

[Back to previous page](#)



document 1 of 1

Advice to the right Series: Is Conservatism Dead?: [National Edition 1]

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Abstract (summary)

A few years ago, I said at a meeting of Civitas, a conservative discussion group, that Canada had all the components of a powerful conservative movement except for a political party capable of winning a national election and forming a government. [Stephen Harper] and Peter MacKay remedied that deficiency in 2003 by merging the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives to create the Conservative Party of Canada, in the process shedding the populism of the former and the social progressivism of the latter.

Full Text

Tom Flanagan is a professor of political science at the University of Calgary, and special advisor to Stephen Harper.

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In the years when they were cut off from the prospect of participating in government, Canadian conservative writers often took positions on intellectual grounds without worrying about political feasibility. Fair enough, for, as Friedrich Hayek often said, the highest calling of the political thinker is to challenge conventional wisdom and thereby expand the limits of what is politically feasible.

But without forgetting that long-term goal, conservative thinkers need to develop a mature relationship with the Conservative party. As a party contending for power, the Conservatives often will adopt positions that do not fully satisfy social conservatives, fiscal conservatives, libertarians and other members of the Conservative coalition. These factions have to remember that politics is not a seminar, winning power is not the same as making debating points and half a loaf is better than no bread at all.

Usually, democratic politics is about moderate compromise and incremental change. Activists and thinkers in the conservative movement should work to ensure that the Conservative party is positioned to the right of the Liberals on major issues, but they must remember that staying reasonably close to the position of the median voter is essential for winning elections.

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