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Libs shut down their highly-touted renewal commission

Some criticize Grits for closing up renewal commission policy shop, but federal Liberals say renewal commission has run its course.

By Bea Vongdouangchanh

The Liberal Party has shut down its renewal commission and buried its reports without much fanfare or public discussion.

In doing so, the party has failed to take advantage of the renewal process to have a good public policy debate, says one of the renewal commission task force chairs.

"As one of the chairs of the report, I was excited by the prospect of speaking to more party members about the ideas contained. No one would expect that all of the ideas would be worthwhile, but you would hope that among 32 reports there would be a couple of ideas that could spark an interest in constructive debate," said Peter MacLeod, a public system design consultant who was the non-partisan chair of the civic engagement task force.

Tait Simpson, a Liberal Party spokesperson, told The Hill Times that the renewal commission "ran its course," which ended at the party's December 2006 convention in Montreal. Twenty four reports or working documents submitted before the convention deadline were made public and circulated prior to the convention and then handed over to the policy and platform committee co-chairs to form the basis of the party's election platform, Mr. Simpson said.

"It's not something that continues. It's not ongoing," Mr. Simpson said. "It was a one-off that started in April 2006 and terminated and finished in December 2006 and there was one report that was published in January 2007 because it came in late. It showed that there was a public policy discussion going on within the party."

Mr. MacLeod said, however, that the discussion should be ongoing.

"Regardless of how many reports were received by the convention they nevertheless represent a very good effort made by hundreds of Liberal Party supporters," he said. "Surely their use didn't expire on the night of the convention. There's a useful conversation still to be had... The ideas themselves may or may not be great but it's more about a precedent that it sets for a party. It's a habit of mind and action. A lot of people believe in the idea that the Liberal party is a party of ideas and promotes discussion. But you can't do that when you take your biggest exercise in policy development in at least five years and once the convention is over simply say, 'Oh well, we're not making those easily accessible.' "

Liberal MP Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, N.B.), who co-chaired the convention and is the policy and platform committee vice-chair, said the Renewal Commission was a successful process. He said he agreed somewhat with Mr. MacLeod, but not with his conclusion. "I certainly don't share the view that they were ignored at all. It's obvious that they contributed both to the policy process of the convention which we held as part of the leadership convention in December and as the platform development," he said, adding however, that the conversation is indeed continuing.

Mr. LeBlanc said that the policy process was predicated on a possible early election that was supposed to be triggered last month. Because the party had to have an election platform in place for the potential spring election, the reports and the resolutions adopted at the convention were quickly integrated. Now that the election fever has died down, the party will look at ways to involve more people in the policy process, Mr. LeBlanc said.

"We were working on a scenario which said we needed to have a platform document ready by last month. We prepared for that consequence. If it appears now that the election may not be in the coming days or weeks, we think there's an opportunity, we the platform group, think there's an opportunity to go back to the party and try and structure some round tables or some conversations," he said. "We'll use the time to engage the party membership, is what I'm trying to say. Until last week, it wasn't clear that we would have that chance. So in that sense, he's right to say that it's an ongoing process. By no means is it an

end to the platform process. Those that worked on the renewal commissions will be able to contribute in some way. We're still working on what that ongoing engagement will be. If we have the time, we'll use it properly."

In a letter to Renewal Commission chair Tom Axworthy, Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion (Saint Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) wrote that the party achieved what it sought to do. "The time, energy and resources you allocated to the renewal commission over the last year have served as a basis for real change within our party. Your efforts have enriched the proud traditions of our shared vision, policies and history," Mr. Dion wrote in the letter.

Mr. Simpson said the renewal commission was "healthy" for the party. "All of our members take a different level of interest in the policy process but we had resolutions go from the riding level to the provincial level to the national convention where they have to pass up to four votes to finally become a priority policy resolution and I think that process is a healthy one for our party and is one that is strengthened with our constitution. So the renewal commission helped in augmenting that process and giving the policy process a higher profile in our party."

After 13 years in government, however, the Liberal membership felt a distance between the party's policy process and the government's, Mr. LeBlanc said. For this reason, the renewal commission "reignited" the policy discussion and it was "an essential" part of moving forward.

A Liberal Party member involved with the commission, who did not want to be identified, said for the most part that the process failed. The person said that the right questions were not asked and therefore there was no real "renewal" for the party. Rather than asking what the party meant by "renewal" and setting up a process that would generate ideas from the public, the party asked an elite group of people to provide the answers. Some of the task force chairs included former deputy prime minister Anne McLellan, newly-nominated Liberal candidate and son of a former prime minister Justin Trudeau, constitutional lawyer Deborah Coyne, astronaut Marc Garneau, journalist Andrew Cohen, former ministers David Collenette, Martin Cauchon and Tony Valeri and former New

Brunswick premier Frank McKenna.

Mr. MacLeod argued that the party is still using old methods of policy making which are turning people off of politics. "You can't be a party for ideas and then not share good ideas with the public," he said. "It's all about the culture of the party and where you think ideas come from and who you think should be involved in development of policy. All the parties have extraordinarily outdated policy development mechanisms, the whole passing a resolution at a convention."

He said this problem extends to all parties. "If you want to influence policy, you join a riding association, right? They tell you that. The only influence you have is who your candidate is. It's not a place for policy influence but that's what all the parties keep telling us. They keep saying, 'Oh if you care about policy, go join your local riding.' That's crazy. If you care about policy, if you care about new ideas, you go work for a think tank, you publish an op-ed in The Globe or The Star or you create a website. And until the parties figure it out and integrate this new reality, they're going to face these awkward moments. This isn't how civic engagement is done," he said. "The failure to circulate PDFs is a failure to understand the reality of policy making in an age of Facebook and Google. If the ideas are bad, the people will take care of it. If the ideas are good, the people will take care of it, but stop pretending that you're in charge."

Liberal MP Garth Turner (Halton, Ont.) agreed that the major parties haven't clued in to how policy should be made. "There's almost a technophobia around this place and where we now have the ability to communicate with literally thousands of people a day so easily, I don't see any of the political parties doing it," he said. "I know from my blogging how many people I get coming to visit me everyday and they're all full of ideas, so I think it makes sense for a major political party to use these technological tools to canvas literally millions of people, and we ain't doing it."

Technology has allowed more people to get involved more quickly and has changed how politics and policy making works, Mr. MacLeod said, adding that parties, not just the Liberals, need to recognize that and do it

across party lines.

"Do you think any talented, young, 23-year-old in this country who cares about the environment right now thinks that the best way to influence public policy in this country is to take out a Liberal membership, wait for a riding meeting, convince the members of the riding's policy committee to draft the language that they think is appropriate and then take that from the riding level to a provincial level and from the provincial level to the federal level and then at some point have the leader look at this resolution that was developed in, I don't know, Chatham, Ont., and say, 'My god—this is 2009 by now of course—my god, isn't this clever? It's not how it works,' " he said.

"It may have been how it worked before we were blessed with cheap long distance and the internet. Policy development has been profoundly changed by our mobility and our connectivity. So it means that you can have exercises like the renewal commission where 32 people are suddenly designated with this task, they go forth, they come up with ideas and they circulate them. And then if you have enough people chattering about it, then it gets the attention of the people in power. There's no formal ratification process. That's not how Al Gore put climate change on the world's agenda. He did it by creating a PowerPoint presentation, delivering it a thousand times and making a movie and having millions of people pay attention. That arguably is how policy will get made in the 21st century and whether you like it or not, you can't ignore it," Mr. MacLeod said.

Mr. Turner said that parties are afraid of what people will say if they embrace the technological means to discuss policy with Canadians. Although there could be "a lot of ruffraff" by asking 30 million people what they think of a certain issue, the exercise could be useful.

"We care around this place what polls say. A national poll is 1,000 people. I mean, excuse me but, you know, that's nothing. Yet that makes huge headlines and influences party policy," he said. "We all have the ability now. All the major political parties have hundreds of thousands of people on their email database. We should be asking all those people what they think."

Mr. LeBlanc said that one of the priorities for the platform and policy committee is to use the internet to the party's advantage, with online discussions, virtual town hall meetings and a potential "policy super weekend."

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