

Talent for compromise

Tories have been forging coalitions and partnerships since Confederation, says SCOTT McDOUGALL. It's the PC way

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UPDATED AT 12:03 AM EST

Wednesday, Dec. 3, 2003

The agreement in principle to create a new national conservative party that is being voted on by PC Party of Canada delegates on Saturday is about the creation of an honourable

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successor-in-interest between two equals, and represents an opportunity for people of goodwill acting in the national public interest to restore multiparty democracy in Canada.

Many past efforts to accomplish this objective have been thwarted by narrow-minded people who refuse to recognize the well-documented and noble coalition-building traditions of the PC Party, and have arrogantly believed that as the natural governing alternative to the Liberals, only it (as currently constituted) could win an election. The steadfast refusal to recognize overwhelming electoral evidence to the contrary is sadly inconsistent with the proud Progressive Conservative tradition that they purport to protect.

Nothing short of a successful effort to form a new conservative party before the next election will attract the best quality candidates to public life, and inspire the participation of tens of thousands of small-c conservative donors and campaign workers who are currently uninvolved in federal politics. Most important, an end to the war of attrition between the two parties will serve as a positive signal to Canadian voters that they will once again be able to vote for a credible governing alternative to the Liberals.

PC history with respect to forging coalitions and partnerships is a honourable one that dates back to the founding of Confederation, when Sir John A. Macdonald acted in the national public interest by partnering with George Etienne Cartier and long-time adversary George Brown. It was actually the Liberal-Conservative Party (established in 1854) that formed the first Dominion government in 1867, under prime minister Macdonald. Previously, Mr. Macdonald had served in successive colonial coalitions with Liberals (1854) and Mr. Brown's Reformers (1864).

Whenever Canadian conservatives have formed the federal government, some sort of broad coalition in the Macdonald tradition has existed. This includes the successful relationship between Sir Robert Borden, who became prime minister in 1911, and the Quebec nationalist Henri Bourassa. In 1917, Liberals and Conservatives formed a coalition government under Mr. Borden (with a cabinet of 12 Tories, nine Liberals, plus independents) and governed as Unionists until 1920.

The National Liberal and Conservative Party was the name adopted in 1921, since the party consisted of Liberals and Tories. Even from 1925 to 1942, it was still officially the Liberal Conservative Party, and known only by default as Conservative.

With the historic election of premier John Bracken of the Manitoba (Liberal) Progressive Party in 1942, the party became branded as the Progressive Conservative Party, the name change being one of his demands for assuming the federal leadership. The Progressive Party had its roots as an agrarian-based protest movement. It was not a formal merger since the federal Progressive Party only ceased to exist shortly after the poor showing of a limited number of candidates in the 1942 election. Interestingly, this same Progressive Party had worked co-operatively with the Liberal Party in 1925, by helping W. L. M. King (who had won only 99 seats) form a government and defeat Arthur Meighen (who had won 116 seats).

In more recent years, prime minister John Diefenbaker benefited from a strategic relationship with Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis. Prime minister Brian Mulroney's electoral success is directly linked to the coalition of soft-nationalist Québécois, Ontario and Western Canadian small-c conservatives. The difficulty of forging such a winning conservative coalition is highlighted by the fact that since R. B. Bennett's 1930 victory, the PC party has only won three majority governments.

The Canadian Alliance's founding was entirely in keeping with the coalition-building traditions of the PC Party. In his 1998 keynote address to the Reform national assembly meeting, then-leader Preston Manning recognized this indisputable historical fact when he spoke about the Macdonald, Brown and Cartier partnership and invited Canadians to participate in the united alternative movement. While the campaign attracted tens of thousands of provincial activists and federal conservatives, and while the Alliance succeeded in significantly improving upon previous Reform electoral results, it is still an incomplete coalition.

In recent times, the world has witnessed remarkable examples of political reconciliation in Europe, South Africa and our Southern Hemisphere. Surely when viewed in that context, current partisan differences between PC and CA supporters are more akin to a family feud and are easily resolvable. As in a family reconciliation, there are risks involved and old wounds to be healed. However, nothing will be accomplished without the

type of positive leadership and goodwill that has been demonstrated by Peter MacKay, Stephen Harper and their distinguished negotiating teams.

Achieving political unity before the next election does not require uniformity of thinking. Successful federal and provincial conservative coalitions have always been broadly based and have valued the diversity of their constituent members. Today's challenge for party delegates is to rise above the real and perceived grievances of the past, and participate in the process of building a winning, truly inclusive team for the future.

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