



## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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### Behind-the-scenes battle raging in B.C. Liberal Party

By JUSTINE HUNTER  
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#### *Potential contenders for Leader Gordon Campbell's job vie to set terms for the struggle*

Potential successors to Premier Gordon Campbell are playing coy this week, but behind the scenes there is an intense battle to eke out an advantage by shaping the terms of engagement.

On Saturday, the 21 members of the B.C. Liberal party executive will decide when and where the leadership vote to replace Mr. Campbell will be held.

The crucial decision about how ballots will be counted may take longer. The party is locked into a "one person, one vote" mechanism - now the party's constitutional lawyer is reviewing just how much flexibility can be wrung from that wording.

Until those details are worked out, most leadership hopefuls will keep their intentions as quiet as possible.

Energy Minister Bill Bennett said the voting system must be changed so that the vote isn't entirely controlled by party members from the densely populated Lower Mainland.

"If we don't fix this, this has more potential to split the party than any single thing, including a leadership race," he said in an interview on Tuesday.

Mr. Bennett has been lobbying for change since the summer, and had planned to bring his resolution to the party's policy convention later this month. But Mr. Campbell's decision last week to step down forced the party to scrap that convention, leaving the proposal in limbo.

"I was told the party would change it," he said. Whether a new system can be brokered before a leadership convention is part of the internal debate now taking place.

The timing is important, too.

Prospective candidates from outside the party may prefer a longer lead time before the vote, giving them more time to sign up new members to create an instant base in the party.

But there are many voices calling for a convention as early as possible - which under the current rules would be the second week of January.

Last week, Mr. Campbell indicated he will remain in control while the government prepares the February budget and throne speech reflecting initiatives and policies he has set in recent weeks.

"The more people start to think life after Campbell, the more they will want to make sure there isn't a throne speech and budget while he is still Premier," said former party strategist Greg Lyle, who now heads the Innovative Research Group.

Mr. Lyle said the party now needs to "hit the pause button" and allow the next premier to put together a new direction. "It's a great opportunity to rebuild the party," he said. "If they go and listen, they are going to find a lot of upset people - and those people are not going to stop being upset if the government continues with the status quo."

Mr. Campbell said he is stepping down because his unpopularity over the introduction of the harmonized sales tax is dragging his government down and making it impossible to have a clear-headed debate about the merits of the tax.

But by insisting that his caucus and cabinet continue to support his policies, Mr. Campbell may be forcing an exodus from his cabinet.

"I don't think you could act as a cabinet minister and a leadership contender," said Mr. Bennett, who said he intends to resign from cabinet if he decides to make a run for the leadership.

Education Minister George Abbott agreed: "If I make the difficult decision to run, I would be tendering my resignation that day."

Mr. Abbott, like Mr. Bennett, comes from a largely rural riding where the one-member, one-vote system would be a drawback.

He said he won't take part in the debate but acknowledged the decision will influence whether he runs.

"I know they are wrestling with it," he said. "For everyone who is considering a run at this, there is a political calculus that we undertake for ourselves - where we are from, where our strengths may be, what kind of coalition might we build.

"The terms of engagement are an important part of that, but it's only part of the calculus."

Since the moment Mr. Campbell made his announcement last week, prospective candidates have been feeling out support from allies and gauging financial backing. The expertise needed to run a leadership campaign will likely be drawn from federal Liberal and federal Conservative circles, reflecting the provincial party's ever-fragile coalition.

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