

Three tips for the CA: policy, policy and policy

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Every major success enjoyed by conservatives in national politics in the past decade has resulted from the timely and unapologetic advancement of conservative ideals. These ideals catalyzed the Reform party and gave the Canadian Alliance its initial momentum. Conservatives looking for a way forward should get their bearings by taking a look back.

Reform was the first national party to oppose the Meech Lake accord, especially the distinct society clause. It made an even bigger impression on the public mind by helping to win the 1992 referendum battle against the Charlottetown accord. The opposition to both accords was essentially grounded on the conservative principle of the equality of all citizens before the law — an ideal that gathered wide support in the referendum battle.

The next landmark was Reform's Zero in Three plan for eliminating the federal deficit in three years through spending cuts. Zero in Three became the crucial factor in the 1993 election that enabled the party to win 52 seats in the House of Commons. This time, the conservative ideal of smaller government provided the foundation, a foundation initially derided by all the other parties but soon adopted by the Liberals as their own policy.

In 1995, Reform put out a new fiscal blueprint — the Taxpayer's Budget advocating \$25-billion in spending reductions and the elimination of the federal role in health and education through the transfer of tax points to the provinces. Here was another conservative principle — decentralization. The success of Reform's downsizing and decentralizing proposals came when Finance Minister Paul Martin borrowed heavily from Reform's proposed spending reductions in early 1995. That same budget also combined federal transfers into an annual lump sum, reducing Ottawa's control over provincial social programs.

Reform then shifted emphasis when it published its "20/20" paper after the Quebec referendum of October, 1995. That document merged Plan A — decentralization of powers not only to Quebec but all provinces — with Plan B — Canada's pledge to defend its national interest against separatist threats. Plan B was grounded in the conservative ideal of the rule of law, which the Liberals borrowed when they introduced the Clarity Act — once again demonstrating how influential an opposition party can be against a rudderless government.

In 1998, the leadership of the party launched the United Alternative, shifting the focus from policy to process. Internal strife grew and polling numbers fell as the party put its attention on how to win power, rather than on what political power should be used for. In the meantime, Alberta Treasurer Stockwell Day announced Alberta was moving to a single rate of provincial income tax. Positive reaction in conservative circles emboldened the United Alternative organizers to adopt the single-rate tax as the signature policy of the new Canadian Alliance.

Mr. Day's bold tax-reform initiative also made possible his successful campaign for leadership of the Alliance. And while the media paid little attention, his campaign was marked by numerous policy speeches detailing his commitment to tax cuts, smaller government, decentralization, traditional social institutions, and criminal justice reform. Preston Manning, in contrast, spoke relatively little about policy during the campaign, preferring to emphasize his claim that only he could lead the party to victory in a general election. Mr. Day won a resounding victory, and Alliance polling numbers broke through Reform's glass ceiling of 20%.

The Liberals responded with cunning — stealing the tax-cut agenda and catching the process-weary Alliance off guard by calling an early election. During the election campaign, the Alliance policy messages got confused. Nonetheless, the party received 25.5% of the popular vote, much better than the 19% Reform got in 1993 and 1997, and Canada got significant tax cuts as a result of the pressure the Alliance put on the Liberals.

This survey suggests that if conservatives hope to find a way out of their muddle, they have to refocus on policy. Factional strife and endless talk about who can win, rather than advancing the ideals they would pursue if they did win, will do little but drive the party's supporters away.

This is not just a recipe for perpetual opposition. Provincial conservatives have used conservative ideology to win power in Alberta (smaller government), Ontario (tax cuts and welfare reform) and British Columbia (democratic reforms, lower taxes and the equality of all citizens). At the national level, fiscal issues and free trade provided part of the foundations for conservative majorities in the 1980s.

Canadians need, and deserve, more than just an alternative, more than just strategic alliances. They need an alternative grounded in conservative ideals such as smaller government, lower taxes, the equality of citizens, and the rule of law. For if all we want is the exercise of power, we might as well join the Liberals.

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