

Tories stand their ground -- but may disappear

Refusal to co-operate with the Alliance is principled, proud and, quite possibly, foolhardy

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In the 1984 federal general election, the one that saw Brian Mulroney sweep to power with 211 of 282 seats, the Progressive Conservatives received 6.3 million votes, 50 per cent of those cast.

In the 1988 election, the party received nearly 5.7 million votes, or 43 per cent. In 1993, it won 2.2 million (16 per cent), in 1997, 2.4 million (18.7 per cent) and in 2000, 1.6 million votes. Its percentage of the popular vote in the last federal election -- a meagre 12.2 per cent -- was its lowest ever. Even in the middle of the Depression, when Mackenzie King's Liberals trounced R.B. Bennett's incumbent Conservatives, the party still polled 29.8 per cent.

By contrast, Reform's vote in 1993 was 2.6 million (18.7 per cent) and 2.5 million in 1997 (19.4 per cent, an increase over 1993 because of lower turnout). The Canadian Alliance's total was 3.3 million (25.5 per cent) in 2000, despite a terrible campaign.

Do you see the pattern here?

The Tory vote is today just one-quarter of what it was when the party was at its Mulroney peak. And its support has dropped for four straight elections, with the exception of a tiny blip upwards in 1997, when the memory of the hated Mulroney had faded and the disastrous Kim Campbell had been replaced.

For three straight elections, the Tories have won the smallest number of seats of any of the five major federal parties. Between the 1997 and 2000 elections, nearly 900,000 voters -- almost a third of their 1997 support -- abandoned them.

In Quebec, the Tories all but disappeared, going from 22 per cent in 1997 to just six per cent last time. Even in Atlantic Canada, their only remaining stronghold, the Tories lost four percentage points in 2000. In Ontario they declined from 18 per cent to 14.

In the last election, their support was less than one-half of the Canadian Alliance's. And despite the Alliance acrimonious and implosive year in 2001, when the controversy over the leadership of Stockwell Day all but tore that party to shreds, the Tories failed to make any inroads. At the end of the Day debacle, the Tories were one percentage point ahead of where they had been in the polls when the Alliance's troubles began. The big winners had been the Liberals, who picked up seven points.

Among the Alliance MPs who defected to the Tories, only Inky Mark of Manitoba stayed.

So, given all this, it's really charming of the Tories to reject co-operation with the Canadian Alliance, and to think they can defeat the Liberals on their own. But it also borders on the delusional. What can the Tories point to as concrete evidence that they are not still headed downward, other than their own renewed hubris that they alone are the legitimate alternative government?

Voting 99 per cent to reject a merger with the Alliance may look forceful and confident. It may enable

the Tories to inflate their self-images. Yet it doesn't alter the electoral forces coursing through the Canadian political mainstream.

Perhaps someday voters will share the same high opinion of the Tories that they have of themselves, yet that seems unlikely.

The party has been on an 18-year decline that shows no sign of letting up. They can insist that Alliance backers should "come home," rather than choosing to merge their party with the CA. Still, no senior Tory ever misses an opportunity to disparage all things Alliance. There has been more invective for the Alliance at the Tory convention than for the Liberals. It's hard to imagine how this attract-them-with-vinegar strategy will succeed. Most Tories believe Alliance members are dumb, but dumb enough to be convinced with insults to rejoin the PCs?

I've never been a huge fan of the unite-the-right movement, preferring hostile takeover to merger, scorched earth to joint tenancy. So it's not the Tories' rejection of the concept that's galling. Rather it's their smug rejection of the obvious.

Earlier this week, retiring Tory Leader Joe Clark said, snidely, that the Alliance under new leader Stephen Harper had failed to make a major advance in the polls, which is accurate enough. Since Harper took over in March, the Alliance has risen from 14 per cent to 18 per cent, hardly a juggernaut. But the Tories have dropped from 16 per cent to 15. And since the depths of the Day controversy last year, the Alliance has resurged 11 points, while the Tories have dropped four.

Clark's vision of a stagnant party would seem preferable, then, to the Tory reality of a declining one. Imagine how confident the Tories would be about their future if their support dropped to single digits and their Parliamentary caucus disappeared altogether. Young, little-known Bernard Lord or Scott Brison or Peter MacKay may reverse this trend if one of them replaces Clark.

But don't bet on it.

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