

# Political fantasia at Mont-Tremblant

NP, Aug-17, 2001  
TOM FLANAGAN

The sorcerer is trying to save his apprentices, but it's too late for his word magic to work.

Two days ago, Preston Manning published in this newspaper a column titled, "My blueprint for uniting the right." It contained a number of seemingly sensible suggestions for how Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative MPs can work together in Parliament, perhaps leading in time to a more comprehensive "strategic alliance" for contesting elections and governing the country.

The column was low-key in tone. To a casual reader, Mr. Manning must have seemed like a knowledgeable pundit giving helpful hints to politicians. But to well-informed observers, what is most striking about the column is its remoteness from the real-world situation.

What is actually happening at Mont-Tremblant? A meeting will take place co-chaired by Brock Easton, president of the Progressive Conservative party and Cliff Fryers, former chief of staff to Preston Manning. Under this aegis, key Tories, including the party's leader, Joe Clark, will talk to suspended members of the Canadian Alliance caucus. The latter now call themselves the Democratic Representative Caucus and claim that Chuck Strahl is their leader, even though they all retain membership in the Canadian Alliance. Alliance leader Stockwell Day was not invited, the Alliance caucus voted to condemn the meeting and no caucus members are attending.

In plain language, this is a breakaway faction of one party — the Alliance — undermining their own party by holding highly publicized talks with the leader of another party — the Progressive Conservatives — about future cooperation. But none of this context appears in Mr. Manning's column. Here he is, the former leader of the Alliance, saying he "commends" the Mont-Tremblant meeting as a step towards uniting the right, when it is really a further step towards splitting his own party!

By stepping forward now to support the dissident faction, Mr. Manning confirms that he has all along been a silent partner in an audacious campaign to force Stockwell Day out of office, install a pliant interim leader and make a quick deal with the Tories to create another new party, thus setting the stage for Mr. Manning to capture the leadership, perhaps in a final campaign against his old nemesis Joe Clark.

The leading figures in the campaign are Cliff Fryers, chairman of the Reform Party and Mr. Manning's chief of staff; Rick Anderson, Mr. Manning's chief adviser, strategist and campaign manager; Deborah Grey, his deputy leader; Chuck Strahl, his most recent House Leader; and Ken Kalopsis, Canadian Alliance co-chairman, installed by Mr. Manning's people to replace Gee Tsang when the latter became too independent.

None of these people would have undertaken the campaign against Mr. Day if they thought Mr. Manning did not want them to. He could have stopped it any point with a simple public statement: "The members of the party chose Mr. Day as leader. I support him and I want all of you to support him. A leader most needs help when he has made mistakes, so it's time to rally round."

But in spite of being implored by Mr. Day and others to step forward, Mr. Manning would not make such a statement. Instead he chose at critical moments to adopt a posture of conspicuous neutrality, which worked to devastate

Mr. Day and his supporters while encouraging the dissidents.

Mr. Manning apparently did not direct the campaign against Mr. Day. If he had, it would have been conducted more elegantly. But he did roll out a strategic plan for the dissidents. In a column published in this newspaper on March 8, he called for a "strategic alliance" to be negotiated quickly with the Tories, without all the grassroots approval mechanisms — national conventions and referendums — that had accompanied the United Alternative. Do it quickly and present the members with a *fait accompli* was the subliminal message.

Wednesday's column, however, contains a muted admission that the plan has failed in its goal of staging a quick putsch. "Now is not the time for 'grand schemes,'" writes Mr. Manning, "as much as I love grand schemes." His column of March 8 did indeed sketch out a grand scheme for a quick amalgamation of parties, but that is obviously not going to happen now. Mr. Day proved to be a more tenacious fighter than the plotters had counted on.

Mr. Manning's latest ploy is also doomed to failure. The dissidents are on "a downbound train," in Bruce Springsteen's graphic phrase. They will not get recognition as a party in the House of Commons because most other parties are opposed and it is not in the Liberals' interest to encourage breakaway movements lest one arise in their own ranks. Their numbers will probably soon fall be-

## THE DISSIDENTS ARE ON A DOWNBOUND TRAIN; IN SPRINGSTEEN'S PHRASE

low the critical threshold of 12 as one or more of them returns to the Alliance to support Stephen Harper's leadership bid.

The dissidents have no collective future. As individuals, they can try to return to the Alliance, join the Tories and hope to get re-elected under that label, or retire from politics when their terms expire.

The Alliance, meanwhile, may be revitalized, now that Mr. Day has saved it from being hijacked. Stephen Harper, an experienced and qualified candidate, seems ready to enter the leadership race; let's hope others also step forward. If Mr. Harper enters the race, his purpose will be to preserve the Alliance as a forthrightly conservative party — not extreme, but consistent in its philosophy, ready to co-operate with other parties but not to abandon its own identity.

Defeatist talk about the necessity of merging with the Tories will give way to proud affirmation of a simple fact: The Reform/Alliance movement was the most influential force in Canadian politics of the past decade. It successfully drove the federal agenda towards fiscal responsibility, tax cuts and resistance to separatism; and it still has lots of work to do.

Politics abounds in ironies. Preston Manning conjured the Canadian Alliance into existence but then quickly encouraged his apprentices to euthanize the party. Maybe Stephen Harper, whose past disagreements with Mr. Manning are legendary, will be the one to keep Mr. Manning's creation alive.

*National Post*  
Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary and author of *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning*.