

# 'Gritlock' is the least of conservative worries

TOM FLANAGAN

The foundation of the Canadian Alliance has fostered a new conventional wisdom among conservatives: The Liberal government of Jean Chrétien is a calamity because it faces no effective opposition; it will be in power forever unless a united opposition emerges; the highest priority is to bring the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives together into one party in order to defeat the Liberals.

The whole argument is ably summarized in the recent book *Gritlock*, by Peter White and Adam Daifallah, which is a "must read" for anyone interested in conservative politics. But, with greatest respect to my friends White and Daifallah, the conventional wisdom does not stand up to serious scrutiny.

Jean Chrétien's Liberal government is far from a disaster. While it has many shortcomings from a conservative point of view, it has implemented important Reform/Alliance ideas, such as balancing the budget, downsizing some parts of government, reducing the income tax and taking a tougher stand against Quebec separatism. It is an improvement over the nominally conservative government of Brian Mulroney that it replaced.

Moreover, the Liberals have only been in power eight years, not a long time by Canadian standards. The Progressive Conservatives in my own province of Alberta have been in power for 30 years, and before that Social Credit governed for 36 years. In spite of (or perhaps because of) these long-lived political dynasties, Alberta routinely scores first on measures of economic performance and policy among Canadian provinces.

As the case of Alberta suggests, there is no demonstrated relationship between the existence of highly competitive, two-party politics and the implementation of market-oriented policies. Let me enlarge on this third point, because it may seem counter-intuitive at first glance to many conservative observers.

Three countries with which Canada has much in common — the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand — experienced highly competitive two-party politics from the end of the Second World War into the 1990s. (New Zealand has now entered a multi-party phase with the introduction of proportional representation.) In each of these countries, there were only two parties capable of winning an election — Labour and the Conservatives in the UK, Democrats and Republicans in the United States, Labour and National in New Zealand — and regular alternation in office occurred, so that the nominally right-wing party had frequent chances to govern.

Despite such seemingly propitious conditions, the conservative agenda of free markets, smaller government, individual freedom and personal responsibility made zero progress in these countries from the 1940s through the 1970s. The nominal parties of the right supported the welfare state in all significant aspects and even extended it in attempting to outbid their left-wing opponents. The most egregious example was Robert Muldoon's "Think Big" policy of protectionism and import substitution, which drove New Zealand to the brink of bankruptcy.

The free-market alternative started to thrive in the 1980s, not because there were nominally conservative parties capable of winning elections but because leaders such as Margaret Thatcher,

Ronald Reagan and Roger Douglas (treasurer in a Labour government!) stepped to the fore. By explaining to voters the need for market-oriented reforms such as privatization and deregulation, they changed the conventional wisdom and political culture in their three countries.

A similar tale, though without such a happy ending, can be told of Canada. In the relatively competitive post-war period, the Progressive Conservatives won six of 14 elections, governed for 16 years and furnished the country with four prime ministers before they collapsed in 1993. But they never pursued anything remotely approaching an agenda of market-oriented reform.

Historians now trace the beginning of Canada's love affair with deficit spending to John Diefenbaker's administration. Joe Clark's short-lived government fell when he tried to impose an 18-cents-a-gallon tax increase on gasoline. Brian Mulroney did bring in free trade, for which he deserves credit, but in other respects his time in office was a huge disappointment to conservatives hoping for balanced budgets, lower taxes and rationalization of the welfare state. The hapless Kim Campbell promised to throw herself across railroad tracks to protect Canada's bloated social programs. The conservative agenda did not start to make serious progress in Canada until the 1990s, after the Reform party got out in front and started shifting the climate of opinion.

A nominally conservative party does enormous damage to the conservative movement by confusing its supporters about first principles. No one should be surprised when the Liberals legislate multiculturalism, regional economic de-

## A NOMINALLY CONSERVATIVE PARTY DOES ENORMOUS DAMAGE

velopment and affirmative action; these are only logical expressions of their ideology of group rights. But when an allegedly conservative party embraces the same policies, as has the Progressive Conservative party led by Brian Mulroney and Joe Clark, it frustrates the development of a genuine conservative philosophy of individual freedom in a civil society.

The lesson of history could not be clearer. If you have political convictions and a definite agenda, you cannot achieve your aims by supporting a catch-all party whose goals are simply the attainment of power, the enjoyment of prestige and the distribution of patronage. You have to support a party that represents your philosophy in the public arena.

Of course, the bigger and more powerful the party, the better. It would be ideal to build a party, such as Margaret Thatcher's Tories or Ronald Reagan's Republicans, that is both truly conservative and able to win elections. But if you have to make a choice, it is more important to have a party that genuinely represents your world view than one devoted to electoral victory at all costs.

The Canadian left learned this lesson 70 years ago when it founded the CCF. We on the right seem to be slower learners, but it's time to catch on.

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Tom Flanagan is professor of  
political science at the  
University of Calgary.