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*Selecting the Party Leader:
Britain in Comparative
Perspective*

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To Alison Sarah

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Preface

This is a study of the ‘what, why and so what’ of the process of selecting the party leader in Britain and elsewhere. It seeks to answer the questions: by what means does a party select its leader; why does it use that particular method; what consequences flow from its use of that method? The concern is not with political leaders in the plural, in the sense of the recruitment of elites, but with the selection of the individual who fills the post of leader of the party. While the prime focus of the book is the selection of the leader in the main British parties, the British experience is placed in a comparative context and is used to illustrate general features of leader-selection processes in competitive party systems. In particular, four basic methods of selection are identified and the British parties are used to illustrate those four methods.

My interest in party leaders has its roots in earlier studies of the Leader of the Opposition in Britain and the Prime Minister in Canada. The immediate stimulus for the book, however, was the realization, when called upon to prepare a short series of lectures on leader-selection procedures, that remarkably little had been written about the topic. A study of Labour’s electoral college, and participation in a workshop on the selection of the party leader in western parties, organized for the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) by Tom Mackie in 1989, coincided with the preparation of this manuscript. Many of the themes that are covered in the book, in particular the analysis of the different types of selection systems in Chapter 1, were discussed at the ECPR workshop. I am grateful to the participants in the workshop for the stimulus provided by our discussions. I am also

grateful to Jennifer Punnett for her services as a research assistant and to Jack Vanderoef, John Sanderson and Gabriella Ilonszki for their comments on chapters.

I wish to thank the Carnegie Foundation, the Government of Canada and Ball State University, Indiana, for providing me with research grants. Among the many people who have helped with the physical preparation of the manuscript, I am especially grateful to Grace Hunter, Alison Bennett, Margaret Leckie and Florene Ball for preparing early drafts and to Maxine Riley, Terry Kingrea and Kim Hedge for processing the final draft with exceptional efficiency.

In retrospect it is probably not wise to dedicate books to your children: you have either to stop having children or persist in writing books. With the dedication of this book, however, the task is complete.

Malcolm Punnett
July 1992