile, clean and mostly free of the dirty tricks and attacks that usually mark a high-stakes leadership

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It is, of course, much more complex than this, but here is a short primer.

Leadership campaigns “sell” memberships in the traditional fashion — an organizer, a car, a mobile phone and a shoebox full of 20s. They had less than three months to do so, heavily tilting the deck in favour of the front-runner. In the Tory design it is far more lucrative to spread the campaign message in ridings with zero Conservative potential, because only there does every member up to 100 hundred get a full vote. Members in areas of party strength are discounted. So 100 memberships sold in downtown Windsor — where a Conservative will be elected some years after a New Democrat becomes premier of Alberta — can deliver 100 votes. But the 1,000 committed members in a Tory bastion get one/tenth of one vote each. Democratic? Sensible? It gets better.

When it comes time to vote in Northern Ontario, the keen new party member gets in the family car and drives an hour or two to the nearest polling station. Of course, if you live in a city it's only a few minutes of inconvenience. So party members in small-town and rural Ontario are punished for their foolishness in not living in Red Fortress Toronto. For an organization whose roots and growth potential are not usually

challenged about those crazy risk takers the Canadian banks, and their decade of success with on-line banking, I was assured the security problems were different, “much harder.” Uh, no. A wide range of cities, parties and states use electronic tools to increase the ease and appeal of voting. “But, hey, we're Conservatives!” one embarrassed insider chuckled sardonically.

The *coup de grâce* comes with actually voting. Its perversity seems designed to send party members howling into the street. The party management wizards, attracted by the claim that preferential voting is “fairer and more democratic,” have adopted it for leadership selection. Perhaps no one explained to them that preferential voting was designed for choosing multiple winners, as in multi-member constituencies or a list of delegates — not a single leader!

The wackiness of the system was well demonstrated in this contest. Many voters going into the polling booth a few days before the staged announcement meeting, called a “leadership convention,” were probably aware that the campaigns thought that the race was close. Choosing who they wanted to be leader was presumably uncomplicated. Selecting their next-best candidate for the job therefore became a fantasy under this

battle. There may have been some benefit to party unity, but the trade-off was virtually no media attention; there were few stories worth reporting. Neither the campaign debates nor the convention itself received much attention — for the selection of the premier-in-waiting for Canada's second most powerful government.

Now a reasonable person's reaction might be, "So what? Why would any serious person join one of those tired old organizations anyway? And who cares how dumb their rituals may be or what coverage they get!" Debating the relevance of Canada's political parties is a subject for another day, but they still do decide who governs and how. Suffice it to say that when an organization made up of the people who are likely to form governments — not only cabinet teams but the hundreds of political staff and patronage appointees — dwindles to a shell, strange things can happen.

Such tiny groups are far from representative. They tend to attract a high percentage of special-interest and single-issue activists. Their riding associations are a half a dozen retired small-businessmen — retired union reps in the case of the NDP — and a couple of aging queen bees. This local leadership team then represents the partisan views of up to 100,000 voters. The ridings where the party has a long-term incumbent are often the worst, given that few politicians are happy with a large and demanding local party organization if they can discourage it.

These grouplets are older, whiter, richer and more small-town than the electorate as a whole. The issues they care about and the candidates they choose are not always those most likely to enhance the party's chances of electoral success. In the Saskatchewan NDP's case, one might argue that a 60-year-old pro-nuke former oil executive would not be the most obvious moti-

vator of the party's base. The low-lying fog of skepticism that continues to surround Michael Ignatieff in some Liberal circles stems not only from his having only recently become a Canadian resident, but also from the manner of his anointment by party elders in the absence of a party-reviving leadership contest. The voters who chose Tim Hudak as leader of the Ontario PCs were approximately one-tenth of 1 percent of the electorate. The Ontario Green Party is larger. So much for the foolish slogan of one person, one vote.

So there we were, a few hundred party members, political staffers, journalists and assorted hangers-on, on

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a humid Saturday in a soulless businessmen's hotel deep in the barren northern suburbs that surround Toronto. The convention bunting was limited to a large Ontario flag and the projection of a fuzzy monochrome party logo. The event was too small to merit a large convention hall, and the Tories shared the hotel with hundreds of Asian-Canadian wedding guests. The venue was revealing. Downtown Toronto, where a generation of party leaders were chosen in huge sweaty stadiums, is now toxic political territory. It was in bedroom communities like Unionville that the Harris revolution began.

The Ontario Progressive Conservative Party is a curious political creature even by the pretzel-bent standard of Canadian political parties. It is true that the BC Liberals are really more conservative, that the Manitoba New Democrats are pretty liberal, and that Newfoundland Tories are really parochial regional centrists, and this is not to mention the baffling complexity of the Quebec political parties' mix of ideology and nationalism. But the Ontario Tories are really a marvel of shape-shifting personalities, philosophy and politics. The legacy of the Robarts/Davis years, a generational span of power that ended in 1985, is a unique mix of social democracy, small-town social conservatism and liberal democratic conviction.

Governments of those years created social housing programs, public television networks, human rights commissions and reasonably progressive labour and social legislation. A bungled leadership contest at the end of the era brought first David Peterson and then Bob Rae to power. The party establishment was overthrown after that painful decade by right-wing populists, capably led by former Red Tory Mike Harris. His sharp tack to the right delivered nearly a decade of the most conservative government Canadians had ever seen, even including some of the wacky years of Social Credit in Alberta and BC. In the wake of the Peterson/Rae deficit years, Harris was an enormous success.

With the inevitable pendulum swings of Canadian politics, a coalition of teachers' unions, bitter social and ethnic organizations and other losers of the Harris years, ably assembled by savvy Liberal Party president Greg Sorbara, swept Dalton McGuinty to power. John Tory's opposition leadership for much of the next five years was painful. Without a seat in the legislature for far too long, too



Policy Options photo

Christine Elliott, Randy Hillier, Frank Klees and the winner, Tim Hudak, at an Ontario PC leadership debate in Ottawa in June. Hudak's challenge is to modernize a "tired old party" in time for the 2011 Ontario election.

uncertain about where he wanted the party to sit ideologically and seen by many of the Harris insurgents as a relic of the Davis era, he saw his leadership undermined by powerful players internally almost from day one.

After an inept central leader's campaign in the 2007 election, dragged down by the religious schools funding fiasco, the final straw for party loyalists was Tory's defeat in a by-election this year. He had engineered it by accepting the resignation of one of his few women members, a solid rural caucus mem-

ber. The by-election campaign was marred by poor polling and organization and tensions between unhappy locals and imported campaign staff. Tory's inevitable resignation triggered the June 27 leadership contest.

On the day, the party's grand old man, Bill Davis, delivered two tough cautionary messages to the gathering in the middle of his usual joking self-deprecatory ramble. Davis reminded his political grandchildren that theirs was a party of compassion and respect for the weakest in society. He reminded them that his success was built on

recruiting the brains behind his chief competitors' campaigns, and that restoring party unity was the first task of the new leader. It will be interesting to see whether the messages were absorbed by the victors.

The meeting felt like the first family reunion after a painful divorce, a split whose wounds were only thinly healed. Most insiders and caucus members stepped gingerly around the sore spots and the aggrieved players on other teams. Like Masons careful not to reveal their membership to outsiders,

almost no one wore a campaign button or a T-shirt until the winner was known. A few brave souls wore T-shirts emblematic of a happier, more robust era, saying, “Just fire them all,” a reference to the Toronto garbage strike.

Absent the camaraderie, demonstrations and partisan displays of a real convention, the event resembled the first sales meeting following a painful takeover fight between two competitors. Everyone was on their best behaviour, smiling thinly at passing adversaries but counting the minutes until they could flee. A small-town bar band pumped out endless golden oldies during the long stretches of nothing happening.

The strategic challenge facing the party that governed Ontario for 80 years of the past century is painful. The Ontario Liberals have learned the lessons of the past two decades well. They have recaptured the centre ground of provincial politics, built a formidable organization and used the power of government spending and patronage with the skill of the Ontario Tories at the height of their power. Occasionally tacking right, at least rhetorically, and often tacking left, especially in education and social spending increases, the Ontario Liberals now occupy territory previously owned by both the Tories and the NDP.

Dalton McGuinty’s dull but inoffensive approach to leadership has been a soothing antidote to the stormy Peterson/Rae/Harris years. In the province where Bill Davis famously pronounced, “Bland works,” in describing his own success, Dalton McGuinty is PBS’s Mr. Rogers as premier. From the pastel sweaters to the nerdy haircut and the hesitant sibilant speaking style, baby boomers could be forgiven for thinking that Ontario had become a real-life version of Mr. Rogers’ famous neighbourhood.

His public demeanour conceals a

brutally competitive internal political style, however, closer to Stephen Harper than to a children’s TV host. He forced one senior cabinet competitor from office after an unsuccessful attempt at humiliating him, and another senior minister is considering his options given continuing rough treatment by the boys from the Premier’s Office. “The Centre” in this government is as controlling and hands-on as Harper’s, but it does a better job of hiding it. McGuinty has indicated he intends to seek a rare full third term in office, in October 2011, something not achieved since the Davis era.

For the Ontario Conservatives, therefore, the choice of how to compete successfully for power is not easy. Attempting to recapture the Red Tory coalition with a socially liberal,

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fiscally conservative message was a signal failure under John Tory, though it’s not clear what part of that failure was “progressive” conservatism as opposed to simply poor execution, plus the schools funding disaster. Moving to the right in the middle of a recession when all governments are breaking formerly sacred fiscal boundaries is not risk-free either. A new Conservative premier would inherit a massive deficit, but it’s not clear that voters today would welcome as tough a set of cuts in health, education and social spending as they did under Mike Harris. Socially conservative messages have been consistently unsuccessful with Ontario voters. It is hard to see a successful campaign with traditional family values, abortion, faith and guns at its centre.

Ontario has the largest non-white, new-Canadian population of any province by far. The broad, socially inclusive McGuinty message of better schools, neighbourhoods and health care — despite the staggering costs — has been very attractive to those voters, to the frustration of both the NDP and the Conservatives. The curious fixation of many Tory party activists about the intricacies of the human rights bureaucracy may not have been an intentional race card play, but the Liberals are signalling clearly that that is the way they intend to use it in counterattack. As Christine Elliott attempted to convince Conservative party members, handing such a strategic club to the anything-goes bully boys of the McGuinty war room was not prudent.

The candidate spectrum was quite wide given that there were only four members on it: a true right-wing heir to Mike Harris, an oily social conservative in disguise, a pretend redneck from the boonies and an urban professional Red Tory woman.

From the party elders’ perspective, the less said about the Lanark Landowners’ candidate the better. Former cabinet ministers and insiders would chuckle nervously at the mention of his name and change the subject. Randy Hillier presented himself as a Canadian Mike Huckabee, but without the humour, the rock riffs or the preacher’s speaking skill. He was bad-tempered, tired and emotional at the end of some sessions, and his growth was limited to the outer limits of Ontario and its politics. His bequest to the party may well be having trapped the winner into backing his anti-human-rights plank.

Frank Klees risked becoming the Harold Stassen of Canadian politics with this run. He has campaigned and been defeated twice, once for this title and once in an attempt to capture the Canadian Alliance leadership. “Three-time loser” is a difficult tag to duck in politics. Klees

also risked his credibility with his own social conservative base by tackling Tim Hudak's harder-edged political message from the centre. He ran as an insider, a seasoned leader in business and government. It was a campaign message that made his former cabinet colleagues twitch, recalling his disloyalty and his attacks on the Harris government when he was building his previous image as an anti-establishment grassroots leader.

As this lacklustre contest evolved, Elliott frightened the front-runner first by articulating a detailed path-to-victory calendar setting out the steps to power two and a half years ahead, then by championing a flat tax similar to Alberta's. She was handed a gift by the Hillier/Hudak effort to whip up human rights hysteria.

He tried hard to bridge the Red Tory/Harris divide in the party by running on "electability." To the delight of his capable management team, he performed the most professionally of the candidates by far, smoothly deflecting criticism of his history as the chief promoter of the school funding policy, needling those promoting the human rights agenda as naive about the inevitable Liberal attack, and gently putting down Christine Elliott's claim of private-sector experience through running a small-town law practice. Wags denigrated his perma-tan glow, his perma-wave hairdo and his perfectly pressed demeanour: "It's great that we have our first leadership candidate of colour — too bad it's orange."

Christine Elliott was the candidate who won the media and pundits' attention, at first because of the delicious speculation about how she and her husband, federal finance minister Jim Flaherty, would manage twin careers as political competitors. Then her performance as a candidate won her kudos when the titillation stopped. Flaherty worked tirelessly behind the scenes to rally money and

political support for his wife, a one-term MPP. In public he was scrupulously circumspect about the race and about how he and she would manage relations between an Ontario premier and a federal finance minister who shared the same bed.

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than her competitors to own the compassionate conservative turf. Echoing the message of inclusiveness of an earlier era of the Ontario Tories party, she pummelled Hillier and Hudak for their insensitivity to the needs and fears of that wing of the party's traditional base, and of Ontario's millions of first-generation immigrants. In the end, her message came across as too compromised, too centrist, for the

small activist core that made up the heart of the 22,000 voters still haunted by the end of the Harris years. She was disparaged by other candidates' supporters as "John Tory in a skirt."

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Never a star in government, he was nonetheless a favourite of the Premier and of some of his entourage. His wife, Deb Hutton, is a former Harris senior adviser, a tough, seasoned political operative any candidate would be pleased to have at his back.

Liberal Party hacks e-mailed reporters exultantly upon hearing of Hudak's victory: "Oh, goody, we get to beat up Mike Harris again!" Indeed, many Liberal insiders were most worried about Elliott as an opponent.

McGuinty is not comfortable with professional women as peers and has none in his inner circle. The NDP just elected its first woman leader, Andrea Horwath, who has already demonstrated she knows how to get under the premier's skin. The prospect of facing not one but two opposition leaders, each new, tough debaters, quietly confident — and women — must have caused some troubled nights in the

Office of the Premier. Its staff revealed their default attack strategy as even the more adult voices, like Attorney General Chris Bentley, could not resist the temptation to make the Harris/Hudak link part of their first smack at the new leader. They may be chuckling too soon.

Unlike his mentor, Hudak has a sunny public disposition, a genuine intellectual curiosity and an interest in and respect for his opponents.

Hudak is unlikely to be sucked into playing the caricature social conservative fall guy the Liberals would desperately love. A generation younger than Harris and schooled in the vocabulary and technology of his generation, he will be a more supple opponent than his many detractors give him credit for.

Softened by marriage and fatherhood, he appears to have little of the dark anger Mike Harris worked so hard to keep hidden. As in many political marriages it is his spouse who has been the more ferocious defender of his interests. Adding to her reputation as a political strategist a little too quick with the stiletto, Hutton was sometimes intemperate in her attacks on former colleagues and friends who chose not to support her husband's candidacy.

Hudak is probably closer to Ronald Reagan in personal and campaign style, and ironically more like the leader he helped to undermine, John Tory, in his work ethic and personal discipline. Hudak's message, "Right for Ontario," and his claim to ownership of "real conservative values" were usually softened in delivery by reference to families, the underprivileged and his understanding of those struggling against governments, employers and bad luck.

He positioned his attack on the human rights establishment as a populist defence of the little guy against government, and emphasized more and more loudly his commitment to ensuring a "fair" defence for the victims of rights abuses, culminating in his recruitment of a former human rights commissioner as a supporter. A

veteran campaigner of more than 15 years' experience, Hudak is clearly still growing, improving as a candidate during this race in discipline, delivery and ability to deftly deflect attack.

A genuine fiscal conservative, he has made hay as the middle-class taxpayers' defender on the warpath against the free-spending record of the McGuinty government. Even prior to the fiscal stimulus blowout, program spending grew at a faster rate in Ontario than in any other large

Canadian government. It will serve him well in the legislature over the next two years as opposition leader. Hudak is unlikely to be sucked into playing the caricature social conservative fall guy the Liberals would desperately love. A generation younger than Harris and schooled in the vocabulary and technology of his generation, he will be a more supple opponent than his many detractors give him credit for.

His decisive third-ballot victory was a triumph of organization and careful front-runner lead management. Elliott raised more money, sold as many memberships and was the clear winner among columnists and commentators but was outgunned by street-level voter mobilization.

Hudak's first shot as party leader was at the Toronto CUPE leadership, their suicidal garbage strike and the parallel universe in which they appear to live. Unlike Harper or Harris, who would have been either furious or excessively mean in the face of a public sector strike, Hudak was coolly derisive: "Those guys should get a grip" and do a little "reality check" on their demands. It was a remark one could imagine hearing in a Queen Street bar from an irritated unemployed twentysomething student. It won a quick headline and served as an early brush stroke in the

self-portrait he will try to paint as a new generation of conservative.

There remains, however, the problem of the giant pink political puffball draped across much of the political spectrum. It absorbs punches from left and right with little impact. It appears spineless and harmless, but it smothers opponents quietly but effectively. It is steered by a curious personality who would win no awards for creativity, innovation or courageous political leadership. But this skinny, nebbishy guy has won two majority governments and wants a third.

By October 2011, more than two years from Hudak's real launch this fall, Ontario will have recovered from recession, Canada may have a new Liberal government eager to help its Ontario cousins, and Dalton McGuinty may be being feted as the premier who steered the province out of its toughest crisis in a century. In addition, the deficit shackles will be around both men's feet. Hudak will be pressed by Horvath and McGuinty to reveal "what schools, what hospitals, what children's lunches" he will cut to deliver on his fiscal conservative message. Suggesting that he will do some line editing on the tax code and cut wasteful spending as his prescription for what could be a \$25-billion deficit will elicit sniggers even among party loyalists.

After the broken-record rant of former NDP leader Howie Hampton, the left in Ontario appears to have a leader for the first time since it kicked out Bob Rae. The five years of Conservative drift with John Tory is over, and the party now appears to have a leader with a vision and the discipline to deliver it. It's an interesting time in Ontario politics again.

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