THE LIBERAL CONVENTION OF 1919 AND THE SELECTION OF MACKENZIE KING[1]

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THE expected resignation within the next three or four years of Prime Minister W. L. Mackenzie King as national Liberal party leader has led to widespread speculation and discussion regarding the choice for his successor. Just when Mr. King will choose to retire from the arduous duties of public life, whether before or after the next general election, he has not indicated. Although party stalwarts would no doubt like to see a continuation of his astute and successful leadership the advancing years inevitably bring on the day of his decision and raise the problem of choosing his successor.

That a national party convention will have a good deal to say in the matter is generally accepted; but few people, perhaps are conscious of the fact that Mr. King was the first leader of a major party in Canada ever to be selected by a national party convention. Prior to the national convention of the Liberal party held in Otttawa on August 5, 6 and 7, 1919, Canadian national party leaders had always been selected by the parliamentary group (caucus, cabinet, and retiring party leader having varying degrees of influence over the choice). While Meighen's selection as Conservative party leader in 1921 was not by a party convention since that time the Conservatives have held three national conventions to choose Bennett, Manion and Bracken as party leaders, and party convention choice has become accepted procedure. Thus the progenitor of all national party conventions to select party leaders, the Liberal convention of 1919, deserves special attention.

With Laurier's death on February 15, 1919, there was no natural or logical successor to the Liberal party leadership. Any Liberal Unionist who had returned to the Liberal fold after temporary collaboration with Mr. Borden had the almost insuperable obstacle of Quebec antipathy. Most of the Liberal provincial prime ministers had been Liberal Unionists. A Frenchman and Catholic seemed to be ruled out because of a common feeling among Liberals "that Laurier's successor should be an English-speaking Protestant, not because a French-

1. I wish to acknowledge assistance from the faculty research fund of the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan, which has enabled pursuit of my interest in the field of Canadian politics.

man or Roman Catholic is objectionable but in recognition of the Protestant element which for more than thirty years gave loyal support to a French and Catholic leader."[2]

What to do? On February 24, 1919, the Liberal opposition caucus of the House of Commons selected Daniel D. McKenzie "a notable and hardhitting Liberal member from Cape Breton since 1904, as Opposition leader in the House, pending the call of a National Liberal Convention."[3] McKenzie, both in Parliament and outside, emphasized that he was leader merely for the session, that he was "temporary" leader to act during the interim before the meeting of the party in a representative national convention. In short, for the first time the parliamentary caucus of a major party was abrogating its hitherto exercised power to select the party leader.

Ernest Lapointe, one of the more prominent Liberals at the convention, emphasized the feeling behind this departure. To quote a report of proceedings on the second day of the Convention, "Mr. Lapointe said that Sir Wilfred Laurier had been leader of a democratic party and it was therefore fitting that his successor should be chosen not by a coterie of politicians but by a great democratic convention."[4] The writer has it on most reliable authority that Mr. King, as the party leader selected at the Liberal convention of 1919, has since placed great stock in the fact that he was selected by a democratic convention and not by the parliamentary caucus. On those rare occasions, when the parliamentary party caucus has begun to growl, when the party has been in opposition and the going has been hard, he has more than once silenced the parliamentary wolves by emphasizing that he is the representative and leader of the party as a whole, not merely of the parliamentary group. What the parliamentary group did not create it may not destroy, at least not without ratification by the party "grass roots." The leader may appeal beyond the caucus to the party membership.

There is, of course, a mass of administrative detail in connection with arranging for a national party convention. The Liberal parliamentary caucus had ultimate supervision of convention plans, but it was wise enough to authorize formation of a representative committee to handle the details. On May 26, 1919, a National Liberal Convention Committee was ap-

2. "The Liberal Leadership," *Round Table*, IX (June, 1919), 594.
3. *Canadian Annual Review*, 1919, p. 602.
4. *The World* (Toronto), Aug. 7, 1919, p. 7.

pointed by McKenzie. It included three senators and twelve members of the House of Commons. To provide representation for the provincial viewpoint the Liberal prime ministers of British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were appointed, together with the leader of the Liberal opposition in Ontario and Prince Edward Island. This was the official committee in charge of the convention. But a committee with such a widespread membership and such important individuals as members could not be in constant session, so a Local Committee on Arrangements was set up to handle the smaller details. Made up of Liberals from the Ontario area, enlarged from time to time, it worked through sub-committees with special functions, such as Finance, Publicity and Printing, Transportation, etc. Mr. Andrew Haydon was installed as general secretary of the convention in a special convention office at Ottawa.

The Official Call for the convention was issued at Ottawa pursuant to resolution of the Liberal members of the Senate and the House of Commons.[5] It set forth the purposes of the convention as (1) the drafting, discussion and adoption of the platform of the Liberal party of Canada, (2) the consideration of the question of party organization, and (3) the selection of a leader in succession to Sir Wilfred Laurier.

Representation at the convention was modeled after that of the Liberal convention of 1893, with a few additions. Liberal members of the Senate and House of Commons and Liberal candidates for the House of Commons who were defeated at the last Dominion election were to be automatically delegates. The Liberal premiers and the leaders of the Liberal Opposition in the nine provinces were also to be included, as were the presidents of the Provincial Liberal Associations. The "grass roots" of the party were to have the opportunity of electing at a local riding convention three delegates from each Dominion constituency, also three alternate delegates. Being 1919, the Call was specific in noting the changed status of women in party affairs, reciting that "Women will be eligible for election as delegates in all constituencies." Finally there was a provision that the Liberal members of each provincial assembly, and Liberal candidates defeated at the last provincial assembly election in each province, acting jointly, should select from

5. See *The National Liberal Convention: Ottawa, August* 5, 6, 7, 1919 (Ottawa, n.d.), pp. 6-7. This is the official report of the Convention and appears to have been published by the party The original records connected with the convention are on deposit in the Dominion Archives at Ottawa.

among themselves a number of delegates equal to one-fourth of the total number of representatives in each provincial assembly. Thus constituted, the convention would number somewhat more than 1050 voting delegates. It will be seen that the Call gave an overwhelming representation to the federal and provincial legislative groups. Under the system adopted the "grass roots" of the party were hardly likely to run away with the show.

When the convention opened at Ottawa on August 5, the delegates found that the program of activities had been planned and timed down to the most minute detail. The National Convention Committee and the Committee on Local Arrangements had done a superb job. Printed pamphlets on party organization, on proposed resolutions for adoption in the party platform, and on numerous other subjects were distributed. Each delegate, on arrival in the morning, found in his chair a complete program for the day. Proceedings moved like clock-work.

It was an august body that assembled to select the new party leader. Some 1650 delegates and alternates were present, and included were seven provincial premiers and one premier-elect. About 475 were there from Quebec and 550 from Ontario. These two provinces were in a position to dominate the proceedings.

After selecting an English Chairman from Nova Scotia and a French Associate Chairman from Quebec, Vice-Chairmen were selected from the remaining provinces. The morning session ended with the request that the provincial delegation meet in special caucus rooms and select their representatives on the various convention committees. Representation on the Party Organization and on the Credentials Committee was two per province and one for Yukon Territory, making 19 in all; but the Resolutions Committee was composed of 110, with Ontario and Quebec having 28 and 25 representatives respectively, compared with 8 apiece for the other seven provinces and 1 for the Yukon. Provincial caucus selections for committees and other convention posts were confirmed by the convention.

The procedure for framing the resolutions appears to have been quite democratic. Six p.m. of the first day's session was set as a deadline for submission. While the Resolutions Committee was to have the first shot at any proposed resolution, with power to accept, reject or amend the same, persons having proposals rejected by the Committee were to have the op-

portunity of bringing the resolution before the convention and to debate the question. Proposed resolutions had been solicited in advance of the convention, and a printed looseleaf document containing such suggestions furnished a basis for action of the Committee.

In contrast to American party convention practice, the delegates were not entertained by singers, actresses and bands. While the convention was waiting for the balloting on the party leadership and prior to the Resolutions Committee's final completion of its task, it took up, discussed and voted on individual resolutions. They were not jammed through as a unit. Even between ballots for party leader the discussion went on. In fact, it was in connection with speeches on particular resolutions in the platform that potential candidates for the leadership showed their "stuff" to the assembled delegates. A good speech raised the candidate's stock; a poor one put a damper on potential success.

The convention took up the recommendations of its Committee on Party Organization and with no debate adopted them. A memorandum emphasizing the need for over-all Liberal organization had been distributed to the delegates at the opening session, and the Committee did little more than report a plan conforming to the memorandum. The plan as adopted involved the formation of a National Liberal Organization Committee, of which the leader of the party should be president. In order to integrate the party organization federally there were to be nine vice-presidents, one from each province. Each province was also to be represented by its provincial party leader and five others. The nine vice-presidents and the five representatives were to be selected where possible by the provincial Liberal associations. This newly constituted Committee was to pick a National Organizer to be in charge of the head office at Ottawa. Thus the party convention attempted to exercise some say over the form of party organization. In the intervening years this convention-adopted organization has proved unworkable and has been largely replaced. In practice, Mr. King, as party leader, has always personally selected the National Organizer.

But of course the important business for the convention was the selection of a new leader, and signs of delegate impatience showed long before the time for balloting arrived. The procedure for voting was quite different from the American. The delegates voted by secret ballot, and many safeguards were taken to see that only authorized delegates got ballots and

that the ballots were properly counted. Nominations were in writing, the Chairman of the convention reading off the names of those so nominated. Thus the endless nomination speeches for favorite sons, so characteristic of an American convention, were avoided. The rules provided that balloting should continue "until a candidate receives a majority of the total ballots cast, and thereupon he shall be declared elected. Provided, however, that if no choice is made on the fourth balloting, the candidate receiving the lowest number of votes on the fifth and succeeding ballots shall drop from the contests." It should be noted that voting was to be by individual delegate, not by delegations, as is common American practice. This fact, coupled with use of the secret ballot, makes it hard to analyze the votes to discover the source of a candidate's strength.

Campaigning at the convention for the party leadership was done in a much more circumspect way than has been customary in the United States. While there was considerable buttonholing of delegates, either before or on arrival, in the interests of particular candidates for the leadership there were no elaborate candidate headquarters or high pressure activities evident. The press was well represented and the news wires were kept busy carrying the latest rumors, reporting in dramatic fashion the rapidly shifting temper of the delegates.

One factor making for drama and suspense was the question mark hanging over the Quebec delegation. The English speaking delegates diverged widely as to the man to be backed for party leader. Under these circumstances, from the outset of the convention, public as well as delegate attention was focused on the Quebec delegation. Because of its balance-of-power position all observers recognized that "as Quebec goes, so goes the convention."

Pre-convention news stories did not give Mr. King much chance for the leadership. He had been defeated at the general elections of 1911 and 1917, and was not, at the time of the 1919 convention, a member of Parliament. It at first appeared that the Quebec delegation, which might have been expected to support him because of his loyalty to Laurier in 1917, was going to stay in the background.

> One prominent French-Canadian Liberal M. P. said to *The World* tonight: "We French-Canadians efface ourselves. We admit that the leader must be English Protestant, and therefore, the English Protestants should tell us whom they want."[6]

6. *The World* (Toronto), Aug. 4, 1919, p.1.

Mr. W. S. Fielding appeared to be the leading candidate in preconvention discussions, but unfortunately for him as events turned out, his association with the Liberal Unionists proved to be an Achilles' heel. So strong was the French Canadian antipathy toward the presence of Liberal Unionists at the convention that it was only after heated discussion and by a narrow margin that in a provincial delegation caucus a motion to withdraw from the convention was voted down. Because of Mr. Fielding's strength the Quebec delegates were forced to step into the leadership battle in a definite way. According to the reporter for *The World*:

> This afternoon . . . the French-Canadian delegates held a secret caucus and are said to have declared themselves unalterably opposed to Mr. Fielding . . . tonight they seized the first opportunity to declare their unmistakable preference for Hon. Mackenzie King. Mr. King's appearance upon the platform to move a labor resolution was the long-looked-for opportunity, and it is now conceded that he will have an overwhelming support from the province of Quebec.[7]

At the afternoon session on the third day of the convention the Chairman announced that balloting for leadership was to take place. He informed the gathering that five persons had been nominated, and read off the nomination papers. One nominee withdrew, leaving four to be voted upon. While the ballots, for purposes of convenience, were collected by provinces, they were not counted or announced by provinces. In the words of the Chairman, "there will only be one result and that will be the result of the total of this National Convention." Thus there was no emphasis upon provincial autonomy in the voting. This contrasts markedly with American convention practice, where the unit rule followed by many state delegations, and announcement of results by states on call of the roll of the states, tends to destroy the individuality of the delegate. The secret ballot used in the Canadian convention enables the delegate to preserve his independence if he so desires.

The convention continued its serious discussion of the platform resolutions while the ballots were being collected and counted. After an interval the Chairman announced that 949 votes had been cast and that since no candidate had received a majority of the total votes cast, no choice had been made, and balloting would therefore continue. On this first ballot Mr.

7. *Ibid.*, August 7, 1919, p.1.

King received 344, Fielding received 297, Graham received 153 and Mackenzie received 453. Two ballots were spoiled. On the second ballot Mr. King received 411, Fielding received 344, Graham received 124 and McKenzie received 60 out of a total vote of 939. Nominees Graham and McKenzie now withdrew, and on the third ballot Mr. King was elected by a vote of 476 to 438 for Mr. Fielding, with 914 votes being cast. The defeated candidate for leadership then moved the election be made unanimous, and after a brief speech by the new party leader the convention adjourned.

It is interesting to note that the temporary leader selected by the parliamentary caucus, himself a candidate for the leadership at the convention, did not automatically get the leadership mantle. In future conventions the temporary leader may perhaps be elected permanent leader, but he apparently carries to the convention no priority claim to the office. He has prestige, of course, as well as wide contacts among the federal legislative *ex officio* delegates. But the riding delegates retain ultimate power to go outside the parliamentary group for their choice as leader. Only in a situation where the leader selected by the parliamentary party succeeds when the party is in power and hence becomes prime minister is it likely that his selection will be permanent. In other situations the tradition today calls for independent choice by a representative national party convention.

The Liberals have not held another national convention. Mr. King's forthcoming retirement foreshadows such a second national party convention to select a new Liberal party leader. Will the democratic device of a representative national party convention come up with another successful leader? As the convention organizers dust off the precedents of 1919 they will find little reason for procedural changes.