

Introduction

The Canadian Study of Parliament Group is pleased to release the third *Parliamentary Perspectives* paper. First launched in 1998, *Parliamentary Perspectives* is an ongoing series of papers on Canada's legislative institutions, processes and related issues. The papers are intended to encourage debate among academics, observers, and practitioners of the Canadian political scene. The papers are offered as an additional benefit of membership in the Group. Copies of earlier papers can be obtained through our web site www.studyparliament.ca.

This third paper, "Members of Parliament, Voters, and Democracy in the Canadian House of Commons" comes from Dr. Bill Cross, the Director of the Centre for Canadian Studies, and member of the Political Science Department at Mount Allison University. Dr. Cross' paper takes a unique look at the much debated question in Canadian politics, "how do you make members of parliament more responsive to voters concerns?"

Dr. Cross begins his analysis by suggesting that members of parliament have correctly been taken to task for not initiating policy debates that might distinguish their own views from those of their party. Party discipline in Canada has not been challenged in the past twenty years despite: 1) massive changes to the party system in Canada since the election of the Reform and BQ caucuses in 1993; 2) large scale turnover in the House of Commons; and 3) changes to the Parliamentary rules that provide more opportunity for activist MPs to gain influence.

Dr. Cross then suggests that part of the problem for MPs is the lack of an independent mandate they obtain from their local parties during the nomination process. Most party nominations are closed door affairs, with little debate over policy issues. As a result, successful nominees often lack a strong backing from their local party to take with them to Ottawa. More open and policy driven nominations are an important first step in producing MPs unafraid to take on parliamentary leaders.

We trust that you will find Dr. Cross' paper of interest and welcome any comments or suggestions for topics that might be addressed in future *Parliamentary Perspectives*.

**MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT, VOTERS, AND DEMOCRACY
IN THE CANADIAN HOUSE OF COMMONS**

**Dr. Bill Cross
Department of Political Science and
Director of the Centre for Canadian Studies
Mount Allison University**

Introduction

This essay offers a different perspective to the perennial question of how to make the Canadian House of Commons more responsive to the concerns of voters. Much of the debate on this question focusses on increasing the opportunity for individual Members of Parliament to influence public policy through revitalized party caucuses and committee work, and increasing the number of free votes in the Commons. I argue here that these approaches offer, at best, only a partial answer to this question. Giving more power over policy development to individual MPs does little to enhance democracy unless these MPs have a mandate from their constituents and are at some point held directly accountable for how they exercise this increased power. Rather than focussing on the empowerment of MPs, this essay considers the relationship between Members of Parliament and their voters. If giving more power to MPs is meant to enhance Canadian democracy and respond to voters' concerns that Canadian democratic institutions (primarily the House of Commons) are unresponsive and out of touch, then consideration must be given to whether MPs have a mandate to represent their constituents' views, have strong incentive to be responsive to them, and whether voters have the opportunity to hold them personally accountable for their performance in the House of Commons. This is not currently the case.

While there is substantial evidence that voters favour a weakening of party discipline, individual MPs today have no mandate from their voters to deviate from their party's policy positions and voters have little opportunity to hold MPs responsible for their performance. To a large extent, this is a function of the Canadian parliamentary and electoral systems. I do not wish to tackle these cornerstones of Canadian democracy in this essay, but rather to suggest that reform of the candidate nomination process used by the political parties may offer significant opportunities for MPs to arrive in Ottawa with a limited policy mandate independent of that of their political party. Accordingly, this would provide real incentive (and legitimacy) for MPs to act as defenders of their constituents' interests and to publicly defend their record in this regard. Those who argue for a more effective role for MPs need first to consider whether individual MPs are representative of and responsive to their constituents.

Voter Disaffection

There is substantial evidence that Canadians are decidedly dissatisfied with their present political arrangements and institutions. However, when the contours of this dissatisfaction are examined, it becomes clear that what Canadians are concerned with is not the rather inconsequential role played by most MPs in the policy-making process; but, rather, their perception that Parliament is not sufficiently responsive to their policy preferences. Greater empowerment of MPs may be one method of making Parliament more responsive, but only if individual members have a mandate to reflect their constituents' views, and can be subsequently held accountable for their performance.

The 1990s began with clear representations of this political discontent in the report of the 1991 Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future (Spicer Report). The Forum found that many Canadians harbour a fundamental misgiving towards their political system because of what they perceive as a lack of responsiveness. The following passage from the Forum's report conveys the essence of this sentiment:

One of the strongest messages the forum received from participants was that they have lost their faith in both the political process and their political leaders. They do not feel that their governments, especially at the federal level, reflect the will of the people, and they do not feel that citizens have the means at the moment to correct this.¹

These findings were confirmed by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Lortie Commission) which reported that "many Canadians are critical of their existing political institutions. Many are concerned that these institutions are not sufficiently responsive to their views."² Polling numbers recounted in academic studies by Peter Dobell and Byron Berry, Leslie Seidle, and André Blais and Elisabeth Gidengil provide examples of these general sentiments.³ The findings of these studies include:

- four-fifths of Canadians agree that "Generally, those elected to Parliament soon lose touch

1. *Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future: Report to the People and Government of Canada* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services Canada, 1991), 135.

2. *Report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*, volume 2 (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services Canada, 1991), 229.

3. Peter Dobell and Byron Berry, "Anger at the System: What Canadians Think About Their Political System," *Parliamentary Government* 39 (1992), 3-20; André Blais and Elisabeth Gidengil, *Making Representative Democracy Work: The Views of Canadians* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991); and F. Leslie Seidle, "The Angry Citizenry: Examining Representation and Responsiveness in Government," *Policy Options* 15:6 (1994), 75-80.

with the people.”

- half of Canadians believe that “MPs are not responsive to the needs of constituents.”
- The proportion of Canadians expressing ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of respect for and confidence in the House of Commons has declined from two-in-five in 1979 to two-in-ten in 1995.
- three out of four Canadians agree with the statement, “I don’t think that the government cares much what people like me think,” up from one in two in 1965.
- a strong majority favour a weakening of party discipline in return for MPs being given greater latitude in representing constituents’ views.

Berry and Dobell capture this changing voter sentiment when they conclude:

If Canadians have traditionally been Burkeans, inclined to invest power and responsibility in their elected representatives, they appear now to be becoming Jeffersonians, constitutionally distrustful of government and insistent that their representatives respond more sensitively and directly to the voice of the people.⁴

Neil Nevitte has identified this “decline of deference” as part of a general value change.⁵ Many political scientists point to the processes involved in reaching, and the ultimate failures of, the Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional accords as helping to crystalize this changing voter sentiment. For example, in an article on the 1993 election, Alan Cairns, has written:

The election confirmed the changed relations between citizens and governing (or would-be governing) elites that surfaced with and were stimulated by the successive defeats of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords... The attack on the constitutional accords was, among other things an attack on brokerage politics, especially of the kind that takes place behind closed doors.⁶

Cairns is correct in his observation that the voter sentiment expressed in the constitutional rounds had meaning far beyond the substance of the agreements. As Reginald Whitaker has

4. Dobell and Berry, “Anger at the System,” 19.

5. Neil Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross-National Perspective* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996).

6. Alan Cairns, “An Election to be Remembered: Canada 1993,” *Canadian Public Policy*, 20:3, (1994), 229.

suggested, these events made clear that Canada possessed “a set of discredited political elites” who lacked legitimacy.⁷

Canadians’ forceful expression of their desire for more responsive politicians and greater direct control over policy outcomes, led Leslie Seidle to conclude that public consultations by government must become more frequent, and that “imaginative but clear-sighted changes to how they are carried out, with reforms in other areas, should help narrow the gap between citizens’ expectations and the way certain aspects of our public life are currently organized.”⁸ Despite this widespread public sentiment, little has changed in the past decade.

All of the political parties acknowledged this voter sentiment and took some preliminary steps towards responding to it in the early years of the decade. Most often this was expressed as a promise to voters to find a more meaningful role for Members of Parliament in the development of public policy. One of the most promising developments (for those looking for a changed relationship between voters and their representatives) was the emergence of the Reform Party. As Carty, Cross and Young argue:

The Reform party emerged during the Charlottetown Accord as the voice for English Canadians who opposed the deal, and especially those who were angry at the country’s political elite...The Charlottetown Referendum essentially gave Manning and the Reform party an ideal pre-election opportunity to articulate two sentiments fairly widely held in the West: a dislike and distrust of Brian Mulroney, and a deep-set resentment of the Canadian political elite, writ large.⁹

Along with its attention to issues of concern to voters in its Western regional base, Reform spent considerable energy portraying itself as a populist party committed to bottom-up democracy and thus more responsive to its grassroots supporters than are the ‘traditional’ parties. This helps explain why a significant number of voters left the New Democratic Party in 1993 to support

7. Reginald Whitaker, *A Sovereign Idea: Essays on Canada as a Democratic Community* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 286.

8. Seidle, *The Angry Citizenry*, 80.

9. R. Kenneth Carty, William Cross and Lisa Young, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 57.

Reform. One of the few things these two parties had in common was their claim to being anti-elite. NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin's leading role in supporting the Charlottetown Accord did irreparable damage to her party's claim in this regard.

A centre-piece of the Reform Party's 1993 election platform was a call for political reform including more free votes in the House of Commons, making public the results of caucus votes, support for binding referendums, citizens' initiatives in putting questions to a referendum and procedures for the recall of MPs.¹⁰ The party's platform stated:

We believe in the common sense of the common people, their right to be consulted on public policy matters before major decisions are made, their right to choose and recall their own representatives and to govern themselves through truly representative and responsive institutions, and their right to directly initiate legislation for which substantial public support is demonstrated.¹¹

While the Reform Party was at the forefront in the call for these reforms, the anger of voters with the existing political arrangements was not lost on the other parties. Prime Minister Kim Campbell, acknowledging voters' desire for a change in the policy-making process, made a call for "doing politics differently," a central plank in both her campaign for the Progressive Conservative (PC) party leadership and in the 1993 general election. While stopping short of endorsing the initiatives supported by Reform, the PC platform acknowledged that, "Canadians have had enough bickering and cynicism. They want to believe that government can and does work to serve their interests - that it respects their problems, opinions and tax dollars."¹² The PC platform also included a promise to increase the power of individual MPs by allowing more free votes in the House of Commons.¹³

The Liberal party included in its platform a section entitled, "Governing with Integrity" that also included promises aimed at increasing the role played by individual MPs in the public policy-making process.¹⁴ The Liberal's campaign Red Book was seen as a tool to make the party appear

10. *Blue Sheet: Principles, Policies and Election Platform*, Reform Party of Canada (1993).

11. *Ibid.*, 3.

12. *Making Government Work for Canada: A Taxpayers' Agenda*, Progressive Conservative Party of Canada (October, 1993), 29. See also, Progressive Conservative Party News Release, "Campbell Offers a Clear Choice for Canadians," September 28, 1993.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Creating Opportunity: The Liberal Plan for Canada*, Liberal Party of Canada (1993), 92.

more responsive to voters. Jean Chrétien repeatedly referred to the Red Book as a contract with voters and encouraged them to hold his government accountable for the promises made in it.

Mel Hurtig's National Party of Canada included among its platform promises support for more frequent use of binding referendum and reform of the parliamentary process "so that our members of parliament are much more important in our democratic process."¹⁵ NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin joined in this chorus with vague general statements such as "we have challenged elected politicians throughout the country to let the people play a role, let Canadians have a say in their future."¹⁶

This early momentum for change has not been sustained. The 1990s ended much as they began with no fundamental change in the relationship between voters and their representatives. As Carty, Cross and Young conclude: "This voter sentiment has not, however, led to substantial change in the role of the MP in Parliament."¹⁷ Since coming to power in 1993, the Chrétien Liberals have enforced party discipline and punished those who dare break party ranks on important issues. In this regard, they are no different from earlier Liberal and Conservative governments. In an early, high profile test of the Chrétien government's willingness to tolerate dissent within the Liberal caucus, long-time MP and former cabinet minister Warren Allmand was removed from his position as Chair of the Commons' Justice Committee for voting against the government's 1995 budget. For their part, neither the Conservatives nor the NDP show any evidence of changing their disciplinary practices. While party discipline in the House of Commons remains strong, there are signs that an increasing number of MPs are willing to ignore their party whips on occasion, and suffer punishment (even expulsion) from their caucus. In a 1998 study of party voting, Joseph Wearing found that: "The last three parliaments have witnessed the largest number of dissenting votes since 1945 and the number grows with each successive parliament."¹⁸ There is, though, little evidence of the traditional parties' leadership being willing to allow dissenting votes without punishing the dissident.

15. Mel Hurtig, *A New and Better Canada: Principles and Policies of a New Canadian Political Party* (Toronto: Stoddart Press, 1992), 33-34.

16. "Notes for an Address by Audrey McLaughlin, Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 9, 1991" in *Speeches: New Democratic Party Convention, Halifax, June 1991* (Research Group, New Democratic Party), 7.

17. Carty, Cross & Young, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*, 148.

18. Joseph Wearing, "Guns, Gays, and Gadflies: Party Dissent in the House of Commons under Mulroney and Chrétien," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, (Ottawa, June 1998).

In many ways, however, the focus of attention on making the role of the individual MP more effective misses the mark. For example, in a thought-provoking essay on the current debate about “democracy and the House of Commons,” Jennifer Smith notes that there have been several recent reforms to parliamentary practice that increase the importance of the MP.¹⁹ According to Smith “A leading example is the procedure governing the choice of the Speaker, who presides over the proceedings of the House.”²⁰ The change allows all MPs a secret vote. Smith notes that “In a stroke, the members were transformed into independent electors, the upshot being that the choice is an unpredictable and interesting affair.”²¹ While Smith is correct that this has created political drama, it is unlikely that it has captured the public’s attention or in any way addressed the voters’ concerns recounted above.²² Similarly, Smith and others point to increased importance of parliamentary committees as a way to increase the effectiveness of individual MPs. The problem with this approach is that it does not directly address the concerns voters have been expressing for more than a decade regarding a lack of responsiveness on the part of their political institutions. Increasing the effectiveness of individual MPs may improve “democracy” within the House of Commons, in the sense that each MP will play a more effective role in Commons’ decision making, but it does little to ensure that government is more responsive to citizens. The same is essentially true for increasing the number of free votes in the House of Commons. This only becomes a meaningful tool for increasing responsiveness if there are reasonable assurances that MPs are using these opportunities to represent their constituents’ views. And, as noted above, four-fifths of voters believe their MPs are out of touch with average Canadians.

Many may argue that there is a natural connection between an increase in the effectiveness of individual MPs and greater representation of voters’ views in the House of Commons. The presumed logic underlying this argument is that MPs are elected office-holders who desire re-election and thus if given the opportunity will work to reflect their constituents’ views in order to improve their re-election chances. However, there is little in the Canadian experience to justify this conclusion. In the Canadian parliamentary system, voters have just one ballot on which to indicate their preferred choice for both their MP and their government. Unlike voters in the American Congressional system, Canadians cannot vote for a candidate of one party to be their local representative and for a different party to form the government. All studies of Canadian political behaviour tell us that the vast majority of voters use their single ballot to express their preference for a governing party (and preferred Prime Minister) – even though the only names appearing on the

19. Jennifer Smith, “Democracy and the Canadian House of Commons at the Millennium,” *Canadian Public Administration* 42:4 (1999), 398-421.

20. *Ibid*, 400.

21. *Ibid*, 401.

22. In fact, Smith acknowledges that these reforms “have received little attention beyond the confines of Parliament Hill.” *Ibid*, 401.

ballot are those of the candidates for their local riding.²³ The overwhelming evidence is that very few voters cast their ballot based on which local candidate they believe would make the best representative. This is a logical result. Given the choice between voting for an MP of their choosing or a government of their choosing, Canadians routinely select the latter option. The result is that individual Members of Parliament have no independent mandate from voters and thus no democratic legitimacy in differing from the policy views of their party and leader. While doubt has often been expressed as to whether Canada's federal elections provide anyone with a policy mandate,²⁴ there can be no doubt that they do not regularly provide one to individual MPs. Parties discourage their candidates from expressing their own policy views during election campaigns, and there is no evidence that voters are endorsing either the general ideology or specific policy positions of a candidate in electing her to the House of Commons.

If general elections do not provide an opportunity for voters to pass judgment on the views and performance of their MP (and her opponents), then there is little guarantee that members will use any increased power they may garner in the House of Commons to reflect the views of their constituents. Similarly, a party's leadership is unlikely to cede authority to back bench members who lack a policy mandate from their constituents. The real dilemma then is not the role of the MP in the House of Commons, though this is certainly part of it, but rather the lack of opportunity for voters to first empower and then pass judgment on the job done by their MP. One way to rectify this problem is through reform of our electoral and parliamentary systems to allow voters to cast different votes for their preferred representative and preferred government. This sort of change would have much broader implications than the issue under consideration here and is not one I wish to pursue in this essay (the mere fact that such a change in governing systems would require constitutional amendment should give pause to anyone who would seriously advocate it). There is another more modest way to effect some degree of change in this regard. Canadians do at present have the opportunity to choose their candidates for the position of MP through party nomination contests. However, these contests are currently closed affairs that discourage widespread public participation, are increasingly under the control of the national party offices, and have virtually nothing to do with public policy. In the remainder of this essay, I argue that careful reform of the candidate nomination process would go a long way towards empowering MPs and assuaging public concerns regarding the lack of responsiveness in the House of Commons.

23. David Docherty finds that some MPs, particularly those who have served several terms, are able to develop a modest 'personal vote' that is independent of voter support for their party. This, however, is the exception and not the rule. See Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 209-215.

24. See, for example, Harold Clarke, et al, *Absent Mandate: Canadian Electoral Politics in an Era of Restructuring*, 3rd edition (Toronto: Gage, 1996).

Candidate Nomination

The one opportunity that Canadian voters have to select the individual they would like to represent them in the House of Commons is participation in the party nomination process. General election voters are presented with a candidate for each major party, and if they prefer the leader or policies of a particular party, their only rational option is to vote for that party's local candidate regardless of their qualifications or personal policy positions.

The only genuine opportunity for determining the relationship between the representative and the represented exists at the time of candidate nomination. Potentially, nomination contests could be centred around candidates' views of the role of an MP, the relationship between an MP and her constituents, and the candidates' policy views (within the general ideological confines of the party). Examination of the nomination process, however, illustrates that this is not the case. Local nomination contests are increasingly controlled by the national parties, and routinely have almost nothing to do with public policy. As a result, few Canadians participate in nomination contests, and MPs arriving in Ottawa have no policy mandate separate from that of their party.

Writing in the first half of the 20th century, R. MacGregor Dawson observed that local nominating "conventions are extremely jealous of their own powers and independence, and they will not tolerate interference from any quarter, particularly from the higher party circles."²⁵ In recent elections there has been a steady assault on this local prerogative. In 1970, the *Canada Elections Act* was amended giving national party leaders a veto over the selection of local candidates.²⁶ While this provision was initially adopted as a necessary part of a plan to allow for the inclusion of party affiliation on the ballot, party leaders have used it to usurp substantial control over the nominating process. In a survey of riding associations conducted after the 1993 campaign, one-quarter of responding associations reported substantial involvement in their local contest by party officials from outside the riding.²⁷

Leaders have used their control over nominations to protect their party from undesirable candidates. For instance, MPs under an ethical cloud have often been denied renomination by the party leader (for example, Sinclair Stevens in 1988, Gilles Bernier, Carole Jacques and Gabriel Fontaine in 1993). While this may be a fully defensible act, party leaders have also denied candidacy

25. R. MacGregor Dawson, *The Government of Canada*, 5th edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 446.

26. See, *Canada Elections Act*, section 81.(1)(h) and 82.(1).

27. Constituency association presidents in the Reform, Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties were surveyed. Details of this survey can be found in William Cross, "The Conflict Between Participatory and Accommodative Politics: The Case for Stronger Parties," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 17 (Spring, 1998), 37-55.

to individuals because of their policy views -- even when these views were endorsed by the local nominating convention. In fact, the first time this provision was used was by Robert Stanfield, in the 1974 election, to deny candidacy to the then Mayor of Moncton Leonard Jones based on Jones' view regarding protection of French language rights. Similarly, in the 1993 election, Jean Chrétien short-circuited the candidacy of Dan McCash in the Toronto riding of Etobicoke–Lakeshore. McCash was at the time National Coordinator of Liberals for Life and was mounting a vigorous challenge for the nomination. McCash's campaign ended when the Liberal leader appointed Jean Augustine as the party's candidate in the riding.

The Liberal party leadership also took steps to ensure the easy renomination of their incumbents in 1993, and again in 1997. Chrétien let it be known that he wanted his incumbents renominated without facing any opposition. When potential opponents did emerge, the party went to great lengths to ensure that its incumbents prevailed. This is evident in the case of MP Len Hopkins in the riding of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke in the 1993 election. Hopkins was facing substantial opposition to his renomination from local party activists. In order to ensure his leader's desired outcome, Ontario campaign chair David Smith opened and closed nominations for the riding on the same day. He did this from his Toronto office without giving notification to the local association until 30 minutes after nominations closed. Hopkins was the only candidate made aware that nominations were being accepted, and thus was acclaimed.²⁸ Of course, Chrétien has gone further than this, by completely ignoring local party authority in nominations and single handedly appointing at least 20 Liberal candidates in the past two elections.²⁹

When candidates are chosen by the party leadership and not local voters, it is impossible to argue that they have any mandate from their local voters separate from the party leadership. Similarly, when the governing party ensures the easy renomination of its incumbents, it provides little incentive for them to vigorously defend their constituents' interests in their House of Commons' work. Their renomination is automatic and their general election chances lie almost completely with voters' views of their party's performance and not with an evaluation of the job of the individual MP.

Even when local voters do get to select their candidates, the parties do not make participation easy – especially in comparison to general elections. Voting places in a general election are found in nearly every neighbourhood in a riding, often at local schools and fire halls, and voting generally takes only a few minutes to complete. Recent amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* allow voters to register on election day at their local polling station. In contrast, there are several real obstacles to participation in nomination contests. First, only registered party members can participate and

28. See, "Nomination Rules Rile Some Grass-roots Liberals," *Toronto Star*, August 8, 1992, D5.

29. This authority comes from amendments to the party's constitution passed in convention prior to the 1993 campaign.

membership requires payment of a fee of generally between 10 and 20 dollars. This fee effectively serves as a poll tax for would-be voters. Parties also routinely enforce membership cut-off dates, often meaning that only those who are members of the party a month or more before the nomination contest are eligible to participate. Unlike a general election, in almost all instances nomination voting takes place in only one location in each riding. Many voters have to travel substantial distances to participate. Furthermore, contested nomination contests often last for several hours or more as every party requires the winning candidate to receive a majority of the vote (unlike the plurality rule used in general elections), often necessitating several successive ballots. All of this means that in order to participate in a nomination contest, a voter must join a party (often well before the election call), pay a membership fee, travel to a nomination meeting, and sit through several hours of speeches and balloting. Considering this, it is not surprising that relatively few Canadians participate in these contests.

The average attendance at 1993 nomination meetings was 413.³⁰ This number is greatly increased by a few ridings that had very large meetings (three per cent over 2,500). The median attendance was only 201, and one-in-three associations had fewer than 100 voters participate. Most ridings had four major parties contest the 1993 election; thus, if the nomination attendance numbers are generalizable, in most constituencies approximately 1000 voters participated in the nomination of candidates, representing less than two per cent of general election voters. Not only do nomination meetings attract a very small percentage of voters, they also attract less than half of all party members.³¹

One of the reasons few voters participate, other than the accessibility obstacles recounted above, is that these contests very rarely have anything to do with questions of public policy. In a study of candidate nomination in the 1988 election, R. Kenneth Carty and Lynda Erickson reached the following conclusion, “this is largely a portrait of a process typically neither disciplined nor driven by issues or distinctive social groups.”³² The data collected after the 1993 election strongly support this contention. Only one-in-four associations, with a contested nomination, reported an important policy difference among the nomination candidates (there was no significant difference among the parties in this regard). Rather than being contests about ideas, party nominations are typically driven by personality and organization. Candidates first sign up their friends and acquaintances as party members, and then work hard to ensure that these supporters actually turn out

30. The data relating to 1993 candidate nominations are derived from the constituency association survey referenced above. See note 26.

31. One-half of party members attended nomination meetings in 1993, and about one-third in 1988. For the 1988 data see R.K. Carty and Lynda Erickson, “Candidate Nomination in Canada’s National Political Parties,” in Herman Bakvis, ed., *Canadian Political Parties: Leaders, Candidates and Organization* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1992), 114.

32. Ibid, 122.

to the nomination meeting. Most of those participating in nomination meetings do so out of personal loyalty to a candidate and not because of their support for that candidate's policy views.

In fact, nomination voters are given little opportunity to learn a candidate's policy views. In the 1993 campaign, only half of the party associations with a contested nomination held a debate between the candidates. And this number is greatly inflated by the frequent occurrence of debates in the Reform party -- four-fifths of contested Reform nominations included an all-candidates' debate compared with half that number for both the Liberals and Conservatives.

The timing of nomination contests further obscures the role of policy issues. Nomination meetings are usually held before the election is called. Carty and Erickson found in 1988 that "fully 80 per cent of the party nominations had been completed by the time the election was called."³³ This means that nomination campaigns often take place well before the campaign's key policy issues are decided. Similarly, voter interest in the campaign has yet to peak at the time of most nomination contests. The requirement by local associations that voters belong to the party for a period of up to a month prior to the nomination contest in order to be eligible to participate also discourages participation. Potential voters whose interest is captivated during the nomination contests are ineligible to vote unless they joined the party at least a month earlier -- often before the public phase of nomination campaigns begins.

There is evidence that voters are interested in policy discussion during nomination campaigns. For example, as illustrated in Table 1, significantly more voters participated in contested 1993 nominations that included a candidate debate than in those without. Similarly, approximately 25 per cent more voters participated in nomination contests with policy contestation between the candidates than in contested nominations in which policy differences did not play a significant role.³⁴

33. *Ibid*, 112.

34. The mean participation in contests with policy contestation was 670 versus 545 in those without.

Table 1. Voter participation in contested nomination contests by whether a public debate was held among the nomination candidates.

<i>Type of contest</i>		<i>Mean attendance</i>	<i>Median attendance</i>	<i>Cases</i>
Conservative	<i>with a debate</i>	801	700	19
	<i>without a debate</i>	512	450	27
Liberal	<i>with a debate</i>	1042	450	29
	<i>without a debate</i>	534	350	45
Reform	<i>with a debate</i>	499	300	78
	<i>without a debate</i>	127	150	19
Overall	<i>with a debate</i>	669	360	126
	<i>without a debate</i>	443	300	91

(data derived from survey of constituency association presidents following 1993 election).

Conclusion

While Canadians continue to voice support for stronger representation of their concerns in the House of Commons, there is little in the electoral process to help effectuate this view. General elections are fought almost exclusively on the basis of the national parties' labels, platforms and leaders. All of the available evidence suggests that local candidates are at best a marginal factor in general electoral outcomes. Similarly, there is little in the nomination process to suggest that it provides a policy mandate to candidates. Relatively few Canadians participate, the contests are almost always decided on the basis of organization and mobilization of supporters, policy differences rarely play a role, and increasingly national party officials are interfering in the right of local voters to select their own candidates. It is then of little surprise that the role of the MP has not dramatically changed in response to voters' concerns about a lack of responsiveness in Parliament. MPs have no mandate independent from their party, and party leaders thus have little incentive to cede power to their backbench members. Furthermore, there is little reason to expect that granting MPs a more consequential role in the framing of public policy will result in a more responsive House of Commons as there is little opportunity in the current practice for voters to check the performance of the representatives.

Some commitment to policies expressed by nomination candidates, coupled with the

knowledge that a renomination battle may also include policy debate, should encourage MPs to more vigorously represent their constituents' interests in caucus discussions. When party decisions go against them, and the MP feels the need to support the caucus decision, they will then have more incentive to explain to their constituents that vigorous caucus debate took place, what arguments carried the day, and why they will be supporting the caucus decision. Alternatively, when MPs decide to break from party discipline to support their constituents' wishes they will have more legitimacy in doing so. Changing the timing of nomination contests, making voting more accessible, and routinely holding policy debates as part of these contests might help effectuate these changes.

Parties might consider applying some of the recent reforms made to their leadership selection processes to candidate nomination. There has been a steady shift in leadership selection participation from a small group of party elites, to a broader group of committed party activists, to methods today that permit participation by any interested voter.³⁵ Rather than restricting participation to caucus members, or party elites able to travel to a national convention, many parties currently allow any interested voter to vote directly for the leadership candidate of her choice. Participation is highly accessible as many parties allow members to vote by telephone from their own homes, or by ballot at one of many polling locations in each riding.³⁶

The old-line parties, committed to the practice of brokerage politics, may believe they have little interest in having members nominated on the basis of their individual policy preferences. They may fear that a caucus filled with members with independent mandates will make accommodation and compromise more difficult. However, it must be remembered that voters are currently highly suspicious of these practices. With voter confidence in parties and in Parliament consistently low, there is reason for concern about the continued legitimacy of decisions made through these institutions. If nomination processes are opened up and some policy debate becomes routine, MPs may have more incentive to defend their Commons' work, make caucus debates more transparent, and work harder to justify the occasional need for accommodation and compromise. General elections will still be largely about party leaders and policies, and any mandate an MP may claim from a vibrant nomination contest will be tempered by this reality.

35. For a full discussion of the evolution of leadership selection in Canada, see John C. Courtney, *Do Conventions Matter? Choosing National Party Leaders in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1995).

36. For a discussion of the various leadership selection processes currently being used by Canadian political parties, see William Cross, "Direct Election of Provincial Party Leaders, 1985-1995: The End of the Leadership Convention?" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 24:2 (1996), 295-315.