

Liberals need a contested leadership, then a (genuine) downing of arms

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For many months, the media was aflutter over whether Justin Trudeau would run for the Liberal leadership, with most assuming that – if he entered the race – he would win. The same assessment has been voiced by some potential candidates, leading some to state that, if Trudeau ran, they would not enter the race.

The Liberals are lucky to have such a dedicated, energetic and charismatic man as Justin Trudeau willing to put himself forward as leader. But, if the Liberal party hopes to succeed, there are two things that everyone involved — from potential leadership candidates to all those who will vote for the new leader — would be well-advised to consider.

First, those who have indicated an interest in running should not let Trudeau's candidacy alone discourage them from participating in a vigorous competition of ideas and leadership styles. Far from being over, the race hasn't even started yet. The Party and the eventual leader who is chosen will both be better off if a competitive race has taken place.

In 2006, the Liberal leadership race garnered attention for months and mobilized many new members. The result was surprising to virtually everyone. At the outset, very few would have predicted that anyone other than the two perceived frontrunners — Bob Rae and Michael Ignatieff — would win the leadership. Stéphane Dion proved virtually every political pundit wrong. There have been other instances where perceived frontrunners have not come out on top.

In the recent NDP leadership race, Brian Topp was touted as the sure thing, but was bested by Tom Mulcair in what turned out to be a highly competitive race with many candidates proving their mettle.

In the 2012-13 Liberal leadership contest, with a new category of supporters able to vote, the race is more open than ever. We don't know how many people will ultimately vote nor do we know how they will vote. Far from being a foregone conclusion, the outcome could surprise again — it will almost certainly be affected by what is said and done along the campaign trail over the next six months.

An open, engaging, and exciting leadership race will provide an excellent opportunity for the Liberal party to recruit new members and supporters, increase the profile of members of the Liberal caucus and other Liberals who enter the race, and generally prove to Canadians why the party merits their support and confidence.

Regardless of who it is, the eventual leader will be better off for having had the experience of a real leadership race. A leadership race is a more friendly (though, admittedly, not always), extended, version of a general election campaign. It thus provides candidates with an opportunity to sharpen their messages as well as their campaigning and debating skills. A coronation would

eliminate that benefit and risk putting a relatively untested leader in the grueling daily spotlight of a rough and tumble federal campaign, where every mistake is magnified.

Here's the second point that needs to be reflected upon by Liberals. While this, too, is not a foregone conclusion, most partisan Liberals will quietly acknowledge that regardless of who the leader is (or what the party does) the Liberal Party is unlikely to emerge victorious from the next general election. Yes, there are already polls which suggest a massive Liberal resurgence under Trudeau, but few are banking on those numbers holding. At the very least, the Liberal Party has an extremely challenging uphill climb ahead of it. Many believe that a return to official opposition status — with the possible bonus of holding the Conservatives to a minority — would be a triumph.

With this thought in mind, the mindset of party members should be that the candidate chosen to be Liberal leader in April 2013 should be 'hired' to lead them for at least the next two elections.

Win or lose. He or she should not feel compelled to step down or risk being forced out after an electoral loss. The constant shuffling of leaders has been a disservice to the Party and to the Canadian public. The ongoing rotation of leaders reeks of a simplistic "how do you like me now?" approach to political marketing. Paul Martin, Stéphane Dion and Michael Ignatieff each had political strengths and weaknesses (as does the current prime minister, for that matter).

What is clear is that experience in the job and on the campaign trail is beneficial. Whether you like his politics or not, few would deny that Stephen Harper has grown in the job. The BQ's Gilles Duceppe and the NDP's Jack Layton were both mocked during their first campaigns as party leaders. With time, they each became respected for superior political and debating skills.

What this suggests is that Liberals need to commit to and stick with the next leader for at least two elections. If the party's membership (and the media) can get their minds around this concept and be patient enough to allow the new leader time to grow, problems such as a candidate's relative youth (important if the leader selected is Justin Trudeau) will no longer be a factor. Lack of parliamentary or cabinet experience will seem like less of a disadvantage seven years down the road in the 2019 election, when the Liberals' "new" leader will have six years of leadership experience. And, knowing that the party leader won't be run out of town after the next election should temper any divisiveness caused by the leadership race and allow positive growth within the Party.

To sum up, the Liberal Party needs renewal, not just a change at the top. To all those with leadership ambitions or new ideas to advance, don't let Justin Trudeau's formidable presence deter you from demonstrating what you have to offer. You can enrich the discussion and help propel your party toward renewal. Once the race is over, however, everyone — including all the leadership candidates as well as party members — should down arms and let whomever emerges as the leader have an unhindered opportunity to do the job (and grow in the job) without having to look over their shoulder every week.