The Future of the Political Right in Canada

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, it is a great privilege for me to be asked to speak about the future of the “right” in Canadian politics.

First of all, I would like to say I have some problem with the title of these remarks, i.e., “the future of the political right.” This of course begs the question of definition – what is the right? Former premiers Bill Davis and Peter Lougheed have both resisted the expression “uniting the right,” saying that their governments were pragmatic and centrist and could not be categorized with the right or left label. To this I agree. I, like they, do not believe that in a country like Canada our politics should necessarily be split on entrenched ideological grounds. That is not consistent with our history or our traditions. But after paying due deference to the wisdom of former premiers Davis and Lougheed, it should be pointed out that both their proteges, in both cases, once removed, premiers Mike Harris and Ralph Klein, do support some form of union or arrangement between the Alliance and the Progressive Conservative parties.

I am a member of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. I am also a member of the Alliance.
I believe in same-sex benefits. I am pro-choice on the issue of abortion; I am in favour of gun control; I have reservations about the death penalty; I am not religiously wedded to tax cuts; I am concerned by the growing disparity between the rich and the poor; I even believe in seat belts, photo radar, and government action to save the oakridges moraine.

I do not believe there is a necessary correlation between views on these issues so as to categorize someone as right or left.

However I did support the Alliance in the last election. Why? I supported the Alliance because, like most Canadians who believe in our parliamentary system, I felt that no effective alternative could be presented to the Canadian people unless the two parties were united.

All Canadians must agree that those of us who choose to participate in the political process have an obligation to present Canadians with viable choices. This simply cannot be done with two major opposition parties on the same side of the political spectrum.

Preston Manning recognized the weakness of the reform and attempted to broaden its base, both ideologically and geographically. He attempted to create a united alternative and put his own leadership on the line. The Federal Conservative Party refused to co-operate and for this reason many of us who are conservatives felt we had no choice but to support a political grouping that favoured unity.

The pressure to combine the parties of course was the strongest in Ontario. We have a progressive conservative government in Ontario, which was elected in 1995, not only with the support of federal Tories, but with then reform supporters as well. Every conservative member of the legislature must therefore out of necessity be concerned when his or her supporters are forced to break ranks and fight each other in a federal election. It is not in their interest that their workers should take up arms against each other. In Ontario I can say from personal knowledge that time and time again the federal PCs and the Alliance sought out the same individuals to be their candidates. There may have been differences at the top, but when it came down to the riding level it is difficult to understand what differences existed when both parties sought the same persons out to be their candidates. Invariably when the potential candidates were approached, the answer came back, “well, I might consider running, but unless you two can get your act together I will give it a pass for now.” You can therefore easily understand why so many of those like myself who are supportive of the Harris government, felt that this is not a matter of ideology. It is simply a matter of practical politics. You do not send two farm teams out to try to beat the national champions.

The United Alternative or Alliance Movement of course had very mixed success. They were not successful in winning, nor did they achieve the desired breakthrough in Ontario, winning only two seats in the Ottawa valley. However the Alliance did score considerable success against those continuing conservatives who did not choose to unite. The Alliance gained 740,000 votes in Canada, bringing its total from 18% up to 25%. The Conservatives, on the other hand, lost 800,000 votes, pulling their total down from 18% to 12%. This was the worst showing for the Conservative Party since confederation. In Ontario the Alliance got almost twice as many votes as
did the Conservatives, coming second in 80 seats; the Conservatives came second in only 10 seats.

Nevertheless, because of vote splitting, the shift in Ontario from Tory to Alliance simply had the effect of maintaining, and in some cases actually increasing, Liberal majorities.

The results of the last election have made it painfully apparent to everyone that neither party can win without the other.

What then should happen? In the ideal world the two existing leaders should agree that the parties should unite without either leader attempting to impose preconditions. The caucuses should unite. The national executives should agree on a common process to iron out organizational differences. Finally, and most importantly, the question of leadership must be addressed. In a perfect world I would not like to see either party unilaterally determine its own separate leadership. It should be determined jointly, with one leader or the new emanation that emerges from this process.

Now this may be the objective, but will it happen?

There are many problems. First of all, and most importantly, there is the question of leadership. Stockwell Day and Joe Clark are not necessarily soul mates and both of them appear to have continuing ambitions.

Secondly, there is the problem of the two caucuses. Although the Alliance has six or seven times as many members as the PC’s neither caucus can claim to represent central Canada. It also should be remembered that the members of the two existing caucuses got elected on their own, Many of them may feel that a combination such as I am describing may actually hurt their electoral changes rather than help.

Then there is the ideological issue which may exist at the top, but as you get down to the rank and file, is almost non-existent. If you take the Alliance platform and the Progressive Conservative platform and remove the letterhead, I think many of you would be hard put to be able to say which platform belonged to which party. I am of course here talking about the platform itself, not about how the respective parties’ policies were perceived by the press and their opponents. Here of course there were differences.

There are always questions about leaders of parties who lose elections and I would ask you to divorce the question of leadership from whether a union should take place. After almost fifty years of involvement in politics one comes to realize that leadership is only one part of the equation. It is not nearly as important as determining what manner of party there is to lead.

Nor should we get wrapped up in history and perceived insults and betrayals of the past. Conservatives may never understand why the west did not thank them for getting rid of the national energy plan. But this is all history and has very little relevance to the present.

In the United Kingdom the Liberal Party of Gladstone which was responsible for so much of Britain’s social progress, fell apart over a wartime dispute between Lloyd George and Asquith in 1916. Asquith died shortly after and Lloyd George ceased to be a political force. Yet the split remained for a generation and by 1945 the Liberal
Party was down to only seven seats, with a huge Labour Party majority.

The Federal Conservatives brand the Alliance as being intolerant and too ideological on some issues. However, as their own support has fallen, the continuing conservatives run the risk of losing their position as a centrist party and may become intolerant and ideological themselves. For instance, they could become the refuge of the anti-Mike Harris Tories whose mentor seems to be Dalton Camp, who pretends to give the Conservative point of view for the Toronto Star. One Federal Conservative writing to the editor claimed that the continuing conservatives were a centrist party because they favoured public ownership of hydroelectric power and because they nationalized the CNR. Well, forgive me, I was not aware that public ownership of Ontario Hydro was an article of faith for the present Conservative Government, and of course the CNR has for many years now been in private hands. Times change and the centre changes along with it.

I do not wish to say there are no differences between the average Alliance and Tory member in the House of Commons. Each member represents a different part of the country. We must recognize that Canada encompasses many points of view. Premier Rae knows full well that on issues such as same-sex benefits, views of individual members are determined more by the constituencies they represent than along party lines. An M.P. from say, Huron Bruce, will have a very different attitude on many of these issues than the M.P. for Toronto-Centre Rosedale. It is the constituency they represent that determines their views rather than the party label.

What we must avoid are statements such as the one made by the present prime minister that the west voted for its regional interests, while his own members represented the national interest. The west is part of Canada too.

Unfortunately there are still persons in both parties who believe that they can do it on their own without co-operation. Can the Alliance break through in Ontario? Well, they came second in 80 seats. But coming in second is hardly enough. Can the Conservatives reverse the trend in Ontario when in the last election they got only approximately half the votes of the Alliance? Yes, it is conceivably possible that in Ontario the Conservative Party could double its vote and the Alliance vote be cut in half. However if that happens, the Liberals will still win virtually all the seats in Ontario and the Alliance’s seemingly impregnable position in the west will still guarantee them official opposition status. So what else has changed?

The Federal Progressive Conservative Party has always maintained that they claim to be more moderate, and are the second choice of both Liberal and Alliance members and are therefore the alternative, which Canadians will turn to. They may be the second choice. But again, using the analogy of Great Britain, the Liberal Party in the U.K. is clearly the second choice of most Labour and Tory supporters, but they do not win. Both Labour and Tory Parties in Britain have a solid reservoir of safe seats, which ensures that when a general election is called one of them will win. This is the same situation that we now have in Canada. The Conservatives cannot win without Alliance support; the Alliance cannot win without the Progressive Conservatives. The mathematics of the situation is obvious to everyone, except perhaps to those few in both parties who are too close to the situation to see the big picture.
We are meeting in Kingston, the home of Sir John A. MacDonald, the founder of the Conservative Party of Canada. All of us on our side of the political fence are conscious of the traditions that MacDonald stood for. When John A. MacDonald entered politics he inherited the rump of the family compact group in the legislature, strong supporters of the crown, violently anti-French, who scarcely believed in democracy. Yet he was able to make an alliance with the French Canadian party of Lafontaine and Carter, many of whose members were not only sovereignists but had actually taken up arms against the British crown.

Similarly, at a time when religious differences were far greater than they are today, MacDonald was able to get the support not only of the Orange Lodges, but also of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. He attracted liberals and members of the then reform party and even agreed to an elected upper house in the period immediately prior to confederation. The differences between the Alliance and the Tories are miniscule compared with the challenges that MacDonald faced.

If MacDonald could gain the support of such disparate elements, build a great party and thus a nation, surely the leaders of the Alliance and the Tories can do the same.

Will such a combination happen? My own view is that it must happen because the Canadian public wants it to happen. Providing a credible alternative government is the chief responsibility of an opposition party.

If we on our side of the political spectrum fail to live up to that responsibility, the voters will never forgive us for it, and Canada will be the loser.