

Political conventions top-of-mind right now

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By MIKE O'NEILL

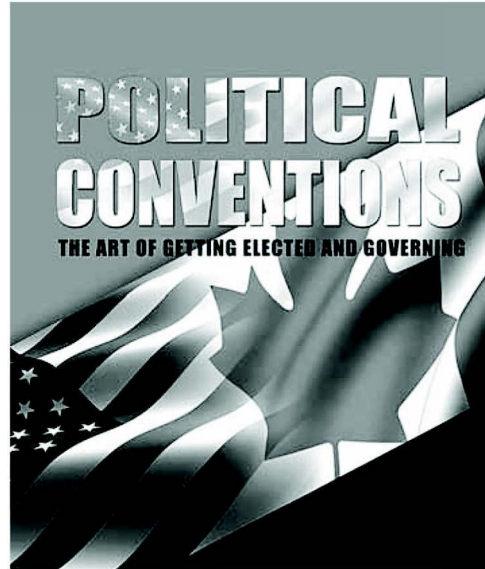
The Liberal Party of Canada is heading to its convention on April 30 and two Ontario political parties are choosing new leaders. Political conventions are top-of-mind, and Allan Bonner's *Political Conventions: The Art of Getting Elected and Governing* tackles conventions among a far broader range of subjects. This book is a manual on political branding and communications based on the author's many perspectives as political staffer, journalist, educator, and communications consultant.

If all politics are local, as the saying goes, then Allan Bonner would argue that all politics are also personal. Bonner treks through the New England political landscape during the U.S. primary season in 2008. He visits campaign offices and events and meets campaign workers, offering us his first-hand perspective on how campaigns deliver or fail to deliver their message to individual voters, reporters of greater and lesser influence, mass television audiences and unknown Canadians who have wandered into their offices.

Bonner's interactions range from the humorous to those that cause you to cringe. The author wanders the inner sanctums of one campaign office, ignored by staff, and his request for information is answered, "Just what is it that you want?" Any candidate or campaign manager will wonder if their message is being subverted on the front lines of their campaign.

The author's first political boss, Mel Lastman, makes a cameo appearance. A master of self-branding, Lastman is recalled as practising a signature so legible that it could be read by senior citizens and people learning to speak English. The former mayor then finds endless opportunities to sign and send letters to constituents.

The book is a series of essays organized into four chapters; 'Media Conventions' is a primer on all aspects of interacting with media; the essay on the political apology is good enough to tear out and stuff in your candidate's coat pocket, should it ever be needed. 'Campaigning Conventions' are cautionary tales of the author's personal interactions with campaigns and organizations that have served to undermine their message. The lesson: communications starts with the person answering the phone.



'Speaking Conventions' is a handbook for anyone trying to reach an audience through a microphone. Bonner tackles the presidential tone, where gravitas is reinforced conversational style, short sentences and message repetition—the same as for the rest of us. He reviews and rates inaugural speeches by every U.S. President from Washington to George W. Bush. Some surprises await – George Washington's speech was lacklustre and he took the opportunity to raise the issue of his compensation.

The final chapter 'Political Conventions' reveals Bonner's long attention and study of U.S. politics. Along the way he tackles some myths – did Kennedy really score a decisive win over Nixon in the 1960 television debate? Was Nixon the consummate villain or a talented leader?

An underlying theme of *Political Conventions* is that the conventions of political discourse have been shaped by many campaigns and many centuries. Technology changes more quickly than human nature and the practitioner should be aware of both.

An entertaining and edifying read, leave *Political Conventions* on your desk to be consulted every time the phone rings or before booking a first interview to reveal your platform to the world.

Political Conventions: The Art of Getting Elected and Governing, by Allan Bonner, Sextant Publishing 2009. 258 pages.

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