

Grassroots rebuilding calls for an open and accessible leadership contest

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By [DAVID BERTSCHI](#) | Dec. 05, 2011

OTTAWA—In the weeks and months since the last federal election, Liberals from across the country have begun to focus on the process of rebuilding their party. Many have rightly pointed out what we need to do is reconstitute the party as a genuine, grassroots political movement representing “Liberal values.”

Like many organizations that have enjoyed a long run of success, the party had become too top-down, too bureaucratic, and too out-of-touch with key constituency—that is, its membership. Now, we have the chance to change all that. Some of this can be done “from the ground up,” as members come together, re-engage, share ideas, and bring new talent and energy into the party.

But some of it must also come from the top. In short, we need a leadership contest that reflects the new focus and new realities of our party.

Albert Einstein once said that the definition of insanity is “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” As we approach a new leadership contest, Liberals must ask themselves if we are not in danger of falling into this very trap.

The spending cap for our most recent leadership contest was \$3-million. This no longer makes sense. If we stick with the same “cap” that means we could be faced with a situation where three to five candidates are seeking anywhere from \$9-million to \$15-million from much of the same donor pool—all to throw at one another—at a time when party itself raised but \$6.6-million from its own fundraising last year, versus that of \$17-million raised by the Conservatives. This too comes at a time when we are about to lose \$7-million in public subsidies, adding to the urgency of our fundraising efforts in tapping Liberal donors.

There are those who will say that robust leadership campaigns bring new people and money into the party, and that setting a “premium” on the leadership contest forces prospective leaders to demonstrate their fundraising potential as part of the leadership contest, hence ensuring “a winning candidate.” Not necessarily. Witness, our recent experience. Under the current system, we’ve had a succession of leaders who have been successful in stimulating a certain part of the party base and raising money for expensive leadership campaigns, but who have failed to connect with Canadians at large. It’s time for a different approach.

What we need is a leadership contest that’s determined by broad popular support rather than narrow sectional appeal among the party base and a few connected friends with deep pockets that calls for a cap on leadership spending that’s closer to \$750,000, making the leadership more accessible to a broader range of candidates.

This is a risk. It means that the contest for the leader will be more open, more accessible, and more democratic. It will be messy; maybe even awkward and uncomfortable for some. Yet that is precisely what we need. For that is what will generate a new kind of engagement and vetting process that will produce someone who can win not only the leadership, but also the next election.

Back in 1919, the Liberals were the very first federal party to hold a convention delegate vote to elect their next leader. Previously, the caucus had selected the leader. But the party took a chance on change and democracy. The winner of that leadership contest was William Lyon Mackenzie King, the longest serving Prime Minister in Canadian history. That’s not a bad record to emulate.

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