

PARTY ELECTIONS NEED PROCESS UPDATE

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20 January 2012

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"Delegates divided about creating new class of Liberals at convention

By Jeffrey Simpson

This renewal thing may not be working out so well for the Liberals.

Delegates at the party's biennial convention are divided about adopting a new and radical primary system to elect the next leader that would be the biggest sign Grits are prepared to reinvent themselves.

And the hypothetical image of interim leader Bob Rae raising his arms with Sheila Copps, the new party president, doesn't exactly scream renewal.

On Saturday, Ms. Copps, the former deputy prime minister, defended that view, noting that although she is 59 years old, she's lost 25 lbs, plays a good game of tennis and has a good "sex life."

However, she noted, too, that she is for openness and did push the concept of an open primary system at the party presidential debate Friday night.

Ms. Copps' main rival is Mike Crawley, 42, a former Ontario Liberal party president. He was non-committal as to the process he preferred for leadership selection when asked about it in the debate.

Delegates – and there's about 3,000 Liberals at the convention, of whom 1,000 are under 30, according to party officials – will vote Saturday afternoon on the contentious selection process. It would create a new class of Liberals – supporters, who could vote on leadership, but would not have to pay fees or get involved in riding association work.

It is being pushed hard by the Liberal youth and outgoing party president Alfred Apps as a signal of renewal for the moribund party after the humiliating election defeat last May.

But views are mixed – and strong.

Sarkis Assadourian, a former Liberal MP from Ontario, is against opening up the party this way. He calls it an “Americanization” of the party.

He says everyone shouldn't be given a “free ride”. In order to vote for the leader, he said, people should have to join the party.

“It's not renewal for me. It's backward,” he said.

And former foreign affairs minister Pierre Pettigrew says he has “no strong views” about the issue. However, he doesn't understand why a party supporter or “sympathizer” would not “want to become a member.”

“But maybe I'm too Cartesian,” he joked.

Other delegates are waiting to hear the debate, confused about the proposed system.

Meanwhile, Jim Kane, president of the Winnipeg Centre Liberal riding association, is all for the new system. He's supporting it, he says, because it would give “good exposure” to the party, the leader and candidates.

“The traditional way of doing politics isn't realistic now,” he says.

Liberal youth president Sam Lavoie, surrounded by other youth wearing purple t-shirts that said “Youth for primaries”, told reporters that this is “probably the most significant issue” we are going to discuss this weekend.

“Our hope is that this is a way to send a very powerful signal of renewal,” he said, referring to the resolution being passed.

He wants to be able to show young Canadians that the Liberal Party is “embracing some bold ideas” and has the audacity to push for those ideas.

Earlier Saturday morning, delegates heard from Don Tapscott, a Canadian and internationally-renowned thinker on engagement.

He also pushed for opening up the party, arguing that political parties should fear becoming bypassed by the new social tools and networks of engagement that youth are using now."

