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Tory leader's view of the future rivals Alice's looking glass
 DRC coalition failed because it worked so well, Clark says

Paul Wells
 National Post

OTTAWA - It really is a big tent, apparently. **On my way into** last night's PC Canada Fund dinner I ran into an organizer for Paul Martin's Liberal leadership campaign; a guy who used to organize Jean Chrétien's tours from the Prime Minister's Office; two Canadian Alliance strategists; and a passel of bankers who go to every party's fundraising dinners because what the heck, a guy's got to eat somewhere.

Such was the heterogeneous mix who came out to hear Joe Clark's latest plan for electoral triumph. The Tory leader drew a mixed but rather select crowd: About 200 people for the party's main annual Ottawa fundraiser, perhaps half of them actually Tories.

At least twice that many attended last year's dinner. In 1990, Brian Mulroney drew 1,700 people, at higher ticket prices, to a PC Canada Fund dinner in Toronto.

Some might say the Progressive Conservative party is wasting away. Doubtless Mr. Clark would say it is becoming more potent and concentrated. After long practice, he is becoming adept at putting the best possible face on things.

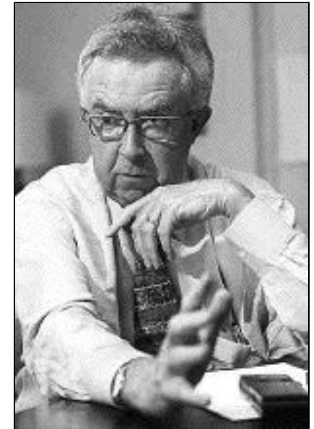
Take that coalition with Chuck Strahl and the other dissident Alliance MPs. "That coalition was broken two weeks ago," Mr. Clark had to admit. But watch this: "It came apart not because it wasn't working, but because it was."

Well, that explains everything, doesn't it. And if the PC-DRC coalition had worked twice as well, it would have lasted half as long. If it had been perfect it never would have existed.

Mr. Clark's speeches these days vault their listeners through the looking glass, where the view is actually quite grand. Six of the Strahlettes "broke their commitment" by returning to the party under whose banner they ran in the last general election; the seventh, Inky Mark, "put his principles ahead of pressure."

He chided Stephen Harper for planning to "run for government in the election after next;" the Tories, on the other hand, plan to seize power in two years. What qualification does Mr. Clark bring to the task? Only this: Because nobody in history has been as soundly beaten by Liberals as he, he holds the key to victory. "No one knows more than I do how tough it is to tackle the Liberal machine."

A week after the 20th anniversary of the 1982 constitutional repatriation, Mr. Clark continues to call that event "the imposition on Quebec of unilateral changes." He noted that "when first proposed, they were overwhelmingly popular outside Quebec," not noting



Rod Macivor, Ottawa Citizen

Joe Clark says he has a better chance at forming the next government than Stephen Harper because "no one knows more than I do how tough it is to tackle the Liberal machine."

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that the substance of the 1982 Constitution was actually rather popular inside Quebec and has become more so.

Today he will meet with Mario Dumont, the leader of the upstart Action Démocratique du Québec party, who didn't bother to attend the National Assembly's 20th-anniversary teeth-gnashing debate. Mr. Clark and Mr. Dumont will have much to discuss. They have so much in common. Mr. Dumont's party was born from dissatisfaction with the constitutional deal that became, under Mr. Clark's stewardship, the Charlottetown Accord. And neither leader has ever won more than two seats in Quebec.

But I digress. Ten minutes after Mr. Clark lauded the virtues of his stillborn coalition, he announced the public "couldn't care less" about "the mechanics of coalition-building." Instead, Mr. Clark will concentrate on good public policy.

Such as? Well, he's against adopting the U.S. dollar. Mr. Clark pronounced himself alone on this policy. "As usual the Canadian government hasn't said yes. It hasn't said no." This is in fact true: What Jean Chrétien has said is, "The government won't do it." Which isn't the same as "no," precisely.

Mr. Clark might be surprised to hear that, in one section of an interview with the National Post that we haven't written about yet, Stephen Harper endorsed Mr. Clark's plan to seek power. "He's the leader of the Progressive Conservative party," Mr. Harper told me and some colleagues in Edmonton. "So his obligation to his members is to try to become Prime Minister of Canada."

For today at least, this corner will offer no prognosis for Mr. Clark's chances of success. His party's fortunes and the Canadian Alliance's have been locked in a poisonous duet, one rising as the other falls, for too long. But he is very low these days and I don't know whether he helps his quest to rise when he indulges in mad fantasy about his party and the world. Even if he does resist the urge to do it in front of large crowds.

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