



THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

December 18, 2008

Rebuilding the Liberal Party

Globe and Mail Update

Navdeep Bains, Martha Hall Findlay and Bob Rae reflect on what must be done now that the leadership question is settled

Absent a competitive leadership campaign, what steps should the Liberal Party take to re-engage its membership and rebuild its national organization?



Navdeep Bains (Mississauga-Brampton South): The Liberal Party is one of the most venerable political institutions in Canada. It is the only party that has existed since Confederation, providing nine prime ministers who collectively have presided over most of Canada's history. The list of their accomplishments is long, their impact unquestioned. Yet despite all this, the party is not well.

Our support is at an all-time low, our finances are less than rosy and our membership feels disengaged. If we are to regain the confidence of Canadians we must first put our own house in order. That means streamlining party institutions and engaging our grassroots.

One of the biggest challenges facing the party is also its greatest strength: history. Unlike other parties whose structures were heavily redrafted with subsequent mergers and re-brandings, the Liberal Party has retained a complicated structure. We need to simplify this, eliminating unnecessary duplication and ensuring the biggest bang for our fundraising dollar. Fundraising itself must be at the core of all party operations and this goes hand-in-hand with engaging our grassroots. As Barack Obama has taught us, when people believe in you, they're more likely to show that support with their wallet.

Another topic we need to tackle is the question of how we elect our leaders. Currently it is done through delegated conventions, but in order to better engage our membership we should adopt a more equitable and democratic system. A one-member, one-vote system that provides equal weight for the ridings would give all Liberals a voice in choosing their leader. This does not mean that the excitement of a leadership convention would disappear; rather it would be replaced by a national gathering where members on the floor would be joined by the broader Liberal family when making their big decision.

It is that family which is the heart and soul of the Liberal Party. Our party could not and would not exist without the members on the ground who organize campaigns, run the riding associations and every day act as ambassadors for Liberal values. These people must be integrated into policy development and consulted on the state of their party. Riding association presidents should be consulted regularly and should form the core of our renewal process. We must also improve our use of technology to bridge geographic distances and make it that much easier for our members to be

active and involved.

These challenges are not insurmountable. Indeed, the Liberal Party has been through tough times before but we have always re-emerged strengthened and reinvigorated. The members of the party are the sole reason for this and it is their passion that we will harness in order to rebuild. This process began before the last convention with the Red Ribbon Committee and there is now a growing consensus amongst Liberals that our future success is dependent on renewal. Once we regain the faith of our members, we will be well on our way to winning back the confidence of all Canadians.



Martha Hall Findlay (Willowdale): The irony is that leadership campaigns have, for years, been the very source of the disengagement felt by many party members. Too often, Liberals have felt that their membership was only a tool to help one leadership campaign or another. The Chretien-Martin wars; the Martin/Manley/Copps battle; the 2006 leadership campaign with, ultimately, eight candidates all vying for numbers. People were asked to join the party primarily to vote for one leadership candidate or another - and only rarely out of principle or for engagement in the issues of the day.

Now is the Liberal Party's chance to truly re-engage and rebuild, precisely because leadership is *not* an issue. It is our time to recognize Liberals, not as numbers, but as people concerned about the country, with ideas and talent to contribute. We can focus, once again, on what it means to be Liberal in Canada: Economic policies that understand competitiveness and how to create and share prosperity, combined with a fundamental, compassionate belief in human rights, justice and equality of opportunity.

People say that Canadians, particularly youth, are apathetic. Well that's certainly not true of the many, many Canadians I have met over the last few years. Canadians all across the country *care*. Young people care. A lot. They care about equality of opportunity. They care about helping others. They care about their neighbour, with two little kids, who has just lost his job. They care about their sister's cancer operation taking months. They - we- want to be proud of our strengths at home, and to regain our pride in promoting peace and prosperity abroad.

So, how to re-engage Liberal members and liberal-minded Canadians?

First, make it clear - by actions, not words - that their opinions and engagement are important and necessary.

We must move to a one-member, one-vote system. The technology is there, and we can use that same technology not just for voting, but for "consultation" on specific issues.

We should revamp our archaic policy development process. We can eliminate extra layers of provincial/territorial party bureaucracy, which are not only costly but make members feel even more removed. It's time to embrace the Internet using tools such as Facebook, YouTube, online "town halls" and Internet networking, which provide great opportunities to engage in real, two-way discussions. We can also provide tools and channels for greater community involvement, so that Canadians can act on liberal values and ideals in their communities, not just talk about them - and in the process, build goodwill for the Liberal brand.

We need to re-engage Liberals by asking, listening, and by helping them know that even small actions can, collectively, make a difference for all Canadians - in our ridings, in our provinces, and throughout the whole country.

Finally, we must stress that we are a party of the possible; that we will not idly accept personal and misleading attacks, but nor will we engage in them; that rather than using fear to motivate, we will focus on offering constructive alternatives. That we will encourage membership, engagement and, yes, fundraising, out of a belief in the politics of the possible.



Bob Rae (Toronto Centre): This past election saw the lowest turnout of voters in Canadian history. When MPs returned to the House of Commons to elect a Speaker, the speeches focused on bad behaviour in the House of Commons.

These are symptoms of a democracy in decline, of a parliament that is much less than it could be.

The underlying condition is that voters are frustrated, seeing few meaningful ways to



participate, and MPs - denied a meaningful role - simply act out.

A renewed Liberal Party should be leading the way to a change that shows we can do politics differently.

Eliminating any financial barriers to participation in the life of the party is a start. Giving new life to riding associations, making sure they have greater financial resources, is a key next step. Membership in the Liberal Party shouldn't be about privilege, it should be about engagement with local communities on issues that matter. It should be about developing policy, and making sure the leadership is held accountable for its actions.

The riding association has to be the core organization in the life of the party. And local party members need respect for their commitment.

The party's openness and transparency have to start at the local level, with ridings that are properly financed and actively engaged. Immigration, housing, crime, economic development, local issues of all kinds - the Liberal Party has to be at the forefront of these debates and action in 308 ridings.

The selection of candidates to represent the party at the local level also has to be founded on the principle of local democracy and participation. The power of the leader to appoint candidates has to be used sparingly, and always in full consultation with local ridings. Those who say gender equality can only be achieved by appointment are missing the experience of other parties that require ridings to go through a rigorous process of candidate search and candidate recruitment. Gender balance and broader ethnic participation are important objectives as well, and the process of achieving that has to be widely discussed.

The nomination process has to be more transparent and democratic. There also need to be clearer rules governing the financing of nomination contests. Above all, we should have nothing to fear from open and vigorous competition for a nomination.

A different fundraising culture at the national level could also lead to a much simpler, and flatter, structure across the country. After the last convention, a national membership and fundraising list was supposed to lead to a consolidated back office, which in turn should make for stronger direct links to the ridings. Do we need the provincial structures we have in addition?

Without rehashing the issues of the last few weeks, a more efficient and technologically up-to-date national party should be able to conduct national votes, and the next leader should be chosen by a one person, one vote system. Period.

Doing politics differently means changing the way Parliament works. From Question Period - where everyone is rigidly choreographed - to committees, it would be good to see a change.

Caucus discipline need not apply to every vote, and every measure before the House should not be a matter of confidence. If the Liberal Party gives more freedom and responsibility to its MPs, others will follow. It is a supreme irony of the current House that Preston Manning's successor exercises the most centralized control over his caucus, and has the most rigid and hierarchical approach to life. Genuine populism is truly dead in the Conservative Party. It should find new life in a Liberal Party that remembers its own roots as a party of reform.

So I say let the caucus be more raucous. And let the House of Commons do its job in a way that respects individual members. Let committees work freely, setting their own agendas and electing their own chairs. Let committees study the subject matter of bills before they come to the House. Committees where there is real give and take, and real responsibility, will become surprisingly productive and less partisan. Members will stop screaming at each other when they realize they have something to learn from each other.

A healthier, more respectful culture within the Liberal Party will also pose a healthy challenge to the other parties in the House of Commons. Liberals should be at the forefront of parliamentary reform, which is clearly needed and long overdue. No one should ever feel they will be punished for expressing an opinion.

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