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Uniting the right, reforming the system

An Alliance-PC
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than pure partisan
self-interest

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Rumours of co-operation between the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives abound; but, with so many people saying so many things, it is impossible to say how far this could go. Nonetheless, a few points seem clear.

Tactical co-ordination in Parliament is in the interest of both parties because they have complementary resources. The Canadian Alliance has more members in the House of Commons, while the Tories have more Senators and, in Joe Clark, a leader with long experience of parliamentary gamesmanship. The two parties will do a better job of opposing the Liberals if they get together on matters such as planning question period strategy, proposing amendments to legislation, and attempting to block bills as they progress through the House and Senate.

However, the obstacles to outright merger remain formidable. Considered abstractly, the differences in policy between the Alliance and Tories are not huge, but they are intertwined with differences in party culture, organizational imperatives and the future of individual careers in such a way as to make merger difficult.

Consider Alliance leader Stockwell Day's recent statement — which I endorse — that any major change must be approved by the grassroots. This asserted his leadership while simultaneously appealing to the populist culture of his party. Yet it poses all sorts of problems for the Tories, for their 25,000 members would be swamped by 200,000 Alliance members in any exercise of democratic consultation. Hence, the PCs will insist on the equality of the two parties to each other, or perhaps on the equality of all 301 riding associations, not on the individual equality of party members.

In my view, merger would be hard to achieve and probably not desirable, even if it could somehow be negotiated. Like most Alliance members, I want to belong to a party that is clearly conservative, not one characterized by oxymoronic formulas such as “progressive conservative” or “fiscally conservative but socially liberal.”

Yet being skeptical about merger does not mean saying no to electoral co-operation through the strategic co-ordination of candidacies. This can take different forms, ranging from joint nomination meetings to an agreement between the parties to leave specific ridings to the other.

Agreements for electoral co-operation usually begin with an understanding that each party will not oppose any of the other's incumbent MPs seeking re-election. Beyond that, there is infinite flexibility. Parties can divide up the country cleanly on a geographical basis, or they can negotiate a patchwork of candidacies based on a fine-grained analysis of local strength. They can agree to compete against each other in some ridings and to co-operate in others. At the extreme, one party can even make a unilateral decision to withdraw from some ridings, as the British Liberals did in favour of Labour in 1906.

Electoral co-operation between parties can advance their common interests while retaining their distinct identities and ideological positions. It is, however, difficult to sustain co-operation for more than one or two elections with Canadian-style first-past-the-post voting. The winner-take-all logic of the system makes parties want to contest races in all possible ridings, even those they cannot hope to win. The Reform/Alliance and the Tories did this repeatedly in the past, effectively sabotaging the other's hopes of success in Ontario.

Electoral co-operation, however, is promoted by other forms of voting, such as proportional representation (the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union in Germany) or the alternative vote (the Liberals and the National Party in Australia). Thus, Stephen Harper and I suggested in 1997 that, if the Reform party and the Tories wanted to get together, they should make electoral reform “Proposition 1” in their joint platform.

Although electoral reform would serve the interests of an Alliance-PC coalition, it would be more than a measure of pure partisan self-interest. There is wide interest in Canada today in democratizing the political system. Voters are unhappy with rigid discipline in the House of Commons, the appointment of Senators and manipulation of election dates for partisan advantage. Another source of anger is the potential for first-past-the-post voting to confer victory upon a party that has won fewer popular votes than its main opponent, as happened in the 1990s in Quebec and British Columbia.

True to historical type, these issues are most alive in the West. If the Saskatchewan Party comes to power in the next provincial election, it will probably hold a senatorial advisory election, as Alberta has done twice already. In British Columbia, Liberal leader Gordon Campbell, whom everyone expects to become the next premier, has promised to establish fixed election dates and to put electoral reform on the agenda.

Properly framed as part of a wider program of democratization, electoral reform could command support from many quarters. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation is interested, as is the National Citizens' Coalition. The Reform party endorsed electoral reform before folding itself into the Alliance. Prominent Conservatives, such as Hugh Segal, support electoral reform, as do well-known NDP members, such as Judy Rebick and Lorne Nystrom. It is hard to find another cause that resonates so widely across the political spectrum.

An axiom of political science is that electoral reform happens only when it is in someone's interest to make it happen. The pursuit of political success through electoral co-operation between the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives could create a powerful champion for electoral reform and for a more democratic political system in Canada.

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