

Nat'l Post
July 7/2001

Dissidence or destruction

TOM FLANAGAN

The 13 Canadian Alliance caucus rebels are going to meet later this month to consider their options. Superficially, they seem to have three possible paths before them — but ultimately it will all come down to whether they want to be dissidents or destroyers of the party.

First, they can continue as self-styled dissident members of the Alliance, suspended from caucus but still belonging to the party, seeking to force a leadership change within the party. That is, after all, what got them suspended — demanding Stockwell Day's immediate resignation. But their campaign doesn't seem to be achieving its stated goal; Mr. Day seems more determined than ever to keep his position, and he still has the support of a majority of the caucus who don't want to yield to the rebels' pressure. Hence it will be inevitable for the dissidents to consider taking further steps.

The second option is to cut their ties with the Alliance altogether

'WESTERN POPULIST PARTIES ... LIVE, THEY DIE, THEN COME UP AGAIN ... PERHAPS IN A DIFFERENT FORM'

and join the Progressive Conservative party and caucus. However, several of the dissidents have said they don't want to do this. Moreover, even though they might get high-profile critics' positions in the short term, they know they would have a hard time getting re-elected as Tories in their Western ridings.

Hence the attraction of the third option: Now that they number more than 12, they can request that the Speaker of the House to recognize them as a parliamentary party, thus opening the door to research money, the right to speak in debates and question period and positions on committees and party leadership jobs with extra payment. Money, influence, and independence — sweet dreams for MPs.

But there is also a rude awakening. Despite being treated like a party in the House of Commons, the dissidents would in reality be only a parliamentary faction with no external party organization. Faced with this provocation, the Canadian Alliance would surely expel the dissidents and take legal control of their riding associations. To be sure, the dissidents would have supporters at home, but are they prepared to set up a wholly new political party to support a handful of candidates in a patchwork of ridings? It is unlikely they would be able even to get registered under the rules administered by Elections Canada.

seek succour from the Tories. Perhaps they could form an opposition coalition, as the Liberals and National Party do in Australia when they are out of power.

There is even a chance such a coalition could become the official Opposition. If the dissidents grew to 28, they would number 40 when added to the 12 Tories, making them the second-largest group in the House, ahead of the 38 remaining Alliance members and 38 members of the Bloc Québécois.

It might be an exciting ride for the dissidents, but it would still leave them a parliamentary faction without an external party. Come the next election, they would have to become Tories for purposes of seeking re-election. In the end, the third option would be only a longer path to the second option — joining the Tories.

So the choice facing the dissidents is stark: Do they continue what they have portrayed as a struggle to save their party by getting a new leader? Or do they, sooner or later, seek refugee status within the Progressive Conservatives, thus committing themselves to the destruction of the Canadian Alliance?

It may seem far-fetched to suggest that men and women who have given years of their lives to building first the Reform Party and then the Canadian Alliance might want to destroy it. But the founder, Preston Manning, always viewed the party as temporary. He said in 1989: "These Western populist parties have a more natural life cycle than the traditional parties. They live, they die, the seeds go into the ground and then come up again, perhaps in a different form." At the founding of the Reform party, he insisted the party's constitution include a sunset clause terminating it in Nov. 1, 2000, unless the party assembly voted to carry on. In fact, the Reform party transformed itself into the Canadian Alliance before its expiry date. More recently, Mr. Manning wrote a column in the *National Post* (March 10) suggesting the Alliance quickly negotiate a "strategic alliance" with the Tories without the elaborate grassroots participation and approvals involved in the United Alternative process.

I believe, however, that most of the 143,000 Alliance members want a genuinely conservative party that has organizational stability. They are ready to engage in open negotiations with the Tories as long as they can approve or reject the outcome, but they do not want their party splintered so that the Tories can pick up the pieces.

The Alliance rebels will have to choose: Will they be dissidents or destroyers? To be a dissident is honourable, but what will history say about destroyers?

National Post

Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary. He was director of research for the Reform Party of Canada in 1991-92.