

# Behold Preston Agonistes

CALGARY

**R**ARE among politicians, Preston Manning is a dedicated author. He had no ghost-writer for his book, *The New Canada*, and he writes his own speeches. He labours over drafts and circulates them for comment before putting them in final form. Hence, when he publishes an essay or gives a major speech, those who want to understand his thinking should read it carefully.

In his recent speech to the Reform Party Assembly in London, Mr. Manning promised to risk his leadership in an attempt to build a so-called United Alternative — that is, a broader party that would stand a chance of wresting government from the Liberals. “Do I risk the position of leadership which you have given me this past 11 years?” he asked. “The frank answer to that question is yes!”

These words should take Manning-watchers to the passage in *The New Canada* that recounts how he entered politics. In 1983, he tells us, he developed “a conflict-resolution model based on the Christian doctrine of reconciliation but expressed in systems language and stripped of any religious terminology.” The central point of this “model of last resort,” as he called it, was that at the right moment the mediator must be ready to sacrifice his personal interests to bring estranged parties together.

He describes how he sent his “model of last resort” to “several eminent practitioners of the art of conflict resolution,” including Charles Malik, a former president of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Mr. Malik advised him, in words that Mr. Manning says he has “taken to heart,” to enter politics “by running for office or seeking some important political appointment, to be able really to contribute to the ‘Reconciliation of Parties in Conflict.’”

He certainly wants to become prime minister, but he is not merely ambitious in the ordinary way. If he were, he would have entered an existing party and tried to rise within it — surely a more likely path to high office than creating a new party. Yet the founding of a successful new one is Mr. Manning’s greatest achievement — one in which he takes great pride, and which historians will not forget.

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That he now speaks of sacrificing his leadership suggests he believes he is facing the crucial moment in his political career. By announcing that his leadership is at risk, he symbolically offers himself as the mediator of last resort between the party he has founded and other parties he now realizes he needs.

A related and intriguing development is that Cliff Fryers, Reform’s hardest-driving administrator and toughest enforcer, is leaving his Calgary law practice to become the Leader’s chief of staff in Ottawa. This step wouldn’t be taken unless Mr. Manning thought he was arriving at a critical juncture.

**I**S this all just psychodrama, or is something about to happen in the real world? Even though I personally favour a coalition of parties on the right, I have been skeptical till now, believing that Mr. Manning was too attached to his leadership and too individual in his style to share power in a broader formation.

Maybe that view will prove correct, but developments over the past few months have been remarkable. Mr. Manning admitted that Reform can’t win on its own and he announced a search for allies. The “blue” faction of the Progressive Conservative Party tried to entice former Reform MP Stephen Harper to run for the PC leadership, and is now pushing toward negotiations with Reform. Hugh Segal and Joe Clark, expected to be the two top candidates for the Tory leadership, have stopped attacking Reform and started talking about “setting a candle in the window” for Reformers. If we were observing hostile nations in the international arena, we would be talking with guarded optimism about “signs of movement.”

Also important is that Mr. Manning has ceased using his erstwhile favourite word, “populism.” Strikingly, that term did not appear in his London speech. Instead of arguing that the difference between left and right is meaningless, as he used to do, he now offers a multidimensional analysis of ideological cleavage similar to that found in intermediate-level works of political science.

Maybe this more realistic view of ideology will help guide him toward negotiating a broader conservative coalition. He still denies that he wants a coalition on the right; but if one forms, that is where it will be, because that is where the frustrated voters are located.

The odds against success are still long, but it is at least conceivable that something positive will come out of this.

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