

What a disaster the Ontario PC leadership race was

The grandees of that party should note that the appearance is that the legitimate leader was ejected in a cooked-up dawn-raid smear campaign

by Conrad Black



Ontario PC leadership candidates Tanya Granic Allen, Caroline Mulroney, Christine Elliott and Doug Ford pose for a photo after a debate in Ottawa on Feb. 28, 2018. Justin Tang/CP

The Ontario Progressive Conservatives have just had an astonishing upheaval. The former and legitimate leader, Patrick Brown, not a galvanizing chief but a plausible shadow-premier who had grown steadily as leader of the opposition, was given the high-jump on allegations of misconduct with two

women. Brown denied the charges, which were uncorroborated, and which even if true, certainly did not disqualify him from leading his party. His support evaporated; even though the accuracy of the reporting was soon called into question, and the subsequent behaviour of the complainants was not overly righteous. Brown departed without fighting his corner very vigorously and the almost Stalinist haste with which he became a non-person was a bit hokey (the party said this week he would not be welcome to run as a PC, and he subsequently announced that he would not be running at all). A leadership contest was quickly arranged against the deadline of a June 7 election, and in the now faddish mode of the Canadian Conservatives, it was a virtual convention conducted through a cyber-process.

These are a boring and dehumanized exercise at the best of times, drained of any drama or possibility for eloquence. Granted, eloquent convention speeches are rare and most conventions in Canada and the United States in the last 50 years have been deadly challenges to the stamina (and often sobriety) of participants, and an assault on the sensibilities of anyone with an aversion to corny and mindless flannelling. On this occasion, the Progressive Conservatives, as they still call themselves in deference to the merging of the federal Conservatives and the old western Progressive Party in 1942, produced an impossibly complicated voting method, in which all paid-up members received a code with a jumble of letters and numbers in it. It was impossible to distinguish 1 from L or I, and zero from the letter O or Z from 2. The voter was not electronically advised of a particular error, only at the end of putting in the code and taking a best guess where there were these alternatives, would they discovered they had not put in the right code. There were so many variables, it was frequently impossible to chase down the right combination to insert.



Former Ontario Conservative leadership candidate Patrick Brown

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Attempts to clarify a vote were met by clogged telephones at party headquarters. My wife, Barbara Amiel Black, joined a political party for the first time in her life (and despite appearances she has been eligible for that distinction for many years), to vote for our friend Caroline Mulroney or our cordial acquaintance, Doug Ford. (I thought all four of the candidates were quite presentable in different ways). It was obvious a couple of days before the voting cut-off that the majority of eligible voters were unable to penetrate the thickets of the selection system and the decision was going to be made by an absurdly small minority of the membership, and according to criteria of luck with a simple voting code, or an inside line to getting help from the very few people capable of giving it.

On March 8, less than 48 hours before the results were to be announced, Doug Ford sent out a mass-email that stated that "The leadership vote has been corrupted." He elaborated that "The same group of insiders that oversaw rigged nominations over the past two years has made a two-tier system that favours their hand-picked candidates over regular party members ... The party sent verification codes by email to a select group of VIP insiders." Ford, Mulroney and Tanya Granic Allen all asked for a court-ordered extension of the time to qualify to vote, as fewer than half of those who had the right to do so had navigated the maze of the procedure. Barbara managed to get her vote counted after hours on the telephone, two physical visits, and invocation of the good offices of both the Ford and Mulroney campaigns. She would not have succeeded if she were not a well-known personality to those whom she reached.

Former Ontario PC Leadership Candidate Caroline Mulroney is pictured in her campaign office, in Toronto on Friday, March 9, 2018. Chris Young / THE CANADIAN PRESS

It is a nonsensical voting process anyway – constituencies the PC's have no chance of winning in a general election and very few association members have an equal weight with safe districts with thousands of active party members in them. When the unrepresentative tabulation method is capped by an inaccessible selection procedure, all for the purpose of a bloodless, soulless, snoozer of a revelation of the result as calculated by unanswerable and unverifiable machines entrusted to reapply second and third choices on ballots, with three of the four candidates crying foul even before the result is rendered, drama and even credibility are trampled in the dust by malfunctioning automation tainted by old fashioned ballot-stuffing. It is a parody of a Tory effort to scale the heights of new technology, a sitcom.

I have no standing to say whether Ford's allegations were accurate, but there seems to have been some combination of skullduggery by an unidentified clique with universal, equal opportunity, no-fault, officious bungling. The truth is somewhat academic, as Ford, having emerged narrowly as the winner, has not pressed the point. But the grandees of that party should note that the appearance is that the legitimate leader was ejected in a cooked-up dawn-raid smear campaign, a coup; and that a faction with considerable influence on the primitive party machinery did not make a serious effort to get a fair result.



The new leader of Ontario's Progressive Conservative party is no longer being challenged by his main rival, who refused to concede for nearly a day. Ontario PC Party leadership candidate Christine Elliot participates in a question-and-answer session at the Manning Networking Conference in Ottawa on Saturday, Feb. 10, 2018. Justin Tang / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Fewer than half of those eligible apparently voted – and this is not like a general election as all those eligible to vote

had to go to some lengths to get that far, not just be enumerated on their door-steps. And a large number of those who doughtily persevered were rewarded by being confounded at the polls. It looked more like a Latin American, or east European, or even old-time U.S. metropolitan election. (Theoretically, electoral officers are still searching for missing ballot boxes in Chicago for the 1960 presidential election, when John F. Kennedy ostensibly defeated Richard Nixon in Illinois by 9,000 votes out of more than five million cast, and said, in reference to Chicago's mayor Richard J. Daley, and his running mate, Senate leader Lyndon Johnson of Texas, "Thank God for a few honest crooks.")

Surely Ontario's Conservatives have not got to such a pass as that, but the failure of Christine Elliott to join the other candidates in requesting a few days or a week's deferral of the count to ensure a fully enfranchised leadership electorate was unbecoming. I don't think she personally would participate in a coup against her leader or a putsch against her rivals, but the whole sequence of events has been fishy, and only without the appearance and aroma of a dead fish because the loudest protester in fact won. If Elliott had won, they would be a severely divided party. As it is, Ford should win the general election. He took 34 per cent of the vote in the Toronto mayoral election four years ago (out of 980,000 votes cast), 11 points ahead of the NDP's Olivia Chow and only six points behind John Tory at the head of what was effectively a Liberal-Conservative coalition. He should swarm the Liberal stronghold in Toronto in the provincial election and maintain Conservative strength elsewhere.



Whatever his shortcomings, Rob Ford cut Toronto's expenses, the gravy train as he called it, at a rate of \$640 million for a full mayoral term. With his brother, Ontario gets all Rob's good points and few of his weaknesses Ernest Doroszuk/Postmedia Network

Whatever his shortcomings, Rob Ford cut Toronto's expenses,

"the gravy train" as he called it, at a rate of \$640 million for a full mayoral term. With his brother, Ontario gets all Rob's good points and few of his weaknesses. The top three contenders, and Rod Phillips, should be the nucleus of a strong government in just three months. It is an opportunity for the province, and a sweet turn of fortune for the Ford family. But the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario should never go through a farce like this again.

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