

Harper, Harris confer by phone 'They're encouraged by each other's comments'

Robert Benzie, with files from Sheldon Alberts

National Post

Tuesday, August 13, 2002

Stephen Harper, the Canadian Alliance leader, telephoned Mike Harris yesterday amid growing speculation the former Ontario Conservative premier will jump in the race to lead a united right-wing party.

Sources told the National Post the two men spoke by phone and had an informal discussion about the need to bring the Alliance and the federal Tories together to prevent the Liberals from winning a fourth consecutive majority.

The call came after Mr. Harris praised Mr. Harper last week for offering to hold a joint leadership convention with the Conservatives in the wake of Joe Clark's departure as party leader.

"They're both encouraged by each other's comments. Both of them are encouraged by each other's positions. Mike would make a great addition to federal politics. Stephen's already on the record as saying that," said Carolyn Stewart-Olsen, Mr. Harper's press secretary.

She emphasized that the call in no way suggests the Alliance and the Tories are any closer to forming a union. "Ultimately, any decision is, of course, made in both parties by [the] grassroots, and that's way down the road."

But insiders say the call is significant because it proves Mr. Harper's proposal to surrender the Alliance helm in order to merge the two parties was a sincere bid at unity and not what Mr. Clark dismissed as a stunt.

Speaking to reporters on Friday in his native North Bay, Mr. Harris hailed Mr. Harper's gesture.

"I believe very strongly that a small-c conservative united party is essential for this country. To that end, I was very encouraged by Mr. Harper's comments -- a newly elected leader of a party who came forward right away and indicated that he'd be prepared to step down ... and have one leadership of one united party," said the former premier.

"People on both the Alliance party and on the Progressive Conservative Party are going to have to put a little bit of the past aside and they're going to have to talk about the future of the country. If they're willing to do that, then I think there are many, many possibilities for a new leader that may come forward."

Sounding more like a candidate on the hustings than a retired politician, Mr. Harris, 57, said federal conservatives have no choice but to come together.

While Mr. Harris and Mr. Harper do not know each other well, the Alliance leader is an admirer of the man who rebuilt a bankrupt Ontario Conservative party, taking it from third place in 1990 to consecutive majority election victories in 1995 and 1999 by delivering on promises of tax and spending cuts.

Both he and the former premier said only a united party would attract the desired leadership.

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