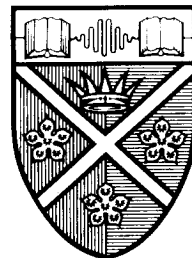


# STRATHCLYDE PAPERS ON GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS



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## *SELECTING PARTY LEADERS: Some Canadian-British Comparisons*

*by*  
*Malcolm Punnett*

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**SELECTING PARTY LEADERS: SOME  
CANADIAN-BRITISH COMPARISONS**

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## SELECTING PARTY LEADERS

Since the 1987 general election the three main British political parties have experienced party leadership contests, with each party using a different method of selection. [1] Following the disintegration of the SDP-Liberal Alliance after the 1987 election, and the consequent merger of the Liberals and some sections of the SDP to create the Social and Liberal Democrats, Paddy Ashdown was elected leader of the 'new' party in the summer of 1988 through a postal ballot of party members. Also in 1988 there were contests for the leadership and deputy-leadership of the Labour Party which resulted in Neil Kinnock and Roy Hattersley being re-elected with overwhelming majorities through the Electoral College process at the 1988 Party Conference. In December 1989 Margaret Thatcher's (previously automatic) annual re-election as Conservative party leader was opposed by Sir Anthony Meyer. Again the challenge was unsuccessful with Mrs Thatcher securing 90 per-cent of the votes in the ballot of Conservative MPs.

Each of these distinctive methods of selecting the party leader was subjected to considerable criticism during and after the contest. The 'direct democracy' of the Liberals' postal ballot was criticised as being expensive and harmful to party unity, requiring the candidates to mount costly, divisive and highly visible campaigns in order to spread their message among the grass roots of the party. The Conservatives' 'closed' method of limiting the choice to the party's MPs in a relatively discreet contest was cheaper and less conflictual than the 'open' Liberal method. Nevertheless, some Conservatives were critical of the ease with which an 'unlikely' candidate could mount a challenge (requiring only the support of a handful of MPs), while others were unhappy about the pressures that could be exerted on the small electorate by the party whips. The contests for the Labour leadership and deputy leadership highlighted deficiencies in the Electoral College system, including the relative ease with which a contest could be launched; the extended nature of the campaign; the distribution of votes within the College between Parliamentary, trade union and constituency sections of the party; and the varied processes through which unions and constituency associations made their

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decision whom to support. [2]

Given such 'discontents' with established procedures, and the consequent calls for reform that they produce, the experience of parties in other countries can be extremely relevant. In this respect, Canada provides a sensible point of comparison for British parties. The constitutional and political roles that party leaders are required to play are broadly similar in the two systems. Canada has a parliamentary system in the Westminster mould. The origins of the main Canadian parties are to be found in the nineteenth century British parties and many of the 'values and assumptions' that characterise political life in Britain are also found in Canada. At the same time, Canadian political development has been sufficiently different from that of the UK to make many of its institutions and practices 'interestingly distinctive'. Above all, the Canadian political parties have long experience of a distinctive method of selecting the party leader (through a specially summoned leadership convention) that has been subjected to considerable analysis over the years and which is currently being re-evaluated. [3]

This paper is concerned with the criticisms that are currently being levelled at the system of leadership conventions in Canada, and the practicality of proposals to abandon the system in favour of the 'direct democracy' of selecting the leader through a ballot of party members. In particular, the recent moves that have been made within the federal Liberal party and the Ontario Provincial Conservative party to abandon the convention system are examined and some of the implications for the British parties are considered.. First of all, however, the principle characteristics of the convention system are outlined briefly.

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### FEATURES OF CANADIAN LEADERSHIP CONVENTIONS

Leadership conventions are a long-established feature of Canadian politics. The first Liberal leadership convention was held in 1919, and the first Conservative convention in 1927. After the 1919 and 1927 'experiments', the system became an entrenched feature of party politics. With the exception of the war years, all Liberal, Conservative and New Democrat (NDP) federal leaders over the last sixty years have been chosen by this method. The system is also used in Provincial politics and the vast majority of Provincial parties now use conventions to select their leaders.

The Liberals in 1919 used a convention to select their leader, rather than continue with the established method of selection by MPs, largely because they hoped the event would revitalise the party after its electoral setback of 1917. In fact, the Liberals did go on to win the 1921 general election, so that in 1927 the Conservatives had the success of this Liberal tactic as a precedent. The Conservatives also reacted against the manner in which their leader had emerged in 1920, when, in effect, the out-going leader had named his successor. At this time also, increased grass-roots involvement in party affairs was encouraged by various factors, including populist influences from the USA, the extension of the franchise and the rising levels of education. The opening of the Canadian west added to the difficulty of maintaining national cohesion and increased the need for political institutions and processes that could provide a rallying point for regional wings of the parties.

Canadian Leadership conventions are not held at fixed intervals. The federal and provincial parties do hold regular conferences for organisational and policy purposes, but specifically leadership conventions are summoned only when the party's 'biennial review' is brought into operation. Liberal party rules require that the leader's position be reviewed at the first conference following a general election, with a leadership convention being summoned if a majority of the conference votes in favour. In fact,

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these reviews have always rejected proposals for a contest, and Liberal conventions have been held only when the incumbent leader has indicated his intention to retire.

Since 1983, the Conservative rules have stipulated that a review of the leader's position be held only after a general election in which the Conservatives have been defeated. This stipulation was introduced after the 1983 convention, when Joe Clark had decided to offer himself for re-election even though the reviews in 1981 and 1983 had decisively rejected proposals for a contest. In all, the Conservatives have held eight leadership conventions (1927, 1938, 1942, 1948, 1956, 1967, 1976 and 1983) and the Liberals five (1919, 1948, 1958, 1968 and 1984). The length of time between conventions, and the particularly long reigns of King (1919 - 48), Bennett (1927 - 38) and Trudeau (1967 - 84) indicate that leaders selected at conventions have normally enjoyed considerable security of tenure.

Canadian leadership conventions are large gatherings, with some 3000 delegates at the 1983 Conservative convention and almost 3500 at the 1984 Liberal convention. Almost two-thirds of the delegates at the 1983 and 1984 conventions were representatives of the mass membership, selected by the constituencies.[4] Conventions have thus provided an opportunity for a range of individuals within the party to be represented in the selection process. The conventions have been particularly effective in achieving participation by a variety of regional and linguistic groups. Francophones, for example, have played an important role in Conservative conventions despite the party's electoral weakness in Quebec for the greater part of this century.

Most conventions last three days, with the first two days being devoted to the consideration of general organisational matters. Voting takes place on the final day and is secret and by individuals, rather than open and by State delegations as at American Presidential conventions. Usually a large number of candidates enter the contest. There were nine at the 1968 Liberal convention and twelve at the 1976 Conservative

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convention. Repeated ballots are held, with the bottom candidate ( and any candidate with a particularly small number of votes) being eliminated after each ballot, until one candidate emerges with half of the votes. Without this 'elimination rule' the contest might continue for many ballots. At the same time, however, the automatic dropping of the bottom candidate, can result in the elimination of the compromise figure. It has been suggested, for example, that at the 1983 Conservative convention John Crosbie might well have triumphed in the final ballot, as 'the least objectionable candidate', had he not been eliminated after the third ballot. [5]

In the thirteen Liberal and Conservative conventions the number of ballots required to produce a winner has ranged from two to five. The successive ballots are conducted fairly speedily, and even the multi-ballot contests have been completed in a few hours. Normally the candidate who led on the first ballot has been the eventual winner, but in the 1983 Conservative convention Brian Mulroney trailed behind Joe Clark in the first three ballots before emerging as the winner in the fourth.

The convention system is much more 'open' , in various senses, than the traditional method of selection by the party's MPs. In the first place, it is 'open' in the sense that it allows a high level of participation by party members. Activists in the constituencies participate directly in the selection process and the personalities and issues are brought to the attention of the party members through the spectacular pre-convention campaign.

Secondly, the system is 'open' in the sense that candidates can emerge from a variety of backgrounds rather than from just the federal Parliamentary pool. Figures who were relatively unknown to party members have been able to enter the contest and acquire national recognition fairly quickly. Provincial Premiers (Stanfield), non-Parliamentarians (Mulroney) and relatively new MPs (Trudeau) have emerged through the convention system. Non-Parliamentarians have often triumphed over established

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Parliamentary figures. John Turner had been out of Cabinet and Parliament for ten years when he became Liberal leader in 1984, and Brian Mulroney had no legislative experience at any level when he became Conservative leader in 1983. Indeed, Louis St Laurent and John Diefenbaker are the only Liberal or Conservative leaders since at least the 1930s to have had substantial records of federal Parliamentary service before their selection.

Thirdly, the system is 'open' in the sense that it is difficult for the party managers and candidates to control. The large number of delegates, the secret and individual ballot, the speed of the ballots and the frenetic atmosphere in which the proceedings are conducted all contribute to this. Two supposed merits of a multi-ballot election are that it allows voters whose first choice is eliminated to 'think again' in face of the support the surviving candidates have received, and it gives the eliminated candidates an opportunity to trade their support among the survivors. In Canadian conventions, however, there is little opportunity for rational assessments to be made, and it is difficult for eliminated candidates to deliver their support. Communication with the delegates is not easy in the short time between ballots, and there can be no guarantee that the supporters of an eliminated candidate will necessarily follow his directions.

Because of these factors, most Canadian conventions have been 'real events', in the sense that the outcome has been determined at the convention itself. Over the years, and particularly since the conventions of 1967 (Conservative) and 1968 (Liberal), the process has become increasingly difficult for the party elites to manage. The number of candidates entering the contest is greater than before the 1960s; the candidates' campaigns have become more elaborate; extensive television coverage of the campaigns and conventions has increased public interest; the rank and file delegates (as opposed to the party hierarchy) have played a more decisive role in the contest. [6]

The spectacular process of the coast-to-coast pre-convention campaign, and then the



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newsworthy convention itself, can arouse party enthusiasm. It can attract new members and help to integrate the party's component parts. This is especially important in a political system that is characterised by its regional and ethnic divisions. At the same time, the process can attract the attention of the electorate as a whole and (if it operates smoothly) improve the party's electoral prospects. Although the timing of a convention is not necessarily linked to a general election, the party in power may seek a dissolution soon after the convention in order to capitalise on the publicity the new leader, and the party as a whole, have received in the leadership contest. The Liberals were successful with this tactic in 1948 and 1968, but not in 1984.

From the party leader's point of view, the system has the merit of providing him with greater security of tenure than if he had been selected (and could be overthrown) by MPs alone. Although each party now has formal procedures for reviewing the leader's position at regular intervals, there are major practical difficulties involved in launching a challenge to an incumbent. The cost of the process, its length and 'visibility' mean that it cannot be initiated lightly. John Diefenbaker in 1967 and Joe Clark in 1983, of course, were removed from office at conventions that had been especially summoned for the purpose. Perhaps, however, the events of 1983 (when the Conservatives' leadership review resulted in a clear vote against a contest, but Joe Clark nevertheless decided to put his position to the test) simply indicate that if a leader chooses to cooperate in his own execution he will not be secure even under the convention system. [7]

As well as enjoying security of tenure, the leader's prestige in Parliament and in Cabinet is enhanced by the fact that he was selected by representatives of the party as a whole, and not just by his Parliamentary colleagues. Further, the composition of the convention, with the constituencies having equal representation regardless of their size, means that the leader has been selected by a nationally representative gathering (whereas the Parliamentary party will normally be highly regionally un-balanced). The

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psychological advantage that the leader will be able to draw from this in Parliament, the Cabinet and party meetings will be considerable.

Despite these considerations, the convention system has attracted a great deal of criticism in recent years. The circus atmosphere of 'balloons, bands and placards' on the floor of the convention hall is disliked by some on the grounds of taste, but also because it is hardly conducive to rational decision-making by individual delegates in a rapid succession of ballots. Policy debates do not flourish under the convention system. The candidates' campaigns emphasise image rather than issues, media coverage tends to be of the form of the campaign rather than of the substance of policy and the formal rules of the convention do not encourage policy speeches. George Perlin suggests that delegates are drawn towards candidates who appear to be capable of acting as brokers on policy issues: [8]

The optimum choice [in 1983 and 1984] was a candidate whose views permitted the incorporation of the widest possible range of interests. [8]

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism that is offered of the convention system, however, is that it is an inappropriate means of selecting a leader in a Parliamentary-Cabinet system of government. The campaign that the candidates conduct prior to the convention is long and well publicised, designed to reach the rank and file members of the party. If the party is in office, candidates have to compete with each other in this open manner, and to indicate views on current and future policy, while being bound by the constitutional conventions of individual Ministerial responsibility and collective responsibility. In 1984 John Turner was the only candidate who was not then a Minister and thus he was alone in enjoying freedom from responsibility for government policy. In office or in opposition, a long and open campaign is likely to produce divisions between candidates and factions that could have a lasting effect on party unity. Following the overthrow of John Diefenbaker at the 1967 convention, for example, the

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cohesion of the Conservatives in Parliament was undermined as bitter campaign-wounds took time to heal.

The system is inevitably protracted and does not permit a speedy transition from one leader to another. If a Prime Minister announces his intention to retire, there is an inevitable delay while the selection process is brought into operation. Thus Trudeau announced in February 1984 that he proposed to retire as Prime Minister as soon as a successor was chosen but the convention to select the new leader was not held until June and John Turner did not enter Parliament until September. Were a Prime Minister to die in office, presumably a temporary Prime Minister would be appointed until the convention could be organised. Temporary Prime Ministers, however, are no more desirable than lame-duck Prime Ministers.

Since the conventions of 1983 and 1984, these well-established reservations about the system have been supplemented by two further major criticisms - that the financial costs of the process are excessive and that the convention delegates are not sufficiently representative of all sections of the party. Such has been the disquiet about these and the other perceived weaknesses of the process that the future of the convention system has been brought into question. Specifically, within the federal Liberal party and the Ontario Provincial Conservative party there have been debates about the desirability of abandoning the convention system in favour of the selection of the leader through a ballot of all party members.

## **MEMBERSHIP BALLOTS**

Following the 1984 convention it was widely felt among federal Liberals that the convention process had become too cumbersome and subject to control by a limited proportion of the party members. Early in 1985 calls for changes in the convention system emerged from the Liberal Reform Commission, which had been established in

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1982 in face of complaints that the period of Trudeau's leadership had been characterised by 'manipulative backroom politics'. [9] The Commission advocated that leadership conventions should be retained but that the initial stages of a leadership contest should take the form of a ballot of party members in each constituency. If the outcome was not decided in the first ballot, then a national convention would be held to decide the outcome, but on a much smaller scale than in the past. This, it was argued, would emphasise the federal structure of the party and would bring the process closer to the grass-roots of the party in each Province.

In 1986, the Alberta section of the federal Liberal party went a stage further than this and proposed, as a formal amendment to the Liberal party constitution, that the leader be elected by a ballot of members. [10] They proposed that the leader's position be reviewed automatically at the first Liberal conference following each federal election, and that if the conference voted in favour of a contest, the ballot be held within the following twelve months. They pointed out that national television coverage, and the use of computers to calculate the votes, could allow party members to gather in their constituencies across Canada and vote simultaneously in several successive ballots if necessary. They advocated that all party members of 28 days standing be entitled to participate in the ballot.

Controversially, the Alberta Liberals proposed that in order to give equal weight to all constituencies, regardless of the size of their membership, the vote in each constituency be presented in percentages rather than in absolute numbers. Thus in calculating the overall results of the contest, 40 per-cent of the vote in a small constituency of just a few party members would carry the same weight as 40 per-cent of the vote in a large constituency of several thousand members. A consequence of this aspect of the proposal would be that the candidate whose support was concentrated in a relatively small number of large constituencies would be at a disadvantage compared with a

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candidate who was strong in a larger number of small constituencies. Indeed, it might be the case that the candidate who received the largest percentage of votes, and thus became leader, might not have received the largest number of votes. His authority as leader would thereby be compromised by the manner of his election.

In defence of their proposal, the Alberta Liberals argued that involving directly all rank and file members in the election of the leader would increase democracy in the party, revitalise the grass-roots and demonstrate that the party was progressive-minded. Further, they claimed, it would be cheaper to operate than the increasingly expensive convention system and would continue to attract the attention of the Canadian voters:

Although there is a certain circus-like attraction to the present system there is no reason to assume that a leadership process involving all Liberals will generate less momentum. Indeed, a leadership contest conducted on a truly national scale with regional leadership rallies should generate more excitement than the current system. [11]

The Alberta proposal was rejected by the party but variations of it have emerged over the last four years. In 1987 the Liberals' biennial conference considered, but deferred judgement on, a proposal that offered a compromise between the established system and the Alberta alternative. [12] The compromise proposal was that party members should vote simultaneously in their constituencies in the first ballot of a leadership contest, with votes being translated into percentages to give equal weight to each constituency. If no one emerged from this initial ballot with an overall majority, a leadership convention would be held at a later date. The 1987 convention also deferred judgement on a proposal that the leader be selected through a succession of ballots of party members voting in the constituencies over an extended period of time if necessary.

In April 1989 the President of the Liberal party in Quebec, Francis Fox, advocated a further variation of the Alberta scheme. [13] He proposed that the leader be elected

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through a ballot of party members conducted in polling stations in each constituency throughout Canada. He suggested a timetable of a televised debate between the candidates on a Friday evening, an initial ballot on Saturday and (if necessary) second and third ballots the following Saturday and Sunday. As with the Alberta scheme, Fox proposed that each constituency be allocated one hundred votes which would be distributed among the candidates according to the support they received in that constituency. In effect, Fox was proposing that the Liberals adopt the method used by the Parti Quebecois to select its leader in 1985, except for the very important difference that in the Parti Quebecois' ballot equal weight was given to each individual member's vote (as opposed to each constituency's collective vote).

The Fox proposal, like the original Alberta proposal and variations of it, was rejected. Given the considerable doubts about the efficacy of the convention system that have been examined here, however, the issue remains on the agenda. If the Liberals do decide to abandon the system in favour of a ballot of party members, they will have the experience of the Ontario Provincial Conservatives as a guide.

Following the 1983 Ontario Provincial Conservative leadership convention, particular dissatisfaction was expressed with the socially unrepresentative nature of the delegates. Although convention delegates have generally been regionally and ethnically representative, they have not been socially representative. Women are normally under-represented among the delegates, while the young are over-represented. Above all, however, middle-class delegates have predominated, not least because of the costs involved in travel, subsistence and registration fees.

One study undertaken at the 1983 Provincial Conservative convention revealed that the delegates were wealthier, better-educated and 'more Protestant' than most people in the Province. [15] Specifically, 72 per-cent of the delegates earned over \$30,000 per year, compared with just 16 per-cent of Ontario voters; 63 per-cent had degrees (10 per-cent of

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voters); 73 per-cent were Protestant (51 per-cent of voters). That the choice of party leader was in the hands of party activists who were markedly different from Ontario voters in these respects, was seen by some as a major weakness of the convention system.

At a one day organisation conference in Toronto in November 1987, it was argued by some that a change to the system of selecting the party leader through a ballot of members would be cheaper than the convention system and would help to encourage people to join the party to participate in its procedures.[16] The outgoing party leader, Larry Grossman, advocated the change as the most beneficial reform that the party could undertake. [17] Subsequently, at a special conference in February 1989, the Ontario Conservatives voted to abandon the leadership convention system in favour of the selection of the leader through a ballot of party members. [18] A two-thirds majority was required for the adoption of the new system, but in the event it was supported by three-quarters of the delegates at the conference.

The Conservatives' new selection system requires party members to vote in polling stations in the constituencies. As with the proposals made by the Alberta Liberals, the Conservative system seeks to give equal weight to large (generally urban) constituencies and small (generally rural) constituencies. Each constituency is allocated a hundred 'points', which are distributed among the candidates according to their share of the vote in that constituency. With 130 constituencies in Ontario, the winning candidate will be the first to achieve half of the total of 13,000 points. Balloting will continue until one candidate achieves this.

The February 1989 conference considered, but rejected, the option of a ballot conducted on the basis of 'one-member one-vote one-value', without any constituency weighting. As well as the theoretical justification for treating the constituencies as the basic building

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blocks of the party, and thus as equal units for convention purposes, rural Conservatives in particular were afraid that urban constituencies might be packed with new and relatively un-committed members, whose involvement with the party might not extend beyond the leadership election. Because of this, the equalisation of the constituencies was demanded as an essential part of the system.

It is likely that the new system will be less of a drain on the party finances than was the convention process. The expense of organising the polling stations, even for successive ballots, should be appreciably less than that of staging the increasingly elaborate conventions. If, as some anticipated, a number of new members are attracted to the party by the opportunity to participate in its democratic procedures, revenue from subscriptions could rise significantly.

In June 1989, however, the party committee that was making the detailed arrangements for the operation of the new system advanced the controversial proposal that, in order to take part in the ballot, party members be charged a participation fee of \$17 (additional, that is, to the normal party membership fees which range from \$1 to \$10). [19] The committee also proposed that fees be charged for attendance at rallies and other party events during the campaign. The revenue from these various fees, it was argued, would meet at least some of the costs of the contest.

Inevitably, the proposal was criticised on the grounds that it would undermine the basic purpose of the new system, which was to give every party member a direct vote in the selection of the leader. It was also argued that the imposition of a registration fee would discourage potential members from joining the party and might drive out some established members. It remains a moot point, of course, whether the additional revenue from the \$17 fee would out-weigh the loss of the normal membership fees of those who left, or decided not to join, the party because of the participation fee.



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Regardless of the effect on the party's finances, it is likely that for the candidates the new system will prove to be as, or more, expensive than the old. The candidates will have to communicate directly with perhaps 100,000 party members rather than with just the convention delegates. Postage costs alone will be appreciable, as will the expenses involved in making personal appearances in all parts of the Province. To an even greater extent than under the convention system, candidates will have to possess substantial personal resources, or be able to attract wealthy backers, if they are to mount an effective campaign.

In 1989 the Ontario Commission on Election Finances, which monitors spending on Provincial election campaigns, extended its remit to party leadership contests. [20] Under the terms of the Election Finances Act 1986, candidates for the party leadership must register with the Commission. The funds that a candidate raises for his campaign, and the sources of these funds, must be reported to the Commission in an audited statement. All campaign expenditure must also be reported in the same way, although the Commission has no power to impose limits on that expenditure. The Commission further requires that until they are registered, candidates cannot spend money or raise funds in anticipation of the contest. Clearly, this is a requirement which is very difficult to enforce, given that a potential candidate can indulge in informal and discreet campaigning long before the contest is officially open.

It is difficult to envisage how breaches of campaign financial restrictions could be punished. Candidates in the 1976 federal Conservative leadership contest were asked to reveal their total expenditure and the names of any backers who subscribed more than \$1,000 to their campaign. Of the twelve candidates, all except Brian Mulroney complied with the request, but no sanctions were applied to him because of his refusal. Theoretically, the winning candidate could be deprived of the leadership if he was found to have exceeded the limits on expenditure but in reality, it is difficult to imagine such an

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extreme sanction being applied.

### SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UK

The Ontario Conservatives' decision to abandon the convention system in favour of a ballot of members, and the federal Liberals' serious contemplation of this option, is of particular interest to the British Labour party as it considers the future of the Electoral College. The Electoral College and Canadian leadership conventions are both means of involving party activists, through a representative institution, in a key aspect of party organisation. Each reflects the principle that the choice of party leader be made by delegates in a representative institution, rather than by the party's MPs or by the full membership of the party.

That said, there are clear differences of detail and of substance between the two institutions. While the Canadian convention system is well established, Labour's Electoral College dates only from 1981. The Electoral College does not have to be specially convened, but functions as a constituent part of Labour's annual conference. Indeed, the Electoral College is simply a temporary transformation of the conference into an agency for recording the votes in the contest.

Theoretically at least, a Labour party leadership (or deputy-leadership) contest can take place annually, as a contest does not have to be 'approved' by a conference vote but is simply launched if a candidate emerges with the required level of endorsement. In fact, contests for the leadership have been held in 1983 and 1988, and for the deputy-leadership in 1981, 1983 and 1988. The actual voting in the Electoral College takes place on the first evening of the conference, in a distinctly sober atmosphere that has none of the flamboyant displays of support for the candidates that characterise the balloting process at a Canadian convention. The candidates do not address the Electoral College before the voting takes place and their campaigns in the weeks prior to the vote

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are shorter, more low-keyed and less costly than those mounted by Canadian leadership candidates.

It can be seen from Table I that the Canadian Conventions of 1967-84 were 'real events' in that there were a large number of candidates, and 4 or 5 ballots were required to produce a result that was close even in the final ballot. Electoral College contests, in contrast, have attracted no more than four candidates and, with the exception of the 1981 deputy leadership contest, a winner emerged with a large majority in the first ballot. Thus, while the Canadian party leaders have, in real terms, been chosen at the convention, the Electoral College proceedings have been 'coronations' with the outcome effectively determined by the trade unions' decisions made some time before the event. In that respect at least, the operation of the Electoral College has had more in common with recent American Presidential Conventions than with Canadian conventions.

The two most significant contrasts between the Electoral College and a Canadian leadership convention, however, are to be found in the factors that determine who can enter the contest, and in the distribution of delegate votes among the various sections of the party. Candidates for an Electoral College contest can be nominated only by MPs from among their own number, with (since 1988) each candidate requiring the support of 20 per-cent of MPs. The fact that MPs control the entrance-gate to a Labour party leadership contest in this way means that the Electoral College cannot reproduce one of the major features of the Canadian convention system - the selection of leaders who have no Parliamentary experience. Labour MPs may have only 30 per-cent of the votes in the Electoral College, but they are able to ensure that only proven-Parliamentarians will enter the contest. What is more, the publication of the Electoral College votes enables us to observe that the winning candidate in each of the five contests has been supported by a clear majority of MPs. To that extent, the introduction of the Electoral College has not made a difference to the type of leader and deputy leader that Labour has had. Unlike

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**TABLE I**

**Canadian Federal Liberal and Conservative Leadership Conventions and  
British Labour Party Electoral College Contests.**

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	<u>Candidates</u>	<u>Ballots</u>	<u>Winner's %</u>
<u>Canadian Conventions</u>			
1967 (Con.)	11	5	54.3
1968 (Lib.)	9	4	50.9
1976 (Con.)	12	4	51.4
1983 (Con.)	8	4	54.5
1984 (Lib.)	7	2	54.4
<u>Electoral College Contests</u>			
1981 (Deputy Leader)	3	2	50.4
1983 (Leader)	4	1	71.3
1983 (Deputy Leader)	4	1	67.3
1988 (Leader)	2	1	88.6
1988 (Deputy Leader)	3	1	66.8

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Liberal and Conservative MPs in Canada, British Labour MPs have not been called upon to adjust to an 'outsider' as party leader.

Whether this is a desirable feature of the Electoral College is a debatable point. In federal Canada the Provincial level of government constitutes a potential source of national party leaders and this requires a system of selection that broadens the choice beyond the federal MPs. Further, the Canadian Parliament probably occupies a less prestigious place within the political system than does the British Parliament, so that the selection of non-Parliamentarians is more acceptable than it might be in Britain. The 'closed' British system ensures that a new leader will have been 'tried and tested' in Parliament, and perhaps the Cabinet, but the 'open' Canadian system can yield a leader who possesses more than simply Parliamentary skills.

There is no equivalent in the Canadian conventions to the role that the trade unions play in the Electoral College. The Electoral College is divided into three distinct sections that reflect the complicated structure of the Labour party - the trade unions (with 40 per-cent of the votes in the College), the MPs (30 per-cent) and the constituency parties (30 per-cent). The MPs vote as individuals, and each constituency association casts a single vote, but a trade union's vote is determined by the size of its membership and is cast as a block. Thus the Transport and General Workers' Union accounted for 25 per-cent of the votes in the Trade Union section of the Electoral College in 1988, while the four largest unions accounted for 60 per-cent. In Canada, in contrast, various elements of the party, such as the federal MPs, federal candidates, members of Provincial legislatures, executive officers and representatives of student associations, all participate in the convention, but almost two-thirds of delegates are representatives of the constituencies. To that extent, the representatives of the individual constituency members of the party account for a very clear majority of the convention votes.

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Despite these differences of substance and of detail, leadership conventions and the Electoral College face the same threat to their future. For the British Labour party and the main Canadian parties a very real current issue is whether the present method of selecting the leader should be abandoned in favour of a ballot of party members. The question is not simply one of organisational technicalities but involves two related matters of principle - what are the relative merits of direct democracy and representative democracy, and are the basic building-blocks of the party its individual members or the constituency parties to which they belong?

As was noted above in the examination of the debates among the federal Liberals and the Ontario Provincial Conservatives, the direct democracy of a ballot of members has many attractions as a method of selecting the party leader. It is the ultimate form of participatory democracy, involving party members directly in a vital aspect of party business. Its introduction would fit the general trend towards greater openness in party affairs that has been evident in many countries in recent years. Once established, direct participation in the leader-selection process might encourage grass-roots members to show a greater general interest in party affairs. It might also lead to an increase in party membership.

Nevertheless, in Britain and Canada there is considerable resistance to this reform. Representative democracy has a pedigree that is at least as respectable as that of direct democracy. Members do not necessarily take advantage of the opportunity to participate in ballots. While the Parti Quebecois achieved a 62 per cent turnout of members in its 1985 leadership ballot, such a level is certainly not guaranteed. Much of the case against direct ballots rests on the 'rights' of local activists as opposed to passive members. There is certainly no universal acceptance of the principle that 'all members are equal'. Activists often argue that their close participation in the day-to-day work of the party justifies the reward of their involvement in the party's representative institutions. Local

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activists often present themselves as the true conscience of the party, more dedicated to its interests than non-active members who might have only a new-found, and perhaps fleeting, commitment. There is also often the feeling that the ordinary members are more likely than dedicated activists to be corrupted by propaganda from the media.

In Britain, proposals that the leader be selected through a ballot of members normally assume the principle of 'one-member one-vote one-value'. This was the basis of the postal ballot that the Liberal Democrats and Social Democrats used to select their leaders, and the equality of each member is assumed in Labour party debates about the desirability of postal ballots. In Canada the Parti Quebecois' ballot of party members was conducted in polling stations across the Province, with each of the 160,000 party members having a single and equal vote.

In contrast, the system that the Ontario Provincial Conservatives have adopted, and that the Alberta Liberals advocated, treats the constituency parties, rather than the individual members, as the basic units. The requirement that the votes in each constituency be expressed in percentages, rather than in numbers, emphasises the primacy and organisational equality of the constituencies. This, it may be noted, reflects the established practice in leadership conventions, where all constituencies, regardless of the size of their membership, have an equal number of delegates. Regions in which the party is weak will receive as much attention from leadership candidates as will regions in which the party is strong. This can be seen as highly desirable in a country in which nation-building is a vital function of the political process.

A consequence of this practice, however, is that the vote of a party member in a large constituency counts for less than that of a member in a small constituency. As a constituency's contribution is not measured by its size, there is no real incentive for constituencies to be active in the recruitment of new members. Further, the candidate who has the support of the greatest number of party members may not emerge as the winner. His authority as leader would thereby be compromised by the manner of his

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election. For these reasons the practice is unlikely to be copied in any system of direct democracy that the Labour party might introduce.



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### FOOTNOTES

1. I am grateful to the Government of Canada and the Carnegie Trust for providing me with grants which enabled me to undertake the research on which this paper is based.
2. See R. M. Punnett, *Labour's Electoral College*, Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics, No. 64, University of Strathclyde, 1989.
3. See particularly G. Perlin (ed), *Party Democracy in Canada*, Scarborough Ont., 1988; J. C. Courtney, *The Selection of National Party Leaders in Canada*, Toronto, 1973; R. K. Carty and W. P. Ward, *National Politics and Community in Canada*, Vancouver, 1986; G. Perlin, *The Tory Syndrome*, Montreal, 1980.
4. Perlin, *Party Democracy in Canada*, p. 11.
5. T. J. Levesque, 'On the Outcome of the 1983 Conservative Leadership Convention', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 1983 pp. 779-94.
6. For a discussion see D. V. Smiley, 'The National Party Leadership Convention in Canada', *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1968, pp.373-97; J. Lele (et al) 'The National Party Convention', in H.G. Thorburn (ed), *Party Politics in Canada*, Scarborough Ont., 1985 (5th ed.)
7. Levesque, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1983 pp.779-94.
8. Perlin, *Party Democracy in Canada*, p.308.
9. *Globe and Mail*, 23 January 1985.
10. *Amendment to Article 14 of the PLC Constitution*, Liberal Party of Canada (Alberta), 1986.
11. Ibid. p. 6.
12. *Globe and Mail*, 1 December 1987.
13. *Toronto Star*, 17 April 1989.

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14. I. Stewart, 'The Brass Versus the Grass', in Perlin *Party Democracy in Canada*, pp.145-59.
15. *Globe and Mail*, 25 January 1983.
16. *Globe and Mail*, 21 November 1987.
17. *Toronto Star*, 10 February 1989.
18. *Globe and Mail*, 13 February 1989.
19. *Globe and Mail*, 29 July 1989.
20. Commission on Election Finances, *Election Finance Reporter*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (May 1989).