

High Discipline, Low Cohesion? The Uncertain Patterns of Canadian Parliamentary Party Groups

JONATHAN MALLOY

The Canadian House of Commons has very disciplined parties even by Westminster standards. Yet Canadian parties are traditionally notable for ideological heterogeneity in both their parliamentary party groups (known as ‘caucuses’) and wider membership. This traditional pattern of high discipline but limited ideological cohesion has been partly challenged in the 1990s by new parties, but remains strong. The relationship between party discipline and party cohesion remains contested in the legislative literature and the Canadian case presents an unusual situation of tightly disciplined but ideologically heterogeneous parties.

This article begins with an overview of the national party system and the state of party discipline and cohesion in Canada. It explores ‘discipline’ and ‘cohesion’ as different and overlapping routes to party unity – one negative, one more positive – and demonstrates how Canadian parties are generally very disciplined but lack strong cohesion, at least in ideological ways. We then look particularly at the new Reform/Canadian Alliance Party and its partial departure from traditional patterns, as well as recent leadership challenges within party caucuses. The article suggests that these patterns of discipline and cohesion are linked to the highly fluid grassroots membership of Canadian parties, but further research is required to clarify the relationship.

THE PARTY SYSTEM

The Canadian federal party system is best understood in two periods – before and after 1993. Before 1993, the system featured two dominant brokerage parties alternating in power – the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives – and a third, smaller and more ideologically focused social democratic party, the New Democrats, which never formed a government. Similar party systems were found in most provinces, with some variation.¹ However, in

Jonathan Malloy is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Carleton University.

the 1993 general election, two new parties – the Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois – rose to prominence, surpassing but not eliminating both the historic Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties. The national party system thus changed from three to five parties in parliament, a configuration that has endured through elections in 1997 and 2000.

Interpretations of the post-1993 party system have been difficult, partly because of initial widespread expectations that the five parties would eventually consolidate into a smaller number of parties. This has not happened.² The apparent permanence of the five-party system suggests that each party fulfils different needs and reflects distinct bases of support in the Canadian political system. The dominant Liberals remain true to their brokerage model, winning support in all regions with a blurred, shifting philosophy of governing that spans the ideological centre. The newer Reform Party is more ideologically focused, drawing nearly all its parliamentary seats from western Canada and presenting a right-wing, populist agenda of lower taxes and limited government. In 2000 the party changed its name to the Canadian Alliance, as discussed below. The Progressive Conservatives are also on the political right, but without Reform/Alliance's populist approach, and are closer in style to the national, brokerage Liberals than the regional and ideological Reform/Alliance. The New Democrats are a moderate social democratic party, with a reasonably clear profile but significant intra-party struggles over increasing or decreasing its ideological salience. Finally, the Bloc Québécois is primarily oriented to one issue – Quebec sovereignty – with less ideological clarity in other matters, although its position is generally to the left of the governing Liberals.

How do these differences play out in the parties' parliamentary caucuses, and particularly in their levels of discipline and cohesion? We see below that, despite their different political bases, the parties have been largely similar in their levels of parliamentary discipline, although Reform/Alliance does appear somewhat more tolerant of dissent. However, parties are more distinctive in their ideological breadth, with the newer parties appearing more focused than the two traditional parties.

DISCIPLINE

Voting in the Canadian House of Commons is highly disciplined. The vast majority of divisions (recorded votes) feature no dissents from party lines, and defeats of government motions by dissenting members are extraordinarily rare. Indeed, voting is so generally predictable that data collection by researchers is difficult and very limited.³ The most comprehensive recent study available, by Joseph Wearing,⁴ finds that the 35th Parliament (1993–97) saw dissent in any party in 160 of 735 divisions (21.8 per cent) – or, in

other words, nearly four-fifths of votes saw zero dissent. Thirty two of the 160 divisions with dissent were on private members' bills, which are minor and rarely whipped, making the effective rate of dissent by any member only 17.4 per cent of all other votes. Dissent was even lower among government members, who dissented in 86 whipped divisions, 11.7 per cent of the total number of divisions. And yet this modest level of dissent was the highest in two decades, with the three previous parliaments since 1980 experiencing total dissent levels (including private members' bills) of 17.4 per cent in 1988–93, 7.7 per cent in 1984–88, and 6.3 per cent in 1980–84. While more recent complete data are not available, trends since 1997 do not appear observably different.

Dissent is modest in size as well as frequency. Wearing notes that the total number of dissenting votes in 1993–97 (that is, votes by all members on all divisions), totals 1,618 – with only 741 total dissenting votes when private members' bills are excluded. For a parliament then of 295 MPs in 735 divisions, this is a very modest level of dissent per member. Again, this was an increase from previous years (the earlier 1988–93 Parliament saw 680 dissenting votes excluding private members' bills). Dissenting votes tend to be cast by a minority of members – Wearing finds that 46 MPs in 1993–97 cast at least ten dissenting votes. As noted above, dissent does not present a serious threat to government motions; indeed, even a handful of dissenting MPs are often literally front-page news.

Strong discipline is common in Westminster-style parliaments. However, the Canadian House of Commons features institutional practices that entrench party whips' power more than in, for example, its British counterpart. The Canadian House has never had a system of line whips indicating the relative significance of votes and the consequences of dissent – a structural feature that at least implicitly accommodates the possibility of dissent from the party line. Instead, every legislative vote is considered at least nominally to be a vote of confidence in the government, although only some votes are explicitly designated as such.

The proceedings of the House and its committees are predicated exclusively on party. It is established, although not always written in the standing orders, that opportunities to ask questions or participate in debates are controlled by party whips, giving the Speaker no discretion to recognise members not on the parties' approved lists.⁵ Similarly, places on committees are not available to members without party affiliations, and committees themselves are more controlled and partisan than British select committees (there being no separation between standing and select committees in the Canadian House). Chairs have always been drawn from the government side, except for the Public Accounts Committee, and until recently were designated by the government whip rather than freely chosen by committee members.

Members are regularly moved between committees by the whips, so few spend more than two or three years on the same committee. While committees do have genuine freedom to investigate topics of their choice, inquiries commonly break down along party lines; separate majority and minority reports are very common, often extending to separate reports from each opposition party.

This regime is maintained by parties through the positive and negative methods common to most legislatures. Positive reinforcement is found particularly in the weekly private caucus meetings held by all parties, in which MPs have the theoretical opportunity to speak their mind. These closed caucuses remain largely impenetrable to researchers, but do appear to allow genuine discussion and dissent, serving as a positive force for generating enthusiasm, party solidarity, and indeed *cohesion* – although not necessarily ideological cohesion, as we shall see in the next section.⁶ Promotions to ministerial or critic (that is, shadow minister) responsibilities are more likely for consistent loyalists, and a range of lesser positions – most notably the minor job of parliamentary secretary – appear almost to exist solely as rewards for good behaviour. The usual treats of office space, travel opportunities, and other resources and perquisites are also important to both reward and punish members.

Dissent on key votes may lead to denied promotion and the loss of desirable committee placements, either immediately or over time. As noted above, Commons committees experience heavy membership turnover. However, members with particular interests and a record of loyalty may retain their placements for several years, while dissenting members are likely to be reassigned to committees far from their areas of interest. Beyond committees, however, party leaders have surprisingly few substantive instruments to punish dissenters short of expulsion.

Occasionally MPs are suspended or expelled entirely from the party caucus, but suspensions and expulsions are more likely to be for personal misconduct than dissenting votes or other substantive policy disagreements.⁷ Only three MPs have been expelled from their parties in recent years for casting dissenting votes – two Conservatives in 1992, and a Liberal in 1996 (each time, coincidentally, for voting against the national goods and services tax); additionally, a Bloc Québécois MP was suspended in 2003 for speaking against party policy. No rule prevents members from leaving their party caucus on their own, nor is it particularly difficult for MPs to cross the floor and join another party, as happens about once a year on average.⁸ Party leaders do hold an ultimate weapon: in a general election all candidates' nomination papers must be signed by their leader. But while this power was used in 1988 to deny a member's re-nomination on ethical grounds, it has never been used to punish members for their parliamentary voting record. Still, this

draconian punishment may have an important anticipatory role in deterring possible dissenters.

Are all parties equally disciplined? Again the available data are limited, but Reform/Alliance members appear more likely to dissent from their party on major votes, while MPs in the other 1993 arrival, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), appear least likely to dissent. While these parties had virtually identical parliamentary numbers from 1993 to 1997,⁹ Wearing's research finds a total of 259 dissenting Reform votes over 58 divisions in that period, but only 21 BQ dissenting votes in nine divisions for the entire parliament – a significant difference. Now the Liberal Party, with 177 MPs, had a much larger 1,310 dissenting votes in 118 divisions; it was three and a half times larger than Reform but experienced five times as much dissent. However, 32 of the Liberal divisions and 782 of the Liberal votes were on private members' bills, the one occasion when the party whip is normally relaxed and MPs vote relatively freely. In contrast, the majority of Reform dissents were on government bills and motions.

Qualitative observations also support the notion that Reform/Alliance MPs dissent more often on substantive votes, and are less likely to be disciplined for doing so. This is consistent with the party's populist approach and official platform, which emphasises fidelity to constituency interests. However, dissent is hardly rampant, and members appear to escape discipline at times by seeking prior approval to vote against the party line. For example, in 1995 three Reform MPs from urban constituencies voted for a government gun control bill, despite the party's overall opposition to the legislation. Three rural Liberal MPs voted *against* the bill and were removed from their standing committees; in contrast, the dissenting Reformers were not disciplined. But the Reform votes had previously been authorised by the party leadership after the members argued convincingly that their urban constituents favoured the bill. Unauthorised dissent still tends to attract disciplinary measures.

In short, Canadian parliamentary parties are generally tightly disciplined, although some more than others. But parties' tight hold on members' behaviour does not necessarily mean high levels of cohesion, particularly in terms of ideological bonds. The well disciplined Liberals and Conservatives tend to contain a hotchpotch of ideological views and interests, while the less disciplined Reform/Alliance actually exhibits more ideological focus. The following section explores the historic ideological heterogeneity of Canadian political parties, both inside and outside parliament, before focusing more directly on the case of the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance.

IDEOLOGICAL COHESION

Canadian political parties may be disciplined, but both their parliamentary cohorts and overall membership often lack ideological focus. Historically

the two major parties, the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives, acted as cadre brokerage parties seeking to fit as many interests and views under their banner as possible to gain electoral majorities. In such a system ideology was less important than building winning coalitions. Electoral positions were formed and discarded by elites for strategic and tactical purposes, often with little consultation of parliamentary caucuses and almost no input from the national membership.¹⁰

Consequently, both parties lacked, and continue to lack, ideological consistency and harbour a good many contradictions, even in their name in the case of the 'Progressive Conservatives'. Leadership contests in both parties continue rarely to centre on ideological or even broad policy choices. Rather, contests are largely won on less tangible qualities of 'electability' and the winner's likely ability to broker a sufficient coalition of interests to win national power.¹¹ In turn, elections have rarely featured clear policy choices;¹² party platforms are generally vague and it is typical following elections for governments to embark on major new policies not mentioned in the general election and with little consultation of parliamentary caucuses. For example, in 1994–95 the governing Liberal Party embarked on a programme of deep spending cuts and reduced transfers to provincial governments, after winning the 1993 election by campaigning against the similar but less drastic policies of its Conservative predecessor.

Why is Canada noteworthy? Ideological laxity and opportunistic elites are found in many political systems and broken election promises are a universal phenomenon. However, Canadian parties are particularly skilled ideological chameleons. Indeed, it is remarkable to see how many key national policies have been enacted with limited caucus consultation, much less electoral ratification. In addition to the 1994–95 spending cuts, the Liberals also campaigned in 1993 against the North American Free Trade Agreement and the national goods and services tax, only to support both after winning power. As mentioned above, one MP was expelled from caucus for demanding that the government fulfil its pledge to abolish the goods and services tax; another was removed from his committee chairmanship for voting against the spending cuts not mentioned in the party platform. The most compelling explanation for the Canadian tradition of ideological heterogeneity is elites' fear of national polarisation over French–English relations and other ethnic and regional cleavages. Hence Carty *et al.* note that 'ideological flexibility and an overarching desire to maintain national unity by fostering accommodation among different regional, linguistic, ethnic and other groups... has been a perennial feature of Canadian party politics since Confederation' in 1867.¹³ This perceived need to hold the country together underlies much of the concentration of power and ideological lurches of Canadian politics.¹⁴

Until 1993, the Liberal–Progressive Conservative struggle relegated more ideological challengers to minor roles. The third national party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), enjoyed legislative representation as early as 1940 (under its original name of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)), but has rarely won more than a tenth of Commons seats. The CCF/NDP also displays ideological mushiness – changing its name in 1961 to reflect the moderation of its socialist roots, and enjoying its greatest success in the 1970s and 1980s with an approach that Bradford and Jenson label ‘contentless populism’ – a milder style of brokering that grouped together opposition to established interests without a corresponding set of clear policy proposals or plans for governing.¹⁵

How did this brokerage party system affect the ideological cohesion of parliamentary caucuses? Again we lack systematic data. But there is little doubt that the lack of ideological focus and consistency in the national party system translated into lower levels of ideological cohesion in caucuses. Instead, cohesion was and is maintained through other means, particularly the weekly caucus meetings and personal friendships and networks. Because both parties focused more on brokering interests than the consistent representation of particular ideological perspectives through their parliamentary caucuses, MPs in the Liberal and Conservative parties as a whole commonly possessed strikingly diverse ideological outlooks, with considerable overlap between the two parties.

And yet, as we have seen, these parties’ traditions were, and continue to be, ones of strong party discipline with little dissent. A likely explanation is that an absence of ideological cohesion necessitated tight discipline to keep members in line and project a common position, whereas greater ideological bonds might have allowed parties to tolerate modest dissent in peripheral areas. This is supported by the recent work of Kam, who provides a strong argument that party discipline is more important in determining legislators’ behaviour than MPs’ individual ideological preferences. Kam suggests the trend is similar in both the UK and Canada, although it should be noted that his evidence also finds greater dissent in Britain and that British MPs exhibit greater coherence on a left–right scale, making the situation less contrived than in Canada.¹⁶

The trends are different for the new, post-1993 parties. Both the Bloc Québécois and Reform Party explicitly campaigned as alternatives to the brokerage style of the then governing Progressive Conservatives, and Reform also challenged the tight party discipline of the House of Commons. And the BQ and Reform/Alliance do exhibit greater ideological focus than the historic major parties, attracting grassroots support based on their ideological positions. Research by Cross and Young¹⁷ on activists in all parties found that members of the two newer parties, as well as the New Democrats, are more

likely to join for policy-related reasons, while grassroots members of the older Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties are more likely to join for other reasons not necessarily linked to ideological positions, as we shall see below. The ideological purity of the BQ and Reform/Alliance is also assisted by their continuing opposition status (whereas New Democrat victories at the provincial level have given that party a more pragmatic streak).

What does this mean for party caucuses? While we cannot draw a direct link between the preferences of these activists and those of legislators within the party caucus, such evidence does suggest a different mode of thinking between the old and new parties and differences in their caucus cohesion. On the other hand, Kam argues that party still remains more important than ideological cohesion in influencing the votes of MPs in new parties – particularly in the BQ, where members may hold similar views on sovereignty but range widely on the left–right scale.¹⁸

As the last point suggests, the new parties are different from one another. We have seen how from 1993 to 1997 the Reform Party, as it then was, experienced the highest level of substantive dissenting votes in the House of Commons. But the Bloc Québécois experienced the lowest (a total of only 21 dissenting votes – less than one act of dissent for every two members). This is congruent with the different parties' platforms. Reform/Alliance has consistently stressed parliamentary reform and greater independence for its legislators, while the Bloc Québécois has placed comparatively little emphasis on these issues.

Indeed, the Bloc stands as an exceptional case because of its central focus on Quebec sovereignty, which masks greater disagreement on more general economic and social issues. And while all BQ members support the concept of a sovereign Quebec state, they disagree considerably on the preferred relationship with the Canadian federation. In contrast, Reform/Alliance provides a more interesting perspective to illustrate the tension between party discipline and ideological cohesion.

THE REFORM PARTY/CANADIAN ALLIANCE

When the Reform Party arrived in force in 1993, it attempted to behave differently than other parliamentary parties in its discipline and cohesion. Its leader, Preston Manning, deliberately sat in the third rather than first row of his party's benches in the House, to emphasise a more consensual style of leadership. Similarly, the title of caucus whip was replaced with 'Caucus Coordinator'. Instead of appointing a shadow cabinet of frontbenchers, the caucus formed a series of policy 'cluster' committees of which any member could speak for the party. The party also emphasised populist austerity, declining

perquisites from business airfare to complimentary haircuts, with other practices such as giving advance notice of its parliamentary questions.

As noted, Reform MPs also voted against their party more than other legislators. But despite much rhetoric about the need to relax party discipline, the party never established clear criteria to determine how and when to apply discipline. The aforementioned 1995 gun control vote thus stands more as an exception than a precedent, and over time some of Reform's distinct features have begun to fade. Many of the early practices, such as Manning's odd seating arrangement and the absence of single shadow ministers, lasted only a few months before they were discarded as clumsy and unworkable. Other symbols faded more gradually, such as the party's enforced austerity.

The absence of more recent data precludes us from saying whether past levels of dissent have continued in the Reform Party, although qualitative observations suggest the basic trend have continued. However, the ideological cohesion of the party may be weakening. Carty *et al.* suggest that the party has 'a somewhat schizophrenic history in which Reform has presented a different face to the electorate in successive elections'.¹⁹ In order to win votes outside its western regional base, the Reform Party over time softened many of its earlier positions, largely in the hope of winning the remaining pockets of Progressive Conservative support across the country. Party economic, social, and linguistic policies became more vague and underdeveloped, as the party began to slip into the Canadian opposition pattern of focusing on tactical skirmishes rather than developing and updating coherent plans for governing.²⁰ This evolution culminated in the more drastic change possible in 2000 when Reform underwent an elaborate exercise resulting in a decision to transform into an entirely new party, the 'Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance', continuing the Canadian love of contradictory party names.²¹ With these steps the party moved closer towards a traditional Canadian brokerage party, deliberately moderating or downplaying its positions in order to build a successful winning coalition of diverse interests across the country.

The Canadian Alliance remains ideologically distinct in the orientations of its grassroots membership²² as well as its parliamentary caucus. But the relationship between discipline and caucus *ideological* cohesion is not always clear. The party's approach to dissent appears to be driven more by a desire to maintain internal order than concern over ideological purity. This was illustrated as early as 1996 when two Reform MPs made statements intolerant of racial and sexual minorities and a third MP criticised her two colleagues for these statements. All three were disciplined, symbolising a growing emphasis on caucus order rather than allowing MPs to range free. In later years, the party has taken a somewhat stronger, but still equivocal line against intolerant statements by members.²³ Thus, while the current Alliance Party does appear less disciplined and more ideologically coherent

than the traditional Canadian political parties, it does not provide a grandly different picture.

LEADERSHIP REVOLTS

Understandings of Canadian parties were further confused in 2001–2, when Alliance leader Stockwell Day and Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien resigned under pressure from their own parties. While leaders have been forced out before, Chretien's downfall was the first time a sitting prime minister was forced to resign by his own party. The coincidence of struggles in both parties suggests changing patterns and more assertive parliamentary caucuses. But events differed in both parties, possibly reflecting their different climates of discipline and cohesion. While several Alliance MPs temporarily left their party to protest against Day's leadership, no Liberals did so – just as dissent levels are generally higher in the Alliance than Liberal Party. Furthermore, although some Alliance members challenged Day's ideological views, conflicts over his leadership centred primarily on his tactical decisions. In contrast, the internal Liberal struggle did see more of an ideological split, as the opposing forces were generally perceived to be more right-wing than the Chretien camp within the Liberal brokerage coalition.

The precise role of the caucuses is unclear. Canadian party leaders are chosen (and deposed) by the overall party, either in convention or mass vote by every member depending on the party. MPs have no formal caucus mechanisms to challenge party leaders, making revolts difficult and confused. Day remained leader months after the MPs left caucus; his eventual resignation being precipitated by the overall party executive. As noted, no Liberal MP departed over Chretien's leadership – the key challenge mechanism, a formal party-wide vote, depended on the grassroots membership and constituency associations, which may or may not be controlled by their MPs. These revolts against party leaders are thus significant but difficult to interpret. Do they follow existing patterns of behaviour in the two parties? Or are they indicators of change in their discipline and cohesion? Evidence is mixed.

CAUSAL FACTORS

The above pages show the mixed situation of Canadian parties. The Liberals and Conservatives generally exhibit tight discipline but are cohesive more in personal than ideological terms, while Reform/Alliance has higher levels of dissent and greater ideological cohesion, although not radically different. The Bloc Quebecois is highly disciplined and cohesive on its key issue, as are the New Democrats on most issues. Recent events surrounding the Liberal and Alliance leadership have further complicated the picture.

Can we find causal factors for this mixed situation? It is suggested that the traditional trends of high discipline and lower cohesion, with variations among the newer parties, may be conflicting effects of the generally weak bases of Canadian parties – particularly their fluctuating membership and lack of strong policy development. Drawing particularly from research by Cross and Young, we can put forward several hypotheses that together may explain how party membership patterns produce contradictory effects on party discipline and cohesion.

Canadian party membership is extremely volatile, with cyclical patterns that peak in election years.²⁴ The basic unit is annual membership in local constituency organisations. Memberships are inexpensive and the chief benefit is the right to select local party candidates and participate in leadership selection (directly or indirectly depending on the party). Consequently, signing up new members and ensuring their attendance at local party meetings is a remarkably crucial aspect of Canadian party politics. It is established practice in Canadian politics for potential nominees, either for local candidacies or the party leadership, to recruit and transport large numbers of new constituency association members to local meetings solely to support their candidacy, to the point that in 2002 one of the chief concerns of the Liberal Party of Canada was disputes over the rules for handling membership forms and how many could be copied or distributed at a time. These ‘instant Liberals’, ‘instant Conservatives’, and so on, often have no previous connection to the party and are commonly recruited in mass numbers from ethnic groups, senior citizens, and youths. Most sitting MPs are able to recruit sufficient numbers of local members to overcome any challenger’s recruitment efforts, sometimes to ludicrous extents as local associations increase by an average of 300 per cent for nomination meetings.²⁵ Once they have obtained membership and supported their candidate in the nomination meeting, few renew their membership or otherwise participate in the party.

These patterns of transitory membership are most prevalent in the Liberal and Conservative parties.²⁶ However, they are also found in the Canadian Alliance, which saw its membership rise and fall dramatically in 2000–2002 because of leadership contests. In 2000, national membership rose from approximately 75,000 in the old Reform Party to 200,000 in the new Canadian Alliance as it selected its leader. However, by the autumn of 2001, membership had fallen to 68,000, only to rebound to 123,000 for the second leadership contest in March 2002.²⁷ In both contests, candidates explicitly campaigned to sign up new members who became eligible to vote directly for the party leadership, but the 2001 drop-off shows that many did not renew their membership.

Attempts have been made to curb the ‘instant member’ phenomenon, such as waiting periods or allowing leaders to appoint candidates, but such reforms

are controversial. Mass recruitment is supported by many as an effective if blunt mobilisation of new Canadians and minorities into the political process,²⁸ and new candidates may object to rules that constrain their ability to overtake more established candidates.

In contrast to their importance in candidate selection, grassroots members in most parties have minimal influence over party *policy* – particularly members of the Liberal and Conservative parties. In these parties it is not even clear whether members seek influence. Cross and Young find that support for local and leadership candidates ‘is a far more important inducement into membership’ in the Liberals and Conservatives than other parties²⁹ – however, elsewhere they note that members of these two parties are the most likely to be dissatisfied with the extent of grassroots decision-making in their parties.³⁰ Members of the newer and more ideologically homogeneous parties are more likely to join to support and contribute to party policies, and in return these parties – particularly the Canadian Alliance and New Democrats – do offer more forums for policy development. However, these parties remain in opposition, making policy exercises somewhat fanciful; their effect on a government in power (or even a party close to winning power) is unknown.

These membership patterns may affect discipline and cohesion in party caucuses, but in different ways that yield the above mixed patterns. Unstable memberships mean that dissenting MPs cannot necessarily count on retaining the support of their constituency association if a challenger signs up more members. While party elites do not appear actively to support local challenges against dissenters, in a few cases leaders can and have unilaterally appointed candidates in order to assist loyal MPs facing tough nomination fights. The ability to recruit a local membership base might give legislators more of an independent mandate in parliament and hence undermine central party power³¹ – as noted, party leaders have almost never denied party status to a local candidate. Yet there are few if any examples of rogue MPs challenging their leaders while safely supported by a strong constituency base. Instead, volatile membership may keep the party centralised and disciplined.

Similarly, the need to recruit masses of supporters may contribute to ideological dilution, since nomination contests revolve less around ideology than organisational skill.³² MPs may be less unified by ideology than by their ability to sign up living, breathing supporters of any stripe. Furthermore, the low incentives for long-term membership and inability to influence policy meaningfully means that MPs and party leaders are rarely held to account by the larger membership for their ideological choices. Without stronger mechanisms for grassroots involvement, it is unlikely that fluid memberships contribute to ideological solidarity and cohesion in parties.

CONCLUSION

Canadian parliamentary party groups present a mixed picture of discipline and cohesion. Traditionally, the two main parties have been highly disciplined but ideologically heterogeneous, making cohesion more personal than ideological. The arrival of new parties in 1993 has challenged this traditional pattern, but the differences between older and newer parties are often more in degree than in kind, and recent upheavals do not seem to have dramatically changed things. As has been suggested, these patterns may be linked to the fluid membership base of Canadian parties.

The absence of more systematic data prevents us from exploring these patterns further in search of clarification and findings to compare with other jurisdictions. The Canadian legislative research community remains in flux³³ and data collection presents difficult methodological challenges. Yet continuing exploration and empirical research may begin to produce understanding of the precise nature and reasons for Canadian patterns of discipline and cohesion and a basis for comparison with other parliamentary systems. This issue should be a priority for legislative research in Canada.

NOTES

1. This article does not examine provincial-level parties, which display similar patterns but are organisationally separate from the national parties. Nor does it discuss party politics in the ambiguous, unelected Senate of Canada.
2. R.K. Carty, W. Cross and L. Young, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).
3. The collection of Canadian voting data is hampered both by a substantive technical problem also found in other legislatures – members are identified in records by name but not party, making data collection an exceedingly tedious and resource-intensive task – and the more substantive assumption that trends are well-recognised and expensive data collection will not challenge basic understandings of Canadian legislative behaviour. Hence even leading works such as C.E.S. Franks' *The Parliament of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) contain no systematic data on voting trends.
4. J. Wearing, 'Guns, Gays and Gadflies: Party Dissent in the House of Commons under Mulroney and Chretien', paper presented at the annual meetings of the Canadian Political Science Association, University of Ottawa, 1998.
5. D.C. Docherty, 'It's Awfully Crowded in Here: Adjusting to the Five Party House of Commons', *Parliamentary Perspectives 2* (Canadian Study of Parliament Group: Ottawa, 1998).
6. P.G. Thomas, 'Parties in Parliament: The Role of Party Caucuses', in A.B. Tanguay and A.-G. Gagnon (eds.), *Canadian Parties in Transition* (Toronto: Nelson Canada, 2nd edn. 1996).
7. A list of suspensions and expulsions is maintained at: www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/people/house/HofCChange.asp?Language=E&Exclude=Y. The list does not distinguish between policy disagreements and other reasons.
8. A list of party-switchers is maintained at: www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/people/house/HofCChange.asp?Hist=Y.
9. In 1993 the Bloc Quebecois won 54 seats and Reform won 52.
10. Carty *et al.*, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*; J. Jenson and J. Brodie, *Crisis, Challenge and Change: Party and Class in Canada* (Toronto: Methuen, 1980); and H.C. Clarke, J. Jenson, L. LeDuc and J. Pammett, *Absent Mandate: Interpreting Change in Canadian Elections* (Toronto: Gage, 3rd edn. 1996).

11. J.C. Courtney, *Do Conventions Matter? Choosing National Party Leaders in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995); G.C. Perlin (ed.), *Party Democracy in Canada* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall, 1988).
12. Clarke *et al.*, *Absent Mandate: Interpreting Change in Canadian Elections*.
13. Carty *et al.*, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*, p.112.
14. See D.J. Savoie, *Governing From the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
15. N. Bradford and J. Jenson, 'Facing Economic Restructuring and Constitutional Renewal: Social Democracy Adrift in Canada', in F. Fox Piven (ed.), *Labor Parties in Postindustrial Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
16. C. Kam, 'Do Ideological Preferences Explain Parliamentary Behaviour? Evidence From Great Britain and Canada', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 7/4 (2001), pp.89–126.
17. L. Young and W. Cross, 'Incentives to Membership in Canadian Political Parties', *Political Research Quarterly*, 55/3 (2002), pp.547–69.
18. Kam, 'Do Ideological Preferences Explain Parliamentary Behaviour? Evidence from Great Britain and Canada'.
19. R.K. Carty, W. Cross and L. Young, 'Canadian Party Politics in the New Century', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35/4 (2000–2001), p.27.
20. C.E.S. Franks, *The Parliament of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
21. See T. Flanagan, 'From Reform to the Conservative Alliance', in H.G. Thorburn and A. Whitehorn (eds.), *Party Politics in Canada* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall, 8th edn. 2001).
22. D. Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada: Understanding Reform and the Canadian Alliance* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002); also Cross and Young, 'Incentives to Membership'.
23. 'Alliance won't Apologize for MP's Alleged Gay Slur', *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 April 2002.
24. Carty *et al.*, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*, pp.158–9.
25. Carty *et al.*, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*, p.158.
26. Young and Cross, 'Incentives to Membership in Canadian Political Parties'.
27. All data from *The Globe and Mail* newspaper (various issues.)
28. W. Cross, 'Grassroots Participation in Candidate Nomination', in J. Everitt and B. O'Neill (eds.), *Canadian Political Behaviour* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002).
29. Young and Cross, 'Incentives to Membership in Canadian Political Parties', p.560.
30. W. Cross and L. Young, 'The Rise of Plebiscitary Democracy in Canadian Political Parties', *Party Politics*, 8/6 (2002), pp.673–99.
31. W. Cross, 'Members of Parliament, Voters and Democracy in the Canadian House of Commons' *Parliamentary Perspectives 3* (Canadian Study of Parliament Group: Ottawa, 2000).
32. Cross in 'Grassroots Participation in Candidate Nomination' notes that many nomination contests do not even include a debate between candidates.
33. J. Malloy, 'The "Responsible Government Approach" and Its Effect on Canadian Legislative Studies', *Parliamentary Perspectives 5* (Canadian Study of Parliament Group: Ottawa, 2002).