



Column / Don Newman

Governments are Governments

The last weekend in May was a good reminder of the old adage that governments behave like governments, and opposition parties behave like oppositions.

The reminder was provided by the conventions of the two major political parties. The governing Liberals in Winnipeg, and the opposition Conservatives in Vancouver.

The fact that the parties had so recently changed places made the examples even more instructive. Until last October the Conservatives had spent the preceding nine and a half years in government, during the process becoming an increasingly closed—even secretive—organization growing more and more out of touch with many Canadians.

Meanwhile, the Liberals had languished in opposition, reaching a nadir after the 2011 election when the party fell to just 32 seats and third place in the House of Commons. So open to the public and the media did the party become that it allowed declared “supporters” of the party who were not members to vote in the 2013 contest that selected Justin Trudeau as leader.

Yet, at their two conventions in their new roles, there was a major shift. The Conservatives, who in office relished holding convention sessions closed to the media and once kept reporters in a pen so they couldn’t bother then Prime Minister Stephen Harper, threw the doors open to every session and welcomed the attention. Whether this approach will continue after the party selects a permanent leader next year and the next election gets closer remains to be seen. But for now, the contrast was striking.

At the Liberal convention in Winnipeg, the mood was euphoric. A

chiropractor could have made a fortune treating the Liberals who were patting themselves on the back. And who could really blame them, after last October’s Lazarus-like comeback from their disastrous finish four years earlier, to a majority government with 184 seats.

The Liberals won the last election by promising, among other things, an “open and transparent” government. People who had been around the block more than once shuddered at that promise. Opponents use openness as easy pickings to attack those that are too open.

And already, the Liberals seemed to be having second thoughts. Of the 40 policy sessions held at the convention, fifteen of them were closed to the media. Thirty-seven per cent of the meetings were not “open and transparent.”

However, while they were celebrating, they were also setting the stage for what they hope will be a repeat of their success at the polls in the fall of 2019. To do that, they made radical changes to the party constitution. And they did that in open sessions, with the full scrutiny of the media and the public.

One appears to make it more democratic by dropping the \$10 a year membership charge so that now anyone can become a Liberal merely by clicking online to become one. This is the same strategy that created the large base for the party leadership vote three years ago.

Now, the strategy will be used to transform the Liberals from a traditional party into a “movement” that many more Canadians will relate to. Of course the real benefit is that everyone who signs up online, surrenders their email address to party headquarters. Immediately, that name goes on the

Liberal fundraising list and soon the new member of the Liberal “movement” is receiving emails repeatedly asking for small contributions.

It is a fundraising strategy pioneered by the Democrats in the United States. It has worked brilliantly for them and for the Liberals since they tried it in their leadership race. Now, by expanding the membership even more, the Liberals will have an even bigger fundraising pool in which to fish.

The other major constitutional change approved at the convention doesn’t expand democratic participation. In fact, it restricts it. The newly amended constitution strips all policy-making responsibilities from the party’s provincial and territorial associations, and places it instead with the national executive. And the national executive will be controlled by the party leader and the people around him.

Going into the Winnipeg convention, there appeared to be push-back from some party members. But after Justin Trudeau made two important speeches supporting the “modernization” of the party constitution, the change passed almost unanimously.

Now, the leader of the Liberals and the people around him have virtually the same control over their party that Stephen Harper and the people around him did over the Conservatives.

Clearly, once a party is in government, it acts like a government. The simple fact is that if it didn’t, it would be unlikely to be the government for very long. **P**

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