

LEADING THE UNITED RIGHT — FROM THE IMPERATIVE OF CONSERVATIVE UNITY TO THE OPPORTUNITY OF LIBERAL SCANDALS

Tom Flanagan

The Reform Party and its successor, the Canadian Alliance, swept western Canada in three elections but could never score a significant breakthrough east of Manitoba. By the time Stephen Harper became leader in 2002, and following a disappointing third place showing in an Ontario heartland by-election in 2003, it became even more apparent than ever that only a united Right would ever be “capable of forming a government,” writes Tom Flanagan, manager of Harper’s leadership campaign. The Liberal sponsorship scandal has given the Conservatives a timely spike in the polls and a competitive advantage to Harper, as a principal architect of the merger and the most experienced candidate in the race. “It is not just about who will make the best leader of the opposition, nor who will make the best debating partner for Paul Martin,” writes Flanagan. “The Conservative leadership race is now about who is ready to become prime minister.”

Le Reform Party et l’Alliance canadienne qui lui a succédé ont balayé l’ouest du pays lors des trois derniers scrutins fédéraux, mais sans jamais faire de percée à l’est du Manitoba. Quand Stephen Harper en a pris la direction en 2002, et à la suite d’une décevante troisième place en 2003 dans une élection partielle remportée par les conservateurs au cœur de l’Ontario, il était devenu évident que seule une droite unie dans un « même parti conservateur » pouvait espérer former un jour le gouvernement, explique le chef de campagne de Stephen Harper, Tom Flanagan. Or, le scandale des commandites a fait grimper les conservateurs dans les sondages et procuré un solide atout à Harper, perçu comme le principal artisan de l’union de la droite et le plus expérimenté des candidats à la direction. Désormais, note Flanagan, l’enjeu de cette course n’est plus de désigner le meilleur adversaire de Paul Martin mais bien le candidat le mieux préparé à occuper le poste de premier ministre.

Preston Manning once told me that the Reform Party of Canada was founded in 1987 at a time of triple crisis: fiscal crisis (federal debt spiraling out of control); constitutional crisis (separatist threats in Quebec); and political crisis (loss of popular trust in federal institutions). Although the Reform Party never came close to forming a government, it exerted enough political pressure to bring about substantial improvement in all these areas. The federal budget was balanced and some tax cuts were enacted, the separatist threat was blunted, and a measure of democratic legitimacy was restored through holding a federal referendum on the Charlottetown Accord.

Despite these political successes, Manning realized that a party that was too narrow to go beyond forming the opposition would never be able to achieve all its goals. Exerting pressure in the political system may serve to block proposals to which you are opposed, but it is hard to initiate positive changes unless you control the government. You must be able to draw up the federal budget; appoint judges, ambassadors, deputy ministers, and board members of Crown corporations; and in general conduct executive business by passing orders in council, ministerial orders, and regulations. In my view, goals such as democratizing the Senate, reversing judicial activism, and re-equipping the Canadian Forces are unlikely to be met without forming a

government. It was logical, therefore, for Manning to seek to broaden the Reform Party by transforming it into the Canadian Alliance in the year 2000.

Manning's initiative succeeded, but only partially. Some Progressive Conservatives joined Reformers in the new party, but more remained with the traditional

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PC Party. Things even got worse in 2001 as some of Manning's closest allies tried to overthrow the new Alliance Leader, Stockwell Day. For a time, there were actually three conservative parties in the House of Commons: the Canadian Alliance, the Progressive Conservatives, and the Democratic Reform Caucus (DRC) — a breakaway Alliance group in uneasy coalition with the PCs.

That has all changed, and while a whole cast of characters played a role in bringing this about, much of the credit for this monumental shift in Canadian politics belongs to Stephen Harper. Nearly two years ago, Harper returned to federal politics by winning the Canadian Alliance leadership race and assuming the mantle of the leader of the opposition. In that role, he carried forward the work that he and I had written about since the mid-1990s — creating a single conservative party capable of forming a government.

He began by re-uniting his own party, reconciling with his leadership opponents, and bringing the DRC back into the Alliance caucus. Turning the official opposition into a disciplined, united and professional party was not enough, however, for the Alliance to challenge the Liberal hold on power. The Perth-Middlesex by-election of spring 2003, in which the PCs took the seat from the Liberals and the Alliance finished third in spite of strenuous efforts, was an object lesson in the difficulty of making the Alliance a contender for government.

Last summer, therefore, Stephen Harper began to work with newly elected PC Leader Peter MacKay to unite two parties into one. Belinda Stronach, now also a contender for the leadership of the Conservative Party, offered considerable assistance in the background as a mediator and witness to the negotiations.

On October 15, 2003, at considerable risk to their own political careers, Harper and MacKay announced the creation of the Conservative Party of Canada. The agreement called for a leadership race using the Tory formula of 100 points per riding rather than the Alliance formula of one member, one vote. The formula was an obstacle to Mr. Harper's goal of becoming leader of the new party, but he accepted it because he could see that it was a sticking point for the Tories. He wagered that he could run for leader and win under these rules, even though it would be more difficult for him than under Alliance rules. No wager, no merger!

In the middle of the ensuing leadership race, the new Liberal prime minister, Paul Martin, has become mired in the so-called sponsorship scandal, raising questions about his party's, and his government's, role in the biggest political money-laundering scheme in recent history. As a result, the Conservative Party of Canada now has an excellent chance to become what Harper called in a 1995 *Globe and Mail* article a “broadly based national alternative to the Liberal government.”

The Bloc québécois can never become an alternative governing party. It is committed to dismembering, not governing Canada; and because it runs candidates only in Quebec, it can never win enough seats to form even a minority government, though it could hold the balance of power under certain circumstances.

The NDP is a slightly, but only slightly, more plausible candidate to form a government in Canada. It runs candidates everywhere and has at various times governed four provinces as well as the Yukon Territory. However, it has never been a true contender at federal elections. Its core support — organized labour, especially in the public sector; special interest groups, such as environmentalists, feminists, and gay-rights activists; and certain ethnic groups, such as native voters in some parts of Canada — is simply too narrow to elect a government.

Under new leader Jack Layton, the NDP has risen from 10 percent to 18 percent in the polls, but that is still far from contending for government. If Canadians want another government in the wake of revelations about Liberal abuse of power, they will have to turn to the Conservative Party, which has a history of at least occasionally putting together electoral coalitions broad enough to govern Canada.

We can dismiss the Liberal attack line that this party has no policy. The new Conservative Party doesn't begin life as a *tabula rasa*. It starts with the legacy of the two founding parties: their common commitment to free enterprise, free trade and fiscal responsibility. Those common causes also go beyond economic matters. In recent months, the two caucuses have largely been on the same side of major parliamentary battles over the gun registry, the Kyoto Accord, the war against terrorism and the definition of marriage. In all these cases, large majorities of both caucuses found themselves on the same conservative side.

But conservatives don't always agree, so Harper has argued that the Conservative Party can only succeed if it welcomes all kinds of conservatives under its banner. It must be a party of the broad right of centre, appealing to economic conservatives, to social conservatives, to so-called Red Tories, and to democratic reformers.

First of all, the party must deal with what the Fraser Institute and others have demonstrated — Canada's declining economic position in the world. It will stand

for free trade, private enterprise, limited government and lower taxes. These are themes that appeal to all who call themselves conservatives, and they will serve to unite the party. Yet, as Stephen Harper has often said, the party cannot be only about tax cuts, because citizens have many other concerns in politics.

Harper believes that the new party must also be a home for social conservatives. It will stand for the central importance of the family to our history and to our future; for lower taxes for families; for protecting children, fighting sexual exploitation, and outlawing child pornography. It will stand for a criminal justice system that puts victims and their property ahead of criminals. The Conservative Party will not ask the state to impose its values on others. But it will demand that governments stop undermining those values.

“Red Tories” must also have a home in the new party. It cannot relegate the poor and dispossessed to the trash bin of society or ignore the scandal of aboriginal policy in Canada. It must remember the needs of immigrants and those who struggle to make their mark in Canadian society. Even as it seeks more efficient solutions to welfare problems, it must recognize the importance of existing programs such as pensions and health care.

Finally, the new party must embrace the democratic reformers. The Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance put democratic reform on the Canadian political agenda; and, in recent years, the Tory party adopted these ideas. The Conservative Party must continue to fight for democratic reforms such as an elected Senate, fixed election dates, and relaxation of party discipline in the House of Commons.

The challenge to any leader of the Conservative Party will be to find common ground among these four types of conservatives, to keep them working together in spite of their admitted differences over particular issues. No one can claim it will be easy, but it is certainly necessary if the new party is to be a serious contender for government.



The Gazette, Montreal

On the campaign trail, Stephen Harper in a pensive moment during an interview with *The Gazette* editorial board in Montreal. Having finally achieved a united Right, Harper now seeks to lead it, arguing that his parliamentary experience is even more important in light of the sponsorship scandal and the Conservatives' spike in the polls.

That said, and with the usual caveat that polls are always fleeting snapshots of public opinion at a particular time and place, it appears that the sponsorship scandal enveloping Paul Martin and the Liberal Party has opened an unexpected opportunity for the Conservative Party. In the current situation, the Conservative Party leadership race is not just about who will make the best leader of conservative factions or the best leader of the Conservative Party. It is not just about who will make the best leader of the opposition, nor who will make the best debating partner for Paul Martin. The Conservative leadership race is now about who is ready to become prime minister. Canadians are looking for someone to clean up the Liberal scandals, to restore integrity and clean government to Ottawa. There can, therefore, be no room in the new Conservative party for corruption or for crooks.

The Conservative Party needs a leader who has taken tough stands and tough decisions, who has built bridges,

who has national political experience, and who is ready to lead because he is already leading. Presenting a viable governing alternative is more important than ever. The country needs a credible, experienced alternative. I believe that Stephen Harper is the candidate ready and able to provide that leadership, so I am working in the campaign to put him at the fore of the new party. But win or lose, Harper has already earned honourable mention by future historians because he took the initiative to end division on the right and merge two existing parties into a broader force that can credibly aspire to form the government of Canada.

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