

**“Something Blue...”:  
Conservative Organization in an Era of Permanent Campaign  
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The organization of the Conservative Party of Canada has inherited traits from both of its predecessor parties, the Progressive Conservatives and Reform/Canadian Alliance. It also has some novel features stemming from the personality of Stephen Harper, the founder and only leader so far of the Conservative Party; his experience with Reform Party and Canadian Alliance populism; and the all-pervasive state of “permanent campaign” that has existed in Canadian federal politics since 2004. The result is a unique configuration of organizational features amounting to a virtual fusion of political party and campaign team. This powerful and effective organizational model helped the Conservative Party bring the Liberals down to minority status in 2004 and defeat them in the elections of 2006 and 2008. Only the future can say whether the Conservatives will continue with this model of organization after Stephen Harper retires and whether other parties may choose to imitate it.

### **The Populist Impulse**

Preston Manning deliberately cast the Reform Party as a neo-populist revival, imitating such Western predecessors as the Progressive Party, the United Farmers, and Social Credit.<sup>1</sup> This meant adoption of direct-democratic policies such as referendum, initiative, and recall, as well as a quasi-delegate theory of the MP’s role, according to which the elected Member was supposed to vote according to “the consensus of the constituency,” at least on controversial moral issues. Manning’s populism also involved a novel approach to party organization. In comparison to other Canadian parties of the late 1980s, Reform exhibited a number of specific characteristics, all of which could be interpreted as populist:

- Reform put great emphasis on formal party membership. Of course, other parties also sold memberships, but Reform kept all membership records in a centrally controlled database held in the national party office in Calgary.<sup>2</sup> The national party employed direct mail to persuade members to renew annually, and also pushed constituency associations to conduct membership renewal drives through face-to-face or telephone contact. In comparison, other parties of that era were more likely to have membership lists controlled by provincial wings and riddled with out-of-date data. The Reform approach produced a membership list that was much more efficient for grassroots fundraising, as discussed in the next point.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and the Conservative Movement*, rev. ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), pp. 20-37.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Flanagan, “Database Party: The 2002 Leadership Campaign for the Canadian Alliance,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 26 (Spring 2003), 8-11.

- The Reform Party was open to receiving corporate and high-end personal contributions, but in practice the party's populist character meant it had little appeal to big corporations and wealthy donors. Reform, therefore, became almost entirely reliant on small donations. Partly this was done face-to-face through the legendary Colonel Sanders Kentucky Chicken bucket passed at every Reform public meeting. Larger amounts of money were raised through direct mail based on the nationally controlled database. John Laschinger had made direct mail an important part of Progressive Conservative fundraising in the 1970s,<sup>3</sup> but the PCs under Brian Mulroney also continued to raise large amounts of money from the corporate world. Reform, being almost entirely reliant on grassroots fundraising, pushed direct mail even harder and also started to use telephone solicitation—first at the constituency level, later under control of the national party. Thus, out of necessity Reform took the PC heritage of grassroots fundraising and made it even more productive—in effect, the lifeline of the party.
- The first Reform Party constitution put control of all party affairs in the hands of a so-called “Executive Council.” This was not a “National Council,” advisory to the Leader, as was typical of other parties, but a full-fledged management body. The Leader was a member of the Executive Council but did not have any independent authority over party affairs. For example, only Reform's Executive Council, and not the Leader, could veto a constituency association's choice of candidate.<sup>4</sup> Also, there was no Reform Fund, appointed by the Leader and independent of Executive Council, to conduct fundraising and manage the party's financial affairs. Rather, the constitution provided for a Finance Committee chaired by the Vice-President (Finance) of the Executive Council to manage all the party's financial business.<sup>5</sup>
- The constitution did not provide for any intermediate bodies between the constituency associations and the Executive Council—no regional or provincial councils, no special-interest associations for youth, women, seniors, First Nations, ethnic groups, etc. It was the ultimate in flat organization. A couple of attempts to create local area councils from the bottom up failed badly. One of my first memories upon going to work for the party in May 1991 was getting caught in a fight between the Executive Council and the Winnipeg Area Council, which ended with dissolution of the local council and numerous resignations and expulsions from the party.
- Another populist provision of the Reform Party constitution was approval of important decisions by membership referendum. Section 8 provided for non-binding membership polls as well as binding referendums (with a two-thirds decision rule) that could be initiated either by the Executive Council or by a petition signed by 15% of the membership.<sup>6</sup> The party actually held three referendums—one in 1991 to authorize expansion east of the Manitoba border, and two in 1999-2000 as part of the transformation of Reform through the United Alternative into the Canadian Alliance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Laschinger and Geoffrey Stevens, *Leaders and Lesser Mortals* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1992), 168-170.

<sup>4</sup> Reform Party of Canada, Constitution, 1987, s. 4(d).

<http://contentdm.ucalgary.ca/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/reform&CISOPTR=237>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 5(g).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Preston Manning, *The New Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1992), p. 288; *idem*, *Think Big: Adventures in Life and Democracy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2002), pp. 284-288, 296-298.

There was also a Canadian Alliance party referendum in 2003 to approve its merger with the Progressive Conservatives.<sup>8</sup>

- Election of the leader by membership ballot would have been a logical procedure for the Reform Party, but that was still a relatively new and experimental idea when the party was founded in 1987.<sup>9</sup> Hence the party's constitution provided for, and Preston Manning was elected by, a delegated convention. However, leadership election through membership voting was adopted when Reform transformed itself into the Canadian Alliance in 2000, and that method was used to select Stockwell Day in 2000 and Stephen Harper in 2002.
- The "Statement of Principles" adopted at Reform's founding meeting in Winnipeg in October 1987 asserted the following: "We affirm that political parties should be guided by stated *values and principles* which are shared by their members and rooted in the political beliefs of Canadians."<sup>10</sup> Guided by this principle, Reformers treated their policy manual, or Blue Book, almost as Holy Writ. Once adopted at an Assembly, wording could only be changed at a subsequent Assembly, and enormous energy went into debates over wording. Interim policies could be adopted by the Executive Council but had to be presented to the biennial Assembly at the next opportunity.<sup>11</sup> The leader, MPs, and candidates always insisted that they, like all other members of the party, were bound by the Blue Book. In other words, the leader of the Reform Party did not have the freedom historically exercised by the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties to adjust policy for the needs of campaigning and governing. If Reform had ever been in government, that creedal attitude toward policy would probably have been relaxed, but the party never got that opportunity.

Reform, then, was more populist—in the sense of having a flat organization combined with membership control of business—than the other parties with which it competed in the 1990s. The true situation, however, was far more complex than the triumph of populism, for behind the scenes Preston Manning exercised a remarkable level of control over the Reform Party. He used his prestige as the founder and only leader of the party to structure decision-making processes and control the agenda for discussion. For example:

- He drafted key documents, such as the "Statement of Principles" embedded in the Blue Book.
- In effect, he chose the officers of the Executive Council. The party's constitution provided for at-large election of members of Executive Council, after which they were to choose their own chairman and other officers.<sup>12</sup> But this election took place at a Council meeting in which Manning led a discussion of responsibilities and then recommended names for the various positions. Dissenters on Council were isolated and, if necessary, expelled, as happened to the Winnipeg group. Later Manning used similar methods in

<sup>8</sup> Bob Plamondon, *Full Circle: Death and Resurrection in Canadian Politics* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2006), p. 336.

<sup>9</sup> William Cross, "Direct Election of Provincial Party Leaders in Canada, 1985-1995: The End of the Leadership Convention?" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 29 (1996), pp. 295-315.

<sup>10</sup> Reform Party of Canada, Blue Book, 1988, p. 26.

<http://contentdm.ucalgary.ca/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/reform&CISOPTR=197>.

<sup>11</sup> Reform Party Constitution, 1987, s. 5(f).

<sup>12</sup> Reform Party Constitution, 1987, s. 5(b) and 5(c).

caucus, and ended up expelling more members than any other national leader that I can remember.<sup>13</sup>

- Manning managed the organization through “chosen instruments,” whom he supported unconditionally. Cliff Fryers became his indispensable chief organizer, assisted by Rick Anderson and Gordon Shaw. Titles and job assignments sometimes shifted, but these three formed a stable core around Manning, supplemented at various times by others.
- Working with Chief Policy Officer Stephen Harper, Manning provided careful guidance to policy development. Grassroots members were indeed asked to submit policy resolutions for consideration at Assemblies, but Manning and Harper would edit and consolidate the resolutions, as well as introduce their own to fill voids that they perceived. They would also intervene at crucial points to provide leadership if floor discussions seemed to be going askew. The Blue Book was democratic in the sense that its provisions were all approved by majority vote at Assemblies; but once approved, it was binding and in that sense served as a form of control over members.
- Manning took a personal hand in wording all important resolutions, such as the questions that went to membership in the three referendums, or the non-binding poll questions that members often received with their *Reformer* newsletters and fundraising solicitations.

Especially in his early years of leadership, Manning often described the Reform Party as a populist movement expressing “the common sense of the common people.” Yet his real view as expressed in private was more nuanced. I often heard him say, “The function of the political party is to mediate between expert and public opinion.” Although he attributed that saying to Vaclav Havel, for whom he had tremendous respect, I could never find the source in Havel’s writings, even after much searching.<sup>14</sup>

I argued in *Waiting for the Wave* that Manning’s behind-the-scenes leadership was an essential complement to his populism. As William Riker showed in his classic *Liberalism against Populism*, populism is intellectually incoherent.<sup>15</sup> There is no such thing as “the will of the people.” When I was working for Manning, we had some interesting arguments on this issue. He seemed to believe that the will of the people was something real, not just an artifact of the decision-making processes. But, following Riker, my view is that what exists in reality is a large number of people with divergent preferences. For democratic decision-making, everything depends on the processes by which those preferences are revealed and aggregated. The same set of preferences can often give rise to very different decisions, depending on how those preferences are weighed and counted. Agenda control—the formulation of questions for decision and the structuring of processes for making decisions—is the key to managing populist movements.

I don’t think Preston Manning had ever read Riker’s book or any similar works on Kenneth Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem, but he had an intuitive flair for agenda control. Even as he spoke about “the common sense of the common people,” “the consensus of the constituency,” “the will of the people,” and other populist shibboleths, he was masterfully managing consultative and decision-making processes within the party to give him the results he

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Flanagan, “Man overboard: Jake Hoepfner’s ouster makes it five and counting,” *Globe and Mail*, August 12, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> William H. Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and Theory of Social Choice* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1988 [1982]).

was aiming at. He could also be a very competent rhetorician; at least in certain settings, he could persuade listeners with his long, carefully reasoned speeches. But his real mastery was not in rhetoric but in what Riker called heresthetic—the art of dividing, of setting up alternatives for decision-making.<sup>16</sup>

During Stephen Harper's invaluable apprenticeship to Manning as Chief Policy Officer of the Reform Party, he learned how to manage a populist movement. He used to grumble privately about Manning's manipulations, but he was absorbing the lessons. Indeed, he ultimately ended up with a view of leadership far more aggressive than Manning's, after he saw the Canadian Alliance experience of how populism could get out of control.

Under the leadership of Stockwell Day, who lacked Manning's manipulative abilities, populism dissolved into factionalism, and the Alliance seemed on the verge of tearing itself apart. Harper saved the Alliance by winning the leadership race in March 2002, but he now had to deal with a National Council most of whose members owed nothing to him and some of whom, including the president George Richardson and a few other members, were quite suspicious. The president's philosophy seemed to be that his job was to protect the party and its constitution from the leader. Matters came to a head in fall 2002 when, as Harper's chief of staff and acting on his orders, I fired George Richardson's son Adam as a regional organizer in Atlantic Canada. The firing precipitated an all-out power struggle on Council that lasted for about four months until Harper was able to put together a coalition to depose Richardson and take control under the presidency of (now Senator) Don Plett.<sup>17</sup>

Little got into the media about this power struggle, but it was a draining, time-and-energy-consuming experience for Harper. It convinced him that he, as party leader, should never again be subject to a governing council and led, I believe, to many features of the constitution adopted by the Conservative Party of Canada after the 2003 merger. This desire to exercise unhampered control over the party was also congenial to Harper's basic personality, which is dominant and controlling in all matters in which he is personally involved.

### Harper's Revision

Regardless of what Bob Plamondon says in *Full Circle*,<sup>18</sup> the merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives was Stephen Harper's project. He conceived the idea, raised it first in public, and hounded Peter MacKay for months until the deal was consummated. The merger was done on the basis of an interim constitution, and approval of the final version was put off until the March 2005 convention in Montreal, which meant that Harper had a great deal of influence over its drafting once he won the leadership of the new party. As the Conservative Party's only leader to date, he has exercised the same sort of sway over it as Preston Manning did over the Reform Party in its early years.

With respect to populism, the Conservative Party bears some important resemblances to the Reform Party but even more important differences. Let us look first at the similarities.

- Grassroots fundraising is still paramount. Of course, all parties have had to renounce high-end personal contributions, as well as corporate and union donations, as a result of Jean Chrétien's Bill C-24 (2003); but Harper turned the screw even further by using the

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<sup>16</sup> William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> Flanagan, *Harper's Team*, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> Plamondon, *Full Circle*, p. 287.

*Accountability Act* (2006) to reduce the limit for personal contributions from \$5,000 to \$1,000 (adjusted for inflation). In effect, he imposed a populist model of grassroots fundraising upon all parties (though highly tempered by the public-support provisions of C-24). Under the new regime, the Conservatives raise far more money than any other party, partly because of the earlier Reform experience in grassroots fundraising, and partly because of technological advances. The key to Conservative success is the unification of fundraising with mass voter identification, using a custom-designed data base (CIMS) that integrates all these forms of information. It is populism with a technological edge.<sup>19</sup>

- The national organization is still flat, consisting only of the Electoral District Associations and the national-level entities (National Council, Conservative Fund, and National Office). With one exception, there are still no regional or provincial layers of organization. The one exception is a provincial Conservative organization, which Harper finally acceded to after years of resisting demands from Quebec. The organization, however, is quite weak. Unlike the Quebec wing of the Liberal Party of Canada, it does not have its own budget, director, and council. There is still no Conservative youth wing, women's organization, or commissions for special interests.

The differences from the Reform era are more profound:

- The financial side of the party, including both budgetary management and fundraising, has been taken away from Council and given to the Conservative Fund Canada. Although this was the practice of the former Progressive Conservative Party, the new Conservative Party has not simply resurrected the older approach. The Progressive Conservative Fund was a large body with dozens of members, recruited mainly for their ability to contribute to corporate and high-end personal fundraising, which relies heavily on networking. The Conservative Fund, in contrast, has only a handful of members, all of whom are appointed by the Leader, subject to the ratification of council.<sup>20</sup> In practice the Fund is dominated by the Chairman, (now Senator) Irving Gerstein. The 2005 Montreal convention saw a floor fight over this arrangement, which some saw as giving too much unchecked power to the Leader.<sup>21</sup> In the end, a compromise was negotiated, according to which the Conservative Fund makes a quarterly report and also presents its annual budget to National Council for purposes of information, but is not controlled by or accountable to the Council.<sup>22</sup> At the 2008 Winnipeg convention, there was an unsuccessful attempt to make National Councilors members of the Conservative Fund.<sup>23</sup> The reality is that the Leader controls the party through the Fund, especially its Chairman, and through the National Director of the Party, who reports in budgetary and fundraising matters to the Fund, especially to its Chairman.

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<sup>19</sup> Tom Flanagan and Harold J. Jansen, "Election Campaigns under Canada's Party Finance Laws," in Jon H. Pammett and Christopher Dornan, eds., *The Canadian Federal Election of 2008* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2009), pp. 194-204.

<sup>20</sup> Conservative Party of Canada, Constitution, s. 9.8, <http://www.conservative.ca/media/20090205-Constitution%20-e.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Flanagan, *Harper's Team*, pp. 204-206.

<sup>22</sup> Conservative Constitution, ss. 9.2 and 9.3.

<sup>23</sup> Kady O'Malley, November 15, 2009. <http://www2.macleans.ca/tag/cpc-conventionwatch-2008/>.

- The Reform Party’s “Executive Council” has been replaced with a “National Council,” as indeed had already happened in the Canadian Alliance. The significance of the name change is that Council is no longer a true executive body, responsible for running the party. As described above, the party is run largely by staff accountable to the National Director, the Chairman of the Conservative Fund, and the Leader. The council is now more of a governance than an executive body. It approves the appointments of the National Director and the Conservative Fund, receives regular reports from these authorities, and comments on the annual budget proposal. Its most important area of independent activity concerns membership and EDAs. It establishes rules for membership, monitors the status of constituency associations, sets rules and deadlines for nomination contests, and arbitrates the disputes that frequently arise at the grassroots level in all parties.<sup>24</sup> But unlike the Reform Executive Council, it does not have a formal role in establishing party policy (except indirectly through the conventions that it helps organize), conducting communications, raising money, or planning election campaigns.
- Like the Reform Party, the Conservative Party of Canada has a policy book approved by membership delegates at national conventions. Called the “Policy Declaration,” it was first adopted in Montreal in March 2005 and amended in Winnipeg in November 2008.<sup>25</sup> Like Reform’s Blue Book, it is a mixture of general principles and specific policies, but it has nowhere near the same hold over members’ imaginations. It is available on line but not in pamphlet form for members to carry around and distribute. I joined the Reform Party in 1990 after a graduate student gave me the Blue Book to read, but I doubt that happens very often today. Members no longer regard the Policy Declaration as sacred writ. Both in government and in opposition, the Leader has been accorded wide latitude to develop policy for strategic purposes. Items from the Policy Declaration often appear in one way or another in campaign platforms, but no one expects perfect correspondence. In other words, the Leader is free to develop or alter policy for political purposes. In that respect, the Conservative Party is very much like the “old-line parties” that Manning and Reformers used to criticize. As an example, the 2008 Conservative national convention voted to repeal s. 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act, which gives the Canadian Human Rights Commission jurisdiction in certain free speech disputes. Harper and the Conservative government have not rejected that resolution, but neither have they adopted it. It may or may not be adopted for the next campaign; either way, it will be a strategic decision of the leadership, not simply obedience to the views of the membership.

### **Permanent Campaign**

This tendency toward centralized control of the Conservative Party stemming from Harper’s personality as well as his experience of Reform-style populism has been reinforced by the emergence in Canada of the permanent campaign, in which political parties seem at all times to be as much preoccupied with campaigning as with government and opposition.<sup>26</sup> Canada has seen an extraordinary amount of campaigning in the first decade of this century, as shown in Table 1:

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<sup>24</sup> Conservative Constitution, ss. 8.7.1 and 8.7.2.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.conservative.ca/media/2008-PolicyDeclaration-e.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Tom Flanagan, “Political Communications and the Permanent Campaign,” in David Taras et al., *How Canadians Communicate IV*, forthcoming.

**Table 1**  
**Canadian National Political Campaigns, 2000-9**

<u>National Election Campaigns</u>	
<u>Date</u>	<u>Winner</u>
2000	Liberals
2004	Liberals
2005-6	Conservatives
2008	Conservatives
<u>Leadership Campaigns</u>	
2000 (Canadian Alliance)	Stockwell Day
2001-2 (Canadian Alliance)	Stephen Harper
2003 (NDP)	Jack Layton
2003 (Greens)	Jim Harris
2003 (Progressive Conservatives)	Peter MacKay
2003 (Liberals)	Paul Martin
2004 (Conservatives)	Stephen Harper
2004 (Greens)	Jim Harris
2006 (Greens)	Elizabeth May
2006 (Liberals)	Stéphane Dion
2009 (Liberals)	Michael Ignatieff

In fact, campaigning has been even more prevalent than the bare facts of the table indicate, for there has been a persistent sense that the minority governments elected in 2004 and afterwards were liable to be defeated at any time. Thus federal parties have had to maintain non-stop election readiness since early 2004, when Paul Martin became Liberal Prime Minister and indicated he would soon be asking for an election. The last ten years have deeply affected Canadian government and political culture. After so many years of continuous campaigning, federal politicians are like child soldiers in a war-torn African country: all they know how to do is to fire their AK-47s. In short, we are living in a period of “permanent campaign,” to borrow the phrase first coined in the United States to describe the non-stop interweaving of politics and government.<sup>27</sup>

Political campaigning has many resemblances to the military campaigning of warfare, one of which is the importance of unified command and discipline. The permanent campaign environment has thus led to centralizing innovations in Conservative Party organization.

Perhaps the most important of these is the creation of a permanent position of campaign manager reporting directly to the Leader. The older pattern for Canadian parties, when elections happened only every four or five years, was to appoint a campaign committee a year or so before

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<sup>27</sup> Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann, eds., *The Permanent Campaign and its Future* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institute, 2000); Corey Cook, “The Contemporary Presidency: The Permanence of ‘The Permanent Campaign.’ George W. Bush’s Public Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32 (2002): 753-764; Catherine Needham, “Brand Leaders: Clinton, Blair and the Limitations of the Permanent Campaign,” *Political Studies* 53 (2005): 343-361; Peter van Onselen and Wayne Errington, “The Democratic State as a Marketing Tool: The Permanent Campaign in Australia,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 45 (2007): 78-94.

an election was expected. There might also be a separate committee or task force to prepare the platform, as Paul Martin and Chaviva Hošek did with the Liberal Red Book to prepare for the 1993 election.

In the Conservative model, however, everything is centralized. There is no campaign committee. The platform is developed by the Leader's policy advisers, who report directly to him. Other aspects of the campaign are prepared under the direction of the manager, who again reports directly to the Leader. Fundraising is carried out by direct-mail and telemarketing contractors working with the National Director and Chairman of the Conservative Fund. Because there is no need to network with corporate and high-end individual donors, there is no semi-independent corps of well-connected fundraisers who might exert their own influence on the structure of the campaign.

In this situation of always being prepared for political warfare, message discipline is naturally carried to great lengths. Loose lips sink political ships. Conservative staffers and operatives almost never talk to the press and risk loss of employment if they do. MPs religiously follow official talking points. Even, maybe I should say especially, Ministers are carefully controlled through the PMO.

Policy development within the party also has had to take second place. The 2005 Montreal convention was all about policy because it was necessary to have a policy manual for electoral purposes, to deflect opponents' charges that Harper was pursuing a "hidden agenda." But after that, national conventions were repeatedly postponed because of electoral exigencies. When one was finally held three and a half years later in Winnipeg, there was some discussion of policy, to be sure, but it was a secondary feature of the event. Election readiness has largely replaced policy development as the party emphasizes fundraising, campaign training, and building grassroots teams for signage, door-knocking, and phone banking.

Just as chronic warfare produces a garrison state, permanent campaigning has caused the Conservative Party to merge with the campaign team, producing a garrison party. The party is today, for all intents and purposes, a campaign organization focused on being ready for and winning the next election, whenever it may come.

## **Conclusion**

Certain populist aspects remain in the current Conservative model of organization, especially reliance on grassroots fundraising and a flat organization with no intermediate structures between the national office and the EDAs. But these populist relics don't confer membership control over the party leadership; in fact, they work in the opposite direction. The national office and Conservative Fund control the grassroots fundraising, which tends to give the national party fiscal leverage over the EDAs. And the absence of intermediate structures means there are no points of refuge in which opposition to the leadership could coalesce.

By any standard, the party is highly centralized. The Leader appoints the Conservative Fund, which oversees all the party's business affairs. The Leader appoints the campaign manager, who reports directly to him rather than to a campaign committee. There is an official policy manual, but the Leader is free to adopt virtually any policy he wishes for strategic purposes. In any case, the party is focused on election readiness rather than policy development. Message discipline is carefully enforced at all levels, and a high level of secrecy surrounds internal deliberations. The overall atmosphere is almost military, as befits an era of permanent campaign.

The biggest question for the future is whether this “garrison party” will survive the specific circumstances of the present, i.e., the leadership of Stephen Harper and the need for constant election readiness in a period of minority government. The Conservative fusion of political party and campaign team has been extraordinarily effective in doing what all the pundits thought was impossible—overthrowing the Liberal dynasty and installing a Conservative government. The Liberals have already started to follow the Conservative example in several respects, e.g., revising their constitution to assert national control over membership rules and grassroots fundraising; enforcing more effective message discipline; running negative ads between writ periods. If the era of permanent campaign and its arms race logic continues, the Conservative organizational model may well persist and even be imitated by other parties trying to survive in the Darwinian world of electoral competition.

And yet the garrison party model is not without its own internal problems. In all parties, some members are happy with non-stop electoral activity, but others see the party as an organization for representing their views and developing policy. Members of this latter type may turn away from the party if it becomes nothing but an electoral machine. Thus, it is possible that too long a period of constant election readiness may exhaust a party and undercut its effectiveness even in purely electoral terms.