

Tory temptation

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Joe Clark proposes a merger with the Canadian Alliance, say the headlines, but only on Tory terms. Come again? Is there a misprint in my newspaper?

The Progressive Conservatives just finished last for the third time in a row. Their vote share fell from 19% to 12%, and their seat total from 20 to 12. The Alliance, in contrast, got its highest vote share (25%) and seat total (66) ever. Why would the Alliance hand itself over to a party with less than half of its popular vote and less than a fifth as many seats?

The Tory leader, moreover, got elected in Calgary Centre only because the Liberal party sold out its own candidate and told Liberal voters in that riding to support Mr. Clark because of the damage he might do to the Alliance. Not surprisingly, in view of how he got elected, Mr. Clark is now acting as the Liberals' political hand puppet. Calling for a merger with the Alliance on Tory terms is a transparent attempt to foment dissension within Alliance ranks.

True, the Reform party began, in effect, as a breakaway movement from the Progressive Conservatives, but the past 13 years have driven the parties so far apart that reunification is impossible. Once the so-called Blue Tories joined with Reform in the United Alternative, the right really was united. The remaining Progressive Conservative party is a mixture of tribal loyalists and Red Tories, leavened with unstable swing voters who could disappear at any moment.

The Alliance, on the other hand, is an ideologically coherent conservative party. The election showed how solidly committed its voters are. In spite of a poor campaign, the Alliance began and ended with 25% of popular support. Its supporters never wavered.

These voters would never accept leadership from the likes of Joe Clark. They did in the past, and they saw the results — the near-death experience of the Clark-Mulroney era, when deficit spending spiralled out of control and appeasement of Quebec separatism nearly destroyed the country. No Alliance voter wants a rerun of that movie.

Alliance and Tory support no longer can be added together into a larger whole. Most Alliance voters reject the Tories, and most Tory voters reject the Alliance.

Of course, the Alliance has problems. Endorsed by a quarter of the nation, it exerts a powerful influence on the political agenda, but it can't win an election. As I suggested last week, the Al-

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with whoever could form a government with its support. It could, just as well negotiate with the supremely opportunistic Liberals as anyone else; there would be no point in consummating a morganatic marriage with the Tories.

For the Alliance, the recent election was disappointing relative to its aspirations, but hardly so disappointing that it must embrace the Tories for consolation. Canadians have entrusted the Alliance with 66 seats in the House of Commons. Would the Tories or the NDP like to have 66 seats? You bet they would!

The Alliance should cheer up. There is more than enough work to do as the Official Opposition, driving its own items on to the national agenda and blocking the crazier initiatives of the Liberals. Meanwhile, the Tories will continue to squirm in their own futility.

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liance will ultimately have to choose between three alternatives: remain an ideological party, a sort of NDP of the right, and settle for the exercise of influence; become a pragmatic party, focused on winning as a paramount goal; or return to being a regional party of Western Canada, hoping to hold the balance of power in a minority Parliament. Each of these possibilities is worth considering, but none involves a *danse macabre* with the Tory zombies.

If the Alliance continues as an ideological party, it must hold on to its political philosophy, whereas Joe Clark's first demand is to renounce robust conservatism. If the Alliance is going to become a pragmatic party, it will eventually have to find a winning leader, probably from eastern Canada; but such a person will not be found among the current leadership cadre of the PCs. If you want a winner, do you search among those who have masterminded a last-place finish three times in a row?

A Western strategy for the Alliance would involve moving out of eastern Canada, not merging with the Tories. Who knows what might emerge to fill the gap? Perhaps the PCs would rebound, but it is also possible that genuinely conservative Ontario voters would create their own party, with an Ontario rather than a Western flavour, and drive the Tories into oblivion in the east. The Alliance, secure in its Western base, would be ready to deal