# PARTY DEMOCRACY
## Ten Years After Charlottetown

**BY** William Cross and Lisa Young

IT IS NOW COMMONPLACE TO HEAR POLITICAL OBSERVERS AND PRACTITIONERS TALK ABOUT A CANADIAN 'DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT.' SUCH COMMENTARY IS REFLECTIVE OF THE DECLINE IN VOTERS' CONFIDENCE IN CANADA'S POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES THAT FIRST BECAME APPARENT IN THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE MEECH AND CHARLOTTETOWN CONSTITUTIONAL ROUNDS.

THE REPORT OF THE 1991 ROYAL COMMISSION ON ELECTORAL REFORM AND PARTY FINANCING (ROYAL COMMISSION) CAPTURED THIS SENTIMENT WHEN IT CONCLUDED THAT «MANY CANADIANS ARE CRITICAL OF THEIR EXISTING POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS. MANY ARE CONCERNED THAT THESE INSTITUTIONS ARE NOT SUFFICIENTLY RESPONSIVE TO THEIR VIEWS AND INTERESTS» (VOL.2, 229). IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE DEMISE OF THE CHARLOTTETOWN AND MEECH LAKE ROUNDS, THERE WAS NEAR UNANIMOUS AGREEMENT AMONG COMMENTATORS THAT THE DEFEAT OF THE ACCORDS LAY NOT ONLY WITH A REJECTION OF THEIR SUBSTANCE BUT ALSO WITH A VALUE CHANGE AMONG VOTERS THAT MANIFESTED ITSELF IN A DECLINE OF DEFERENCE TOWARDS POLITICAL ELITES. AS ALAN CAIRNS HAS WRITTEN, «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» (1994, 229). EMBOLDENED BY THE DEFEAT OF MEECH AND THE AGREEMENT TO HOLD A REFERENDUM ON THE CHARLOTTETOWN ACCORD, VOTERS WERE INCREASINGLY CHALLENGING THE LEGITIMACY OF CANADA'S ELITE DOMINATED INSTITUTIONS OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY. CANADIANS' DISSATISFACTION WITH THEIR POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS WAS EVIDENT IN PUBLIC OPINION POLLING. CONFIDENCE IN PARLIAMENT, POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL PARTIES WAS AT RECORD LOWS. EIGHT-IN-TEN CANADIANS AGREED THAT 'THOSE ELECTED TO PARLIAMENT SOON LOSE TOUCH WITH THE PEOPLE' (DOBELL AND BERRY, 1992) AND SEVEN-IN-TEN BELIEVED THAT 'THE GOVERNMENT DOESN'T MUCH CARE WHAT PEOPLE LIKE ME THINK' (BLAIS AND GIDENGIL, 1991).

It is telling that during this period when Canadians were most frustrated with their political institutions and practices they focused their energies on reform of the party system. When we look back over the past decade we see that this is the one area of political life that has sustained significant change. While many talked about different types of institutional change, there has been little other reform. For example, while voters expressed substantial dissatisfaction with the functioning of parliament, focusing on the concentration of power in the Cabinet and the lack of a meaningful role for MPs, things have only gotten worst in this regard (as witnessed in two new books, Jeffrey Simpson, *The Friendly Dictatorship and Donald Savoie Governing From the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics)*. Similarly, the widespread support for the use of direct democracy has not resulted in significant change. A few provinces have dabbled with referendum and recall legislation, but for the most part these have been failed efforts that do not represent a fundamental shift in the country's political behavior. Similarly, much criticism was leveled at the unelected and non-representative Senate; nonetheless, Senate reform appears as far away today as ever. What clearly did change in the wake of Charlottetown was the party system.

Although Canadians were dissatisfied with the performance of their political parties, they never questioned that parties are essential to Canadian democracy. In fact, a study conducted for the Royal Commission found that three-quarters of Canadians believe that 'without political parties, there can't be true democracy' (Blais and Gidengil, 1991). As Kenneth Carty and his colleagues concluded in *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*, «it is a curious fact that when Canadians get really angry about national politics and the accommodations it demands, dissatisfied with public policy, or disillusioned with their governments, and decide to do something about it, their instinctive response is to start by attacking the party system» (2000, 14). It is because the parties play such a central role in Canadian government – nominating candidates, selecting leaders, setting policy agendas – that grassroots activists routinely focus on parties when seeking democratic reform. That party activists wanted change in the way parties' were conducting their internal affairs was evident in survey data collected after the 1993 election showing that more than eight-in-ten local party associations wished they exercised more influence over party decision making and would like to spend more time considering their party's policy positions (Cross, 1996).

In the aftermath of the defeat of the constitutional accords, one of the first manifestations of the growing voter dissatisfaction was the success of two new political parties. While Reform and the Bloc Québécois disagreed on much, they both capitalized on voters' displeasure with the status quo and a desire for a more grassroots' driven politics. Both of these parties presented themselves as more internally democratic and thus less elite-dominated than the traditional parties, and both parties attracted significant numbers of new volunteers looking for a more influential say in public decision making. Many others, also dissatisfied with the role afforded rank-and-file members, remained with their original parties and worked for change in the norms of party democracy from within them. Whichever route taken, activists were nearly unanimous in their desire for a greater role in party decision making. Some changes came quickly, perhaps most evidently in the method of party leadership selection. Parties moved away from the traditional delegate convention to various forms of direct election of leaders by the parties' members. The norms of party membership changed so that for the first time ever, supporters can join their party directly at the federal level creating an unmediated relationship between the parties and their grassroots activists. Similarly, the parties talked about giving a greater say in policy making to their members. Their record in this regard is more checkered, but all of the parties at least acknowledged a desire by their members to have more influence in the setting of party policy and some took steps to accomplish this.

On the tenth anniversary of the defeat of the Charlottetown Accord, it is timely to evaluate how the parties are doing in terms of being vibrant, participatory organizations and providing their members with a meaningful role in party decision making. To do so, we analyze data collected in the first ever Study of Canadian Political Party Members. This study includes a mail survey conducted in the spring of 2000 of approximately 11,000 members of the five major federal parties. Close to 4,000 completed surveys were returned for a response rate of about 36 per cent. In the analysis that follows we examine whether the parties have become highly participatory organizations and whether members are satisfied with the influence they have within the parties. Our findings are not encouraging. Keeping in mind that less than two percent of Canadians belong to political parties, it is discouraging to find that many are not at all active and that the majority continue to be dissatisfied with the level of influence they exercise within the parties.

We asked members how much influence particular groups *actually have* and how much influence they *should have* in party affairs. We find that members generally believe that party leaders and pollsters have too much influence, while ordinary members and local riding associations have too little. Members believe that they have less influence than any of these other groups. While table one shows these results for all party members, it is worth noting that the trends are similar in all five parties. In each case members believe that they should have more influence than they do.

**TABLE 1**

*How much influence do you think the following actually have and should have in party affairs? (1-7 with 1 being very little influence and seven being a great deal). Means are reported.*

| | actually have | should have | differential |
|---|---|---|---|
| pollsters | 4.7 | 3.0 | 1.7 |
| party leader | 6.0 | 5.6 | 0.4 |
| riding associations | 4.2 | 5.1 | **-0.9** |
| ordinary members | 3.7 | 5.2 | **-1.5** |

Not surprisingly, three-quarters of party members expressed a desire for ordinary members to play a stronger role in important party decision making such as the development

of election platforms. As illustrated in table 2, six-in-ten members believe that party leaders are very important in developing the parties' policies but only four-in-ten believe the same about members, and three-in-ten for the parliamentary caucus. There is, however, an important inter-party difference in this regard. In the Canadian Alliance, members feel they are as influential as their leader. In each of the other parties, members believe leaders are significantly more influential. In the Liberal party, twice as many respondents think the leader plays a very important role than think ordinary members do.

**TABLE 2**

*Percentages indicating that in their opinion the following are very important in developing their party's policies. N=3658*

| | |
|---|---|
| the party leader | **57%** |
| ordinary party members | 38% |
| the parliamentary caucus | 32% |

The deficit of political efficacy found among party members is most stark in terms of whether they believe they have any influence on government decision making. Replicating a question from the 2000 Canadian Election Study, we asked members whether they thought people like them have any say in what government does. We found that a slim majority of members believe they have no say. Surprisingly, in each of the five parties, members are significantly more likely to share this sentiment than are the parties' voters. This means those most engaged in the political process are the least likely to believe they have any influence. This is true even in the governing party. Liberal party voters are 50 percent more likely than the party's members to believe they have influence in government decision making.

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Given the views of party members regarding the efficacy of their political involvement, it is not surprising that they are not particularly active in party affairs. A majority of members spends less than one hour per month on party activity and four-in-ten attended no party function in the year prior to the survey. As we might expect in light of the relatively limited time commitments of most party members, they engage primarily in low intensity party activity. The most common party activities engaged in are the contributing of funds, wearing a campaign button and having an election sign in one's yard. Members are significantly less likely to have engaged in more time consuming activity such as volunteering in an election campaign or serving on a local association's executive. One-quarter of party members has never even attended a local party meeting.

The parties are also having difficulty in recruiting new members. Most of the parties' members have belonged for a decade or more, with only three-in-ten having joined after the 1993 election. This is reflected in the age profile of party members. The typical party member is 59 years old, with 46 per cent of members being senior citizens. Very few young Canadians belong to parties. Only one-in-twenty of the parties' members is younger than 30. There is significant evidence that younger Canadians prefer more direct forms of political participation and our data indicate that they are turning away from political parties in large numbers. And why not? Surely, there is little attraction in toiling away in a party when members believe they have little or no influence on party and public decision making.

We are left with a significant dilemma. In the wake of the defeat of the Meech and Charlottetown constitutional accords, voter antipathy towards the political institutions and practices in this country was at near record highs. In the ensuing months, voters turned their attention to the political parties and significantly changed the complexion of the party system. However, what they did not succeed in doing was creating a system in which parties offer their activists more meaningful ways of engaging in policy development and ultimately in exercising influence in debates over public policy. In this regard, once again the parties have failed the voters. The question that remains is how often will dissatisfied activists continue to turn to the parties and attempt to reform them, when they are routinely rebuffed in these efforts. The answer to this question may lie in the finding that Canadians in general, and young voters in particular, are turning away from party membership in record numbers. The parties' activists are now largely senior citizens who have belonged for a relatively long period of time. At this rate, with a greying membership and little success at attracting new members, Canada's political parties risk becoming member-less shells in another decade or two.

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In our most recent federal election voter turnout reached an all-time low. Political parties are the central players in Canadian election campaigns. The task of engaging voters and encouraging them to participate largely falls to the parties. What the data reviewed above indicate is that the parties are failing to engage even their most ardent supporters let alone voters at large. While the levels of voter cynicism and alienation may have abated somewhat from their post-Charlottetown highs, the sorry state of our political parties coupled with declining voter turnout remind us that all is not well. Efforts to address the perceived democratic deficit might well begin with a revitalization of our political parties at the grassroots level.

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