

The right can have purity — and power

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In defining the key issue in the current Canadian Alliance leadership race, Tom Flanagan's column (Jan. 4) could not have been clearer. It is this: Does the Canadian Alliance want to be a pure and principled Western-based conservative party, with occasional salutary influence on Liberal governments but with no realistic hope of gaining power? Or is it prepared to make the honourable compromises necessary to make it a still-principled but also nationally credible alternative to the Liberals, as a first step to forming a national government? Is it to be a regional NDP of the right or Canada's second national party and government-in-waiting?

It is understandable Prof. Flanagan should be a strong defender of the first option, as is his candidate for leader, Stephen Harper. Both men are ideological purists of the Barry Goldwater stripe — he who would rather have been right than president. Based on their careful analysis of the history of conservative movements in Canada and elsewhere, they have concluded true conservatives should never join a traditional mainstream party, where they are bound to be in a minority and where their principles are bound to be watered down and sometimes even sacrificed in the name of political expediency. The only acceptable vehicle for Canadian conservatives, on their reading, is a minority gadfly party, which can remain true to its philosophy and convictions at any cost — even at the cost of being perpetually frozen out of government by the more pragmatic Liberals. Prof. Flanagan even goes so far as to suggest the proper model for slow-learning conservatives in Canada is the CCF/NDP — a party that received a whopping 8.5% of the popular vote in the 2000 election and has become an utter irrelevancy to most Canadians!

While no doubt academically sound, Prof. Flanagan's analysis is, as we have now seen through three elections, a recipe for electoral disaster for conservatives and for one-party rule for all Canadians. It is also a prescription founded on defeatism and a resigned acceptance of the inability of conservatives ever to persuade a plurality of Canadians to support them. Moreover, it elevates free market policies to iconic status, with nary a nod to the equally important value of democratic accountability.

I and many other Canadian conservatives take a different view. We believe the failure of cohesion in the conservative movement in Canada is based not on a rejection of conservative values by Canadians, but on two eminently fixable and non-ideological factors: inadequate leadership and the absence of a single credible national conservative alternative to the Liberals. As long as Western conservatives support one party (the Alliance) and eastern conservatives another (the Progressive Conservatives), while both parties dispute the conservative vote in Ontario and are almost invisible in Quebec, it is structurally impossible for the Liberals to lose their plurality in the House of Commons.

Because the thought of dealing with Joe Clark is anathema to him and Mr. Harper, Prof. Flanagan does not even address this structural problem; but it is in fact the one insuperable obstacle to conservative electoral success in Canada. Let me illustrate.

There are 91 Commons seats west of Ontario, 103 in Ontario itself and 107 east of Ontario, for a total of 301 seats. In the last three elections, the Liberals have taken more than 50% of the votes in Ontario, winning 98, 101 and 100 seats, partly because Ontario voters could see no single credible national alternative. The Liberals are likely to repeat this astonishing performance yet again if the Alliance and the Tories continue to divide Ontario's conservative vote — a consistent 38% — more or less equally between their two parties. In addition, and also partly as a result of conservative division and consequent weakness, the Liberals can now count on at least 35 of Quebec's 75 seats and

at least 15 of the 32 Atlantic seats. This gives the Liberal party a current base of 150 seats outside Western Canada — almost a parliamentary majority — even before the writ is dropped. (In 2000, they took 17 Western seats as well.)

To beat the Liberals, another party would have to win every other seat in the country: the 91 Western seats, 40 Quebec seats, 17 Atlantic seats and three in Ontario. A kindergartner can see this is structurally impossible as

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long as three regional parties remain strong enough to take at least a few seats in their home region. Even if the Alliance won every Western seat, while the Bloc won every Quebec seat and the Tories every Atlantic seat, the Liberals would still be the largest party in the Commons based on their stranglehold on Ontario.

No, the immediate problem of Canada's conservatives is not ideological impurity, it is regional factionalism. It follows that the only effective solution is eventually to come together in a single national conservative party. This inevitably means the Alliance and the Tories must make a deal, however unpalatable this might be to a few ideologues on either side. At present, each party has seats in only five provinces. But if the two parliamentary caucuses were to combine, they would immediately become a truly national party once again, with seats in every province except P.E.I., and forming a respectable Official Opposition of 78 members.

Unlike my friends Messrs. Flanagan and Harper, who appear content to let Liberals steal their principles and cynically use them to win elections, most conservatives believe that we could also win elections, while remaining far truer to our principles — but only if we first achieve national conservative unity.

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