

Canadian Alliance metamorphosis

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In Franz Kafka's haunting novella *Metamorphosis*, a man falls asleep and wakes up as a giant cockroach. Almost as quickly, as measured in political time, the Canadian Alliance has morphed from a sectional party espousing a distinctive world view into a brokerage party building a broad coalition of diverse supporters. For all practical purposes, the Alliance has become a reincarnation of the Tory party without the Red Tories.

Big money is back. The Alliance raised \$1.7-million in one fundraising dinner in Toronto — unthinkable in the days of Reform. And if enough can't be gathered on short notice to match the Liberals dollar for dollar during this campaign, the Alliance plans to borrow money — another departure from Reform practice.

Reform was characterized by amateurism and volunteerism, but now professionalism is back, in the person of fundraisers, pollsters, advertisers, strategists and spin doctors who used to work for the Progressive Conservatives. Ethnic politics is back, as evidenced in the recent nomination contest in Calgary Northeast, in which four Sikh candidates recruited 7,000 new Sikh members onto the party rolls in a vain attempt to unseat MP Art Hanger.

The cult of the grassroots is also dead, replaced by a quasi-cult of personality around the party leader. Preston Manning effectively controlled the Reform party through behind-the-scenes manipulation, but he never had the freedom to manipulate policy that Mr. Day now possesses. The Alliance election platform labels all policies "Stockwell's policies," effectively licensing him to modify them as he chooses. And he is not reluctant to do so, as shown by his recent announcement that he is content with existing Employment Insurance legislation, even though the platform says otherwise.

Old-time Reformers may gag, but they will do so quietly. They have invested so heavily in replacing Reform with the Alliance and Mr. Manning with Mr. Day that they will not rebel now, particularly since the Alliance consistently stands 10 points higher in the polls than Reform ever did between elections.

The most fundamental change is that the Alliance is fighting this election with the classic strategy of a major contender in a two-party system — positioning the party near the ideological location of the median voter. In 1993 and 1997, Reform played a different game, positioning itself relatively far to the right of the median voter in order to draw off the more conservative supporters of the Progressive Conservatives. Having largely achieved that ob-

jective, the Alliance has gambled that the time has come to converge with the Liberals on such key issues as tax reform, debt reduction and maintenance of public health care, official bilingualism and equalization payments to have-not provinces.

The Alliance will differentiate itself from the Liberals mainly on non-ideological issues, such as honesty, integrity and sensitivity to voters' concerns. That is the message of the Alliance's generic but still potentially effective campaign slogan, "A Time for Change" — that the Alliance is not so much the champion of an alternative ideology as the alternative governing team ready to carry on the executive business of government.

This is the strategy of a party that sees itself as a government-in-waiting within a system where two major parties alternate in power. In such a configuration, the Opposition usually obtains office not by offering a clear ideological alternative, but by taking advantage of voters' dissatisfaction with the incumbent government. In this scenario, the Alliance has to convince voters that the Liberals are so tainted by patronage, mismanagement and arrogance they are no longer fit to govern. Ironically but logically, it is the Liberals who will seek to make this an ideological election by painting the Alliance as extremist and talking about "Canadian values." Their goal is to make voters remember Reform as it used to be rather than see the Alliance as it now is.

Whether or not the Alliance makeover meets with success in this election, it signals a major shift in the Canadian party system. The 1990s were a decade of fragmentation, with five parties

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cultivating different sections of the electorate, but we are moving into a period of consolidation.

The Bloc Québécois will remain dominant in Quebec but not interested in participating in the government of Canada. Everywhere else in Canada the Liberals and the Alliance will contend for power, while neither the PCs nor the NDP will elect the 12 MPs necessary to form a recognized caucus in the House of Commons. An approximation of two-party politics seems to be just over the horizon.

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