

Taking Stock, making choices

NP, Nov. 29, 2000

In spite of its growth, the Alliance did not achieve any major objectives

TOM FLANAGAN

According to an old joke, after a political battle is over and casualties litter the field, the pundits come down from their observation posts and shoot the wounded. I hope this column is more constructive than that, but it has to be provocative, because it's high time for members of the Canadian Alliance to think hard about political goals and strategy.

In an election where all other opposition parties lost ground, the Alliance increased its share of the popular vote from 19.4% to 25.5%, and its seat total from 60 to 66. Indeed, its vote share and seat total rose not only in Ontario but also in each of the four Western provinces. The Alliance has gotten stronger with each election and is now dominant or highly competitive everywhere in the West except for Winnipeg and downtown Vancouver.

So much for the good news. The bad news is that, in spite of its growth, the Alliance did not achieve any major objectives. Victory over the Liberals was never in reach, and the Alliance also failed to win any of the available consolation prizes, such as bringing the Liberals down to a minority government, making a substantial breakthrough in Ontario, or putting the Tories out of their misery. With Joe Clark elected in Calgary Centre and leading a recognized caucus of 12 in the House of Commons, the politically undead still walk the land.

The worst news is that these failures were largely self-inflicted. It would be pointless to blame the CBC for its biased coverage, or *The Globe and Mail* for its tendentious headlines, or the Liberals for their negative ads. The Alliance campaign was a mess. The attacks that kept the Alliance from gathering new support were effective because they played off errors that ran from top to bottom throughout the party — the leader being unable to defend longstanding party policy; senior advisors making statements that appeared to contradict the leader; paid staff releasing outdated briefing material; candidates making thoughtless public remarks; members recruiting Holocaust revisionists such as Doug Christie and Paul Fromm to join the party.

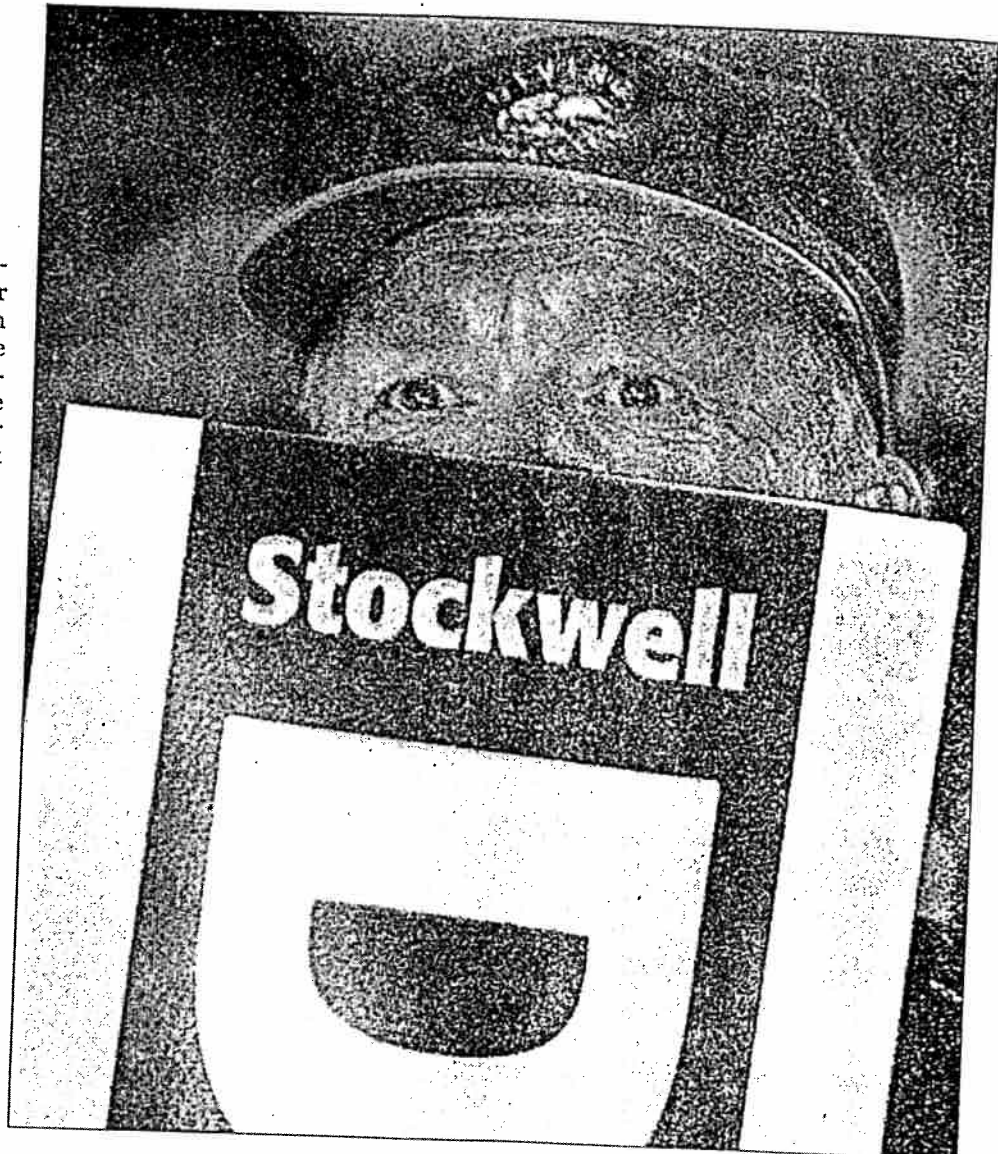
Not surprisingly, opponents turned all this confusion into charges that they had a hidden agenda. If only the charges had been true. If you have a hidden agenda, you must at least be clever.

Where do they go from here? The first step should be for the leader to appoint a task force to review the campaign. This shouldn't be just a self-assessment process carried out by the same people who ran the campaign. Impartial analysts must be called in to help pinpoint what went wrong and figure out how to fix it for next time.

Beyond this immediate task, members of the party should be talking about the Alliance's long-term options. As I see it, three branching paths lie ahead.

First, the Alliance can carry on as it is, as a sort of "NDP of the right." By playing that role in the 1990s, the party effectively influenced the national policy agenda in the direction of balanced budgets, smaller government, lower taxes and resistance to Quebec separatism. By co-operating with conservative provincial governments and maintaining its position in Ottawa as the official Opposition, it can continue the function of running interference for the government, finding out if there is support in public opinion for controversial proposals.

This is an honourable and important



JOHN LEHMANN / REUTERS

mission, but it is also true that if you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten. Being the NDP of the right might lead to further policy gains, but it won't lead to winning a national election in the foreseeable future.

Second, the party can get serious about winning. The chief lesson I have drawn from this campaign is how hard it will be for the Alliance to win a national election with a leader from the West, especially from Alberta. The Liberals obviously

**ONTARIO VOTERS ARE
EASILY SPOOKED ABOUT
THE WEST, AND ABOUT
ALBERTA IN PARTICULAR**

knew what they were doing when they invested their advertising money not in attacking Mr. Day's religious beliefs or social conservatism, but in connecting him to Alberta's health-care policies. Their ad was a collage of barefaced lies, but it was effective because Ontario voters are easily spooked about the West, and about Alberta in particular.

Call it the Mulroney solution. The Progressive Conservatives were stalemated in the 1970s and 1980s until Brian Mulroney convinced them that they could never win a national election without getting seats in Quebec, and that he was the one who could deliver those seats. He was right on both points, and the result was two majority governments for the Tories. The Alliance needs the equivalent of Mr. Mulroney in Ontario.

I am not, repeat, not advocating that the Alliance immediately start a leadership race. Mr. Day resigned a wonderful job, Treasurer of Alberta, to become leader of the party; and he worked himself to exhaustion to help win significantly more votes and seats than it ever achieved previously. The party owes him a debt of gratitude as well as another

chance to show what he can do.

Finally, if for no other reason than to illustrate the range of possibilities, one should think about going back to Preston Manning's original strategy of running candidates only in the four Western provinces. In his 1987 speech to the Vancouver Assembly that launched the Reform party, Mr. Manning said, "A new federal political party which captured 30 to 40 seats across the West would have a better than 50-50 chance of holding the balance of power in the next federal Parliament." In that situation, Western MPs could extract concessions from whichever party they chose to support in government.

Although the balance-of-power strategy is an interesting idea, it was never tested because the Reform party was unable to elect anyone in 1988 and was already running candidates in Ontario in 1993. The irony of the Reform and the Alliance parties is that they have been just strong enough to destroy the Progressive Conservatives in their traditional heartland of rural Ontario, but not strong enough to elect their own MPs there. Have they been too clever by half? Would it have been better to stick to the West, elect a bloc of members there, and then deal with the Liberals or Tories, depending on who was willing to come to the table?

Of course, one can theorize about a strategic retreat to the West, but in practice it would not be so simple. After attracting tens of thousands of eastern members and building an infrastructure across the country, would the party ever voluntarily renounce those assets? I don't know; but in its present impasse, it needs to consider all options before discarding any.

When I was a boy, my favourite baseball player was Yogi Berra. He is supposed to have said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." The Alliance has come to a fork, but it can't just "take it." The party is going to have to make some choices.

Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary and a member of the Canadian Alliance.