

Co-operating with Clark will be death of Alliance

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

As Preston Manning prepares to retire from politics, members of the Canadian Alliance in Calgary Southwest will have to nominate a successor to contest a by-election in 2002. Some have suggested the Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives should nominate a joint candidate, to make sure the Liberals don't win. However, far from being a shrewd move, this would be a historic blunder that would further destabilize the Alliance just as it is beginning to recover from the annus horribilis of 2001.

Electoral co-operation with another party is a major strategic decision with national implications; no mature party can allow such matters to be decided by a single constituency association, even if it is the riding of the former leader. At the national level, the Alliance caucus protocol requires all such initiatives to go through the party's unity committee. If Calgary Southwest proceeds on its own, it will have to defy the Alliance leader, caucus and national council.

Such conflict will reopen the wounds caused by the departure of eight caucus members earlier this year to sit in the so-called Democratic Representative Progressive Conservative Coalition under Joe Clark's leadership.

Do members really want to replicate this bruising experience?

Moreover, there is no consensus within the Canadian Alliance about how to deal with the Progressive Conservatives. Sixty per cent of the 13,000 party members who responded to a recent survey said they favoured co-operation with the Tories. But this statistic is misleading, because half of those 60 per cent want a merger, a third prefer a geographical division of candidates, and a sixth endorse joint nominations in the ridings.

In other words, 40 per cent of Alliance members — the largest single group — are opposed to co-operation in all forms, 30 per cent want a merger, 20 per cent would like to see candidacies divided on some regional basis, and 10 per cent want joint nominations. Thus the strategy now proposed for Calgary Southwest is the least popular choice, opposed by 90 per cent of Canadian Alliance members.

The Progressive Conservatives have made it clear they will accept co-operation only on their own terms. They insist their party must nominate a candidate in every riding and all their candidates must run under the Tory banner and sit in the PC caucus if elected. Not a bad policy, perhaps — but not conducive to co-operation. It means if the Alliance members in Calgary

Southwest want a fusion candidate, they will have to support someone who will follow Joe Clark's leadership and sit in the Tory caucus, even if the reality is glossed over by talking about a PC-DRC coalition.

Preston Manning has repeatedly emphasized that co-operation between parties cannot succeed unless it is based on principle. An unprincipled attempt to nominate a joint candidate will almost certainly backfire by making the Liberal candidate look like the one who actually stands for something.

The underlying problem is that many Alliance positions are far from those of Joe Clark's Progressive Conservatives. The Alliance supported the Clarity Act, which set up high barriers to the separation of Quebec. Joe Clark opposed the Clarity Act, and his party still endorses Quebec's alleged "right of self-determination." The Alliance favours balanced budgets, lower taxes and realistic social programs. Clark and his party, dependent as they are on votes in Atlantic Canada, recently voted to make unemployment insurance more generous for repeat users.

The Alliance stands for the individual equality of all Canadians before the law. Clark was a senior minister in the government of Brian Mulroney, which brought in legislation,

under the Orwellian name of "employment equity," to enforce racial and gender preferences in the federal public sector.

Once upon a time, the federal Progressive Conservatives were a conservative party, or at least they had many conservative members and supporters. But most of the philosophical conservatives went over to Reform in the Tory holocaust of 1993, and the remaining "Blue Tories" went over to the Canadian Alliance in 1999. What's left in Joe Clark's party is mostly a centrist element that is sometimes even to the left of the Liberals.

Joe Clark's integrity, consistency and work ethic are admirable, but he has spent his whole career trying to erase any ideological differences between the Progressive Conservatives and the Liberals. He wants his party to be an alternative team for implementing the same philosophy of government. "Tory men and Whig measures," as Disraeli said.

That is not what most members of the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance have ever wanted their party to be.

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