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## Re-founding the Reform Party

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### Abstract (summary)

Nonetheless, it may be possible to enlarge the Reform base and build the organization by establishing closer links with provincial parties. The CCF benefited mightily by operating both provincially and federally from the beginning. By winning power in Saskatchewan, it turned that province into an experimental laboratory for its ideology, and it trained leaders and workers who could also operate at the national level.

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### Full Text

Re-founding the Reform Party

Thursday, April 22, 1999

IN ALBERTA -- A populist party founded in Alberta succeeds in electing western MPs and exercises substantial influence on public policy. Yet it never gets close to forming a government because its support is spotty in Ontario and almost non-existent in Quebec and Atlantic Canada. In an attempt to become a truly national party, it holds a highly publicized meeting in Ottawa and gives itself a new name, a new constitution and a new platform.

The Reform Party and the United Alternative? Guess again. It's a description of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which was founded in Calgary in 1932, won seats consistently from 1935 onward but did not elect its first Ontario MP until 1949, and turned itself into the New Democratic Party (NDP) in 1961. Preston Manning has been following a well-trodden path in his attempt to re-found the Reform Party.

How successful was the re-founding exercise for the partisans of the CCF/NDP? It did not enable them to win a federal election and form a government; they are as far from that goal as ever. But they stabilized their organization through a formal alliance with organized labour, increased their vote share marginally, and went on to exercise enormous influence. They created the Canadian welfare state, using the Liberal Party as a proxy. Not a bad record of accomplishment, if politics means more than putting your leader in 24 Sussex Drive.

Preston Manning is fond of saying that he does not want the Reform Party to become "the NDP of the right," a party that wields influence but never authority. I couldn't disagree more. The CCF/NDP is an ideal model of how a party can achieve results through patient, consistent, incremental advocacy of its principles.

The problem for Reformers at this juncture is to find allies to do for them what organized labour did for the CCF/NDP -- enlarge the base of support and build organizational strength. An alliance with Quebec separatists is simply not feasible as long as they remain separatists; and the most obvious potential partner, the federal Progressive Conservative Party, doesn't want to get involved. Reform may attract individual Conservatives, such as those who collaborated in sponsoring the United Alternative meeting, but that's a far cry from assembling enough voters to win an election.

Nonetheless, it may be possible to enlarge the Reform base and build the organization by establishing closer links with provincial parties. The CCF benefited mightily by operating both provincially and federally from the beginning. By winning power in Saskatchewan, it turned that province into an experimental laboratory for its ideology, and it trained leaders and workers who could also operate at the national level. It would be a remarkable repetition of history if the new Saskatchewan Party, already informally linked to Reform, could win a provincial election and demonstrate that Reform can govern as well as oppose.

The situation is different in every province. In some cases Reform might affiliate with an existing provincial party; in some it might found a provincial Reform party; in some it might choose to do nothing. But in the absence of willing federal partners, forging provincial ties seems the only way to build the movement.

Another lesson from the CCF. When it turned itself into the NDP, it also chose a new leader: Tommy Douglas, the former premier of Saskatchewan. Without a change of leadership, the re-foundation of the Reform Party will seem purely cosmetic.

Preston Manning has earned his place in Canadian history by creating a new party and realigning the party system. Most of those who know him personally like and respect him. I count myself among his admirers, even though he fired me in 1993. (I had a fatal flaw as an adviser: I gave too much advice.) But he will never be prime minister. For reasons that would take another column to explore, he does not project himself effectively through the mass media. For years, his polling numbers have been only a little above Brian Mulroney's, and that won't change, even with a new wardrobe and haircut.

A new leader won't guarantee success. In fact, most would be much worse than Mr. Manning. But some new leaders, such as Stephen Harper or Stockwell Day, might have a chance of winning a national election. If Mr. Manning really means what he says so often, that forming a government is the true test of success for the Reform Party, he will have to step aside. Then we can both indulge our passion for fishing -- maybe even together.

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

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