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AKIN Angry at party brass, grassroots Conservatives ready for change



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Stephen Harper waves as he leaves the stage after addressing supporters at an election night gathering in Calgary, Alta., on Monday October 19, 2015. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darryl Dyck

OTTAWA -- Grassroots Conservatives in Canada are angry at their party.

They're angry at the way their party lost last fall's election.

They're angry that former leader Stephen Harper abused the power of the leader's office.

They're even angry that millions of dollars they donated were wasted on a computer system screwup at party HQ.

And they're ready to do something about it.

More than 3,000 party members in ridings from Victoria to St. John's have put forward dozens of proposals to change their party's constitution. If passed at the party's biennial convention next weekend in Vancouver, they will radically reshape the relationship between more than 100,000 of card-carrying Conservatives and their leader, party president, and governing council.

A 25-page package of proposed changes is filled with comments submitted by electoral district associations (EDAs) in support of those proposed changes. They are sharply critical of the way the party was run under Harper and its president of the last six years, John Walsh.

"It is deeply discouraging to have any member see the policy resolution they worked hard on result in removal... because a select few establishment members of the our party deem it no longer relevant to Canadians," reads a joint submission from several EDAs upset about what did and did not end up in the campaign platform.

The riding association in South Surrey-White Rock specifically singled out Harper and the party leadership for ignoring policies, adopted by unanimously by the members, to treat Afghanistan veterans better. Instead, the Conservative government started taking veterans to court.



Associations in Edmonton and in Kitchener, Ont., want a new oversight committee specifically for information technology systems used by party HQ. The last overhaul of the party's membership database cost as much as \$9 million -- and didn't work. All that money was wasted. "Existing oversight of the (computerized membership database) is inadequate and closer scrutiny needs to be in place to ensure that money spent ... is not misspent," the EDAs write in support of their idea.

The same two associations were also sharply critical of Harper for naming one of his long-time aides, Dimitri Soudas, as the party's executive director. Soudas would end up getting dismissed for interfering in a nomination contest with this then-girlfriend and MP Eve Adams. Adams, too, would get disqualified by the party and she and Soudas bolted for the Liberals.

"The leader's pick ... was an absolute disaster," the two EDAs write in their submission.

Several EDAs are calling for leadership review votes at every convention, even if the leader is a prime minister.

And while there is no term limit for any federal politician, there is a proposal to place an eight-year term limit on any future Conservative leader who might become prime minister.

The obvious frustration and anger from so many riding associations stands to make for a slightly awkward convention opening Thursday night: The celebration of the one and only leader the party has ever known, Stephen Harper.

While Harper has declined all media requests for interviews since the election, sources close to him say he was reluctant to be feted at this convention. But he is said to have agreed to participate in an opening night celebration so long as it focuses on the accomplishments of the entire party during his decade in leadership.

Once that is done on Thursday night, the grassroots are sure to start looking ahead to its next leader.

Declared and undeclared leadership candidates have arranged for hospitality suites at downtown Vancouver hotels to dispense beer, wine and hor d'oeuvres in their name in the hope of winning support from convention attendees.

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