

A morning-after shocker

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Alliance Party leader Stephen Harper and Progressive Conservative Party leader Peter MacKay have finally reached an agreement to merge their parties in an effort to unite the right. Each needs to elicit the support of his party members -- something which, especially in the case of the PCs, is no slam dunk. Even more challenging will be retaining the loyalty of the current supporters of each party if they do succeed in becoming one Conservative Party.

History shows that parties that wish to challenge the Liberals and form majority governments must offer a platform that appeals to Canadians in every region. Our first-past-the-post electoral system makes it difficult for parties to win seats in every region, but they must always be seen as trying. The Bloc Québécois does not yet aspire to form a government, but the Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives do. There is nothing tactically wrong with these latter two parties uniting, but to position this move as one to "unite the right" is politically dangerous, if uniting the right means uniting socially conservative, anti-government and pro-American constituencies and, in effect, creating the Canadian Republican party.

There is certainly room in Canada for a party that wishes to scrap gun registration, bring abortion back under the Criminal Code, lower taxes for the well-off, reinstate the death penalty, oppose legalizing marijuana and same-sex marriage, and stand shoulder to shoulder with the United States when its government wishes to overthrow a regime it doesn't like. But it is a very small room, certainly less than the combined 30-per-cent popularity the Alliance and PCs enjoy these days.

Rebuilding a conservative alternative to the Liberals is not impossible. It has been done before. But it will require exceptional leadership if it is to build complex coalitions such as those of John Diefenbaker and Brian Mulroney and there is no obvious candidate (although often, charismatic leaders seem to come out of nowhere).

The new Conservative Party leader must consolidate the core of Western alienation and appeal to those Ontarians who voted twice for Mike Harris -- while reaching out to Quebec and Atlantic Canada, young Canada, urban Canada, multicultural, multi-faith and no-faith Canada. The new leader must also be careful with the relationship between his or her religious convictions and stances on public policy issues, given the emotions aroused by wedge issues that speak more to our values than to our interests.

Unlike many Americans, Canadians do not wish their political leaders to wear their religiosity on their sleeves. Former Alliance Party leader Stockwell Day learned that a Canadian political party, unlike the Republicans in the U.S., cannot be built upon the base of Christian fundamentalists who are less than 15 per cent of Canada's population.

The policies revered by the Canadian right appeal most strongly to older, white males who live outside our major cities. They are a minority to be offered the same respect as any other minority, but they are not the country's future. Our future lies with the young, multicultural women and men who live in cities and do their heavy lifting with their heads and not their hands.

Survey after survey shows these people to be disengaging from Canada's political life. They are half as likely to vote as young people in previous generations. Social conservatism is the last thing that will appeal to their secular individualism.

But perhaps the biggest challenge facing the unification of Canada's parties to the right is in squaring the very different values held by the core supporters. Environics research on social values shows Alliance supporters to have the most traditional values of the supporters of any of the five parties in the House of Commons: Their mindset is one of "survival of the fittest" social Darwinism, a resistance to change, a sense that world is going to hell in a hand basket. PC members' values are closer to the Liberals and even to the New Democrats than they are to Alliance supporters.

Our current polling shows significant differences between Alliance and PC supporters on important substantive and symbolic issues. When asked what the federal government should do with its surplus, 45 per cent of PCs agree with 48 per cent of Liberals that it should be spent on programs such as health care, social services and employment grants, an option favoured by only 22 per cent of Alliance supporters. When asked if same-sex couples should be allowed to marry, 57 per cent of PCs agree with 60 per cent of Liberals that this should be so; only 37 per cent of Alliance supporters agree.

And when polled on Canada's possible participation in the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq, 56 per cent of PCs said no, Canada should not participate, as did 69 per cent of Liberals, but only 38 per cent of Alliance supporters, the majority of whom (61 per cent) wanted Canada to help the Americans overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime.

As for an Alliance-dominated merger reaching out to the Bloc Québécois supporters in some sort of out-party grand alliance, forget it. Bloc supporters are just as likely as Liberals to want the surplus spent on social programs, support same-sex marriage, and they lead all parties, including the New Democrats, in opposition to Canada's participation in America's coalition of the willing (85 per cent opposed).

Depending on their choice of leader and the policies that the new party wishes to emphasize, the new Conservative Party could see social conservatives drifting to fringe parties like the Christian Heritage Party, while Red (Progressive) Tories shift to the Liberals and David Orchard's nationalists move to join Jack Layton and the New Democrats. Mssrs. Harper and MacKay may find victory in their bold quest to be like that of the Greek king who defeated the Romans at huge cost. Victory may prove Pyrrhic.

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