



TORY REDUX?

The Progressive Conservative Party of Canada: Leadership 2003

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OVERVIEW

- **The Progressive Conservative (PC) Party of Canada (otherwise known as the Tories) elected Nova Scotian Peter MacKay as its 23rd leader on an unanticipated 4th ballot around midnight on Saturday, May 31.**
- **Mr. MacKay is the 4th Tory leader since the PC's near-death experience in the 1993 election following back-to-back Conservative majority governments under former prime minister Brian Mulroney.**
- **Harkening back to an era when backroom last-minute political deals were the lifeblood of legend, Mr. MacKay's election was finally locked up by what some are calling a "deal with the devil," referring to a secret deal, since revealed, with anti-free trade candidate David Orchard.**
- **Mr. MacKay must now make great strides in healing the divisive wounds in the party as it prepares for an anticipated 2004 election against the likely new Liberal leader, former finance minister Paul Martin.**

In one of the most unexpectedly tense and dramatic leadership conventions of any Canadian political party of late, Peter MacKay, Nova Scotian member of Parliament, took the contest with 1,510 votes, representing 64 percent of the total vote, on the fourth and final ballot in Toronto on May 31. Runner-up candidate Jim Prentice, a Calgary lawyer, took 36 percent of the vote with 836 votes. Nova Scotian MP Scott Brison was eliminated on the second vote and crossed the floor to support Prentice (a western candidate as opposed to his fellow Nova Scotian) hoping to give Prentice enough votes to defeat MacKay.

The charged atmosphere on Saturday night came as a result of precipitous declines in front-runner MacKay's support throughout the vote to the point where floor counts had him about 128 votes short of taking the prize. It did not help that a good number of committed MacKay delegates ended up not making it to Toronto. Fearing defeat, the so-called status quo candidate, backed by elements of the old-guard

Conservative establishment, secretly agreed to a last-minute hand written deal with Saskatchewan farmer and anti-free trade candidate, David Orchard. With a signed agreement, Orchard thus became the "king maker" when he was dropped on the third ballot and moved most of his approximately 600 delegate votes to MacKay, putting MacKay over the top.

The most controversial element of the deal was a review of the Tories much-loved and heralded Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). These agreements are arguably historical pillars in the PC's legacy under former PM Brian Mulroney and are felt by many to be sacrosanct as a foundation of the party's economic policy. As well, MacKay agreed to run Tory candidates in all 301 Canadian ridings in the upcoming federal election, thus eliminating any hope of developing a common electoral strategy for the upcoming election with the other party of the "right," the Canadian Alliance.

“The Deal”

The four points of the MacKay-Orchard agreement were:

- No merger or joint candidates with the Canadian Alliance and a commitment to run Tory candidates in every federal riding. A provision to preclude “talks” with the Alliance was scratched out in the original by MacKay.
- A Conservative blue-ribbon panel to review the FTA and NAFTA, with MacKay to select the chairperson and all other members to be jointly agreed upon by Orchard and MacKay.
- “Clean up head office” (i.e., replace the national director and hire some Orchard supporters).
- Make environmental policy “front and center,” including sustainable agriculture, forestry, and promotion of railways to reduce pollution.

Cherished History

One cannot, nor should not, try to understand the meaning of what took place or what it means to the future of the PC Party without first putting the events and the controversy into the historical context of the party, its history, and its heritage.

Despite the Conservatives current fourth-place standing in the House of Commons with only 15 seats and its tortuous last decade, this is in fact the Party of Confederation, a 135-year-old party steeped in the rich history of Canada’s birth and maturation as a nation. Since 1867, the Conservative Party has played a vital role in building Canada. It engineered the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), saw Canada through World War I, created the CBC and the Bank of Canada during the Depression, laid the groundwork for Canada’s national health care system, proposed the Freedom of Information Act, negotiated the FTA and NAFTA, and put into power Canada’s first and only female prime minister to date.

The Conservatives were able to develop and implement these public policy and political landmarks due to their consistent electoral success throughout Canada’s history. In 1867, a father of confederation, Sir John A. Macdonald, led the Conservatives to form the first government of Canada. Throughout his tenure in office, Macdonald fought the supporters of political and economic union with the United States, believing that the health and very survival of Canada were dependent upon the east-west flow of its economic lifeblood. After Macdonald’s death in 1891, the remainder of the 1890s saw the party work through difficult times. Although it went through an identity crisis as it tried to redefine itself, the party continued to hold onto the nation’s

leadership as the next four prime ministers were all Conservatives. After a 15-year interlude of Liberal Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Conservative Sir Robert Borden brought the party to power again in 1911, and it remained there for three more elections ending in 1921.

After the Conservatives and Liberals traded stewardship of the country for the next 36 years between 1921 and 1957, John George Diefenbaker led the Conservatives to a string of election victories with a minority government in 1957, an electoral majority in 1958, and a minority government in 1962. After the Tory’s defeat in 1963, the Liberals held power for the next 21 years aside from a short interruption when Joe Clark, an Albertan, led the PCs to a minority government in May 1979, only to be defeated nine months later.

It was not until 1984 under the leadership of a Quebecker, Brian Mulroney, that the Conservatives returned to power with back-to-back majority governments from 1984 to 1993—the first for any Canadian prime minister since Liberal Louis St. Laurent and the first for a Conservative since Sir John A. Macdonald. Brian Mulroney stepped down as leader of the party in June 1993, and the Tories elected British Columbian Kim Campbell as leader and Canada’s first woman prime minister.

In the fall of 1993 Canadians went to the polls, and they made their voices heard. Despite a strong popular vote, the Conservatives were nearly annihilated as a party by being reduced to only 2 seats from a majority of over 160. They lost official party status in Parliament for the first time in their history by not maintaining at least 12 seats. Among other issues, the rise of political parties that sought only to represent their regions (the Reform Party in the west and the Bloc Quebecois in Quebec) splintered the Tory vote.

The ensuing years were not kind to the Party of Confederation, as it struggled through a succession of leaders. After Kim Campbell’s resignation, Jean Charest, a former cabinet minister in the Mulroney government, was chosen to lead the PCs. Charest’s leadership focused on a major restructuring and rebuilding of the party. Under his leadership the PC Party won 20 seats in the election of 1997. In April 1998, Jean Charest, a strong federalist, made a very difficult decision to resign as leader of the PC Party and accept the challenge of leading the Quebec Liberal Party.

In November 1998, Tory members voted the Rt. Hon. Joe Clark, the 16th prime minister, to once again lead the party into the next federal election campaign. Following another defeat and losing seats once again to the newest incarnation of the Reform Party, the Canadian Alliance, Mr. Clark, the consummate party loyalist, announced he would step down in 2003 to allow a new leader to take on the Liberals and the Alliance in the forthcoming election.

Concerns were raised as soon as Mr. Clark decided to step down, as there were no obvious candidates willing to jump into the ring. The Tories were looking to the likes of “marquee” candidates such as former Ontario Conservative premier Mike Harris and current New Brunswick premier Bernard Lord. Although “draft” campaigns were orchestrated it was to no avail. Finally, after a slow start, the campaign initially attracted seven candidates: Conservative MPs Andre Bachand, Scott Brison, and Peter MacKay; former cabinet minister Heward Grafftey; Saskatchewan farmer, environmentalist, and anti-free trader David Orchard; former Reform Party candidate and Christian lobbyist Craig Chandler; and Calgary lawyer Jim Prentice. Bachand and Grafftey subsequently dropped out of the campaign. Though the final candidates were somewhat unremarkable in stature, they were earnest, fairly young (30s and 40s), decent, solid, and intelligent.

Leadership and Candidates

Peter MacKay is a native of Nova Scotia, and since 1997 the member of Parliament for the northeastern Nova Scotia riding of Pictou-Antigonish-Guysborough. He was subsequently named House leader for the Progressive Conservative Party and critic for the Departments of Justice and Solicitor General. Overall Mr. MacKay’s policies focused on enhancing the quality of life for all Canadians. He wants to achieve better fiscal management of the economy; invest in the quality and standards of living of Canadians; restore Canada’s role in the world; ensure public safety; and make government more accountable to Canadians.

David Orchard is a fourth-generation farmer from Borden, Saskatchewan, and a high-profile critic of free trade. He was a runner-up to Joe Clark in the 1998 PC leadership race and the author of *The Fight for Canada: Four Centuries of Resistance to American Expansionism* (Stoddart, 1993). He advocates the defense of Canada’s sovereignty, protection of the environment, and the democratization and reform of the electoral system, including its financing. He is also an opponent of both western and Quebec separatism and therefore against a uniting of the Alliance and PCs. In 1985, Mr. Orchard cofounded Citizens Concerned About Free Trade (CCAFT), a nonpartisan citizens organization concerned about the effects on Canadian sovereignty of the free trade agreements with the United States (FTA and later NAFTA).

Jim Prentice is a lawyer from Northern Ontario and a former national treasurer for the PC Party of Canada. His key focus was to unite the Progressive Conservative and Canadian Alliance parties. In addition to positions on the PC Party’s restructuring, defense, and education, he focused on prosperity (taxation, government debt, trade, and northern issues), quality of life (health, environment, and Aboriginal

land claims), Canada in the world (sovereignty), federal-provincial relations, and ethics and democracy.

Scott Brison is a stockbroker and current Nova Scotia MP who has had a successful business career, first in sales and marketing with Atlantic-based companies and, latter, as vice president for investment banking with Yorkton Securities in Halifax. The fact that he is openly gay was a one-day curiosity and became a nonissue in the campaign. He stated he wanted to build “a competitive conservative alternative” to the Liberals. Mr. Brison talked about celebrating success, changing the tax system to reward hard work, and advancing rather than irritating relations with the United States. His most controversial policy statement revolved around his proposal to abolish “the pork-barrel subsidy-driven network of federal regional development agencies—including the Atlantic Opportunities Agency in his own region—in favor of a new tax-driven approach to supporting genuine entrepreneurship and economic growth in these areas.” To the chronically economically disadvantaged region of Atlantic Canada, this was heresy although many secretly agreed with the principle.

Craig Chandler is a native of Southern Ontario, and CEO of the Concerned Christian Coalition and former president of the Progressive Group for Independent Business. Mr. Chandler is also the founder and CEO of the Canadian Leadership Institute (CLI) and co-owner of the Strategy Group, a public relations and lobbying firm. His main and only focus was uniting the Conservative and Alliance Parties believing that any policy positions are irrelevant unless the conservative movement was united. Mr. Chandler took himself out of the race after a well-received and solid speech to the convention Friday night.

The Campaign

The campaign proceeded through a series of standard whistle stops, photo ops, policy pronouncements, and televised debates. The real campaign, however, took place at the party convention in Toronto, attended by almost 3,000 Tory loyalists. The stage was set Friday night when former prime minister Brian Mulroney, with all the passion and pure political moxy the party has come to expect from him, called for Tories to “turn the page” on their acerbic relationship with the Canadian Alliance.

“I have said that the next Conservative leader must be open and magnanimous about opportunities to cooperate and build a winning coalition with other like-minded [conservative] Canadians. In order to build a national alternative government [to the Liberals] that Canadians will accept, we must listen carefully to all potential allies and act selflessly in Canada’s interest.”

He went on to say that the new coalition must fly under the PC brand and that the western-based Reform/Alliance movement is finished. Great political red meat for the crowd,

but in the end was anyone listening? Is the new leader capable of building a “winning coalition” by agreeing to a deal that stipulated, “No merger or joint candidates with the Canadian Alliance and a commitment to run Tory candidates in every federal riding?”

The MacKay campaign chairman sent out a memo two months ago to 1,000 prominent Tories decrying Orchard as a menace to the party’s ideals and calling on them to mount a concerted effort to “ensure he does not take over the leadership”—a vivid example, some believe, of how political expediency overrides principle.

Orchard took his proposals to the other candidates as well. Prentice apparently wanted no part of an agreement that would prohibit any future cooperation with the Alliance over uniting the right. Brison wanted to move forward and not agree to a review or rethinking of the party’s support for free trade. MacKay, however, facing defeat at a convention he was supposed to have breezed through, went for victory over principle and believed he could deal with the ramifications later. After all, he was not the first politician who entered a race not to win. Besides there were those in the party establishment who could not be seen to have lost, given the not so subtle “blessing” they gave him as the most winnable candidate. However, one could also accuse them of ignoring recent party history as a similar scenario played out 10 years ago when Kim Campbell, “the anointed one,” led the Tories to near extinction in the 1993 election.

To Be or Not to Be, That is the Question

The challenge the Conservatives have faced for the last 15 years is yet another redefinition of the party since the arrival on the scene of the western-based Canadian Alliance. The Alliance Party, known first as the United Alternative, grew out of a movement by the Reform Party of Canada to “unite the right” and increase the odds of defeating the Liberals.

The Conservative Party remains split. There are those who continue to hold a serious grudge against the Alliance. They feel it cost them power, national stature, and fragmented the conservative base throughout the last three elections. These Tories will have nothing to do with any talk of uniting with the Alliance. On the other hand, there are those that recognize the realpolitik of some form of union in order to wrest power from the governing Liberals.

The previous leader of the PC Party, Joe Clark, would have no part of the Canadian Alliance. Some in the party felt his stubbornness worked against their attempts at reclaiming glory, and a number of them defected to the Alliance. The general arguments supporting Clark’s stance are that the PC’s claim to be the only national conservative party with representation (although very limited) in all regions of the country, while the Alliance has no elected presence east of Ontario. PCs feel they have the historic name, five provincial

Tory governments, and official opposition in two other provinces, modest by-election gains, and 15 to 18 percent approval in public opinion—second only to the Liberals. However, the reality is that the Alliance has 63 seats in the House of Commons and forms the Official Opposition, while the PCs have only 15. The Alliance also has solid support in Alberta and BC, no party debt, and 10 to 15 percent in public opinion.

Jeffery Simpson of the *Globe & Mail* writes that the Tory’s disdain for the Alliance revolves around the fact that the Alliance split their grand coalition with the creation of the Reform Party and are too ideological to win more support. They have little second-party preference support and are too “western Canadian” to make progress outside that region. Like previous regional protest parties, he argues, they will not make the national leap. He goes on to surmise that from the Alliance perspective, the Tories have too large a debt, no support in Quebec, Alberta, or BC, mushy policy positions and fourth-party status in Ottawa. They couldn’t win with westerner Joe Clark so they are unlikely win with MacKay, especially they way he won.

A Phoenix Rising or a Gordian Knot?

While Peter MacKay has a solid pedigree, good “visuals” for the media, an apparent quick wit, and intelligence, he now finds himself in a maelstrom of his own making and must now heal the internal party wounds caused by the divisive deal with David Orchard. The PC Caucus has rallied around the new leader out of a sense of allegiance to the party in showing a unified front in Parliament but also because their future jobs now depend on MacKay doing well in the upcoming election.

Although Orchard sees himself in the same Tory tradition as Sir John A. Macdonald, opposing free trade, the PCs and the country have rightly moved on. Canada’s economic well-being is anchored on not only on NAFTA but the successful negotiation of the FTAA, other bilateral free trade agreements, and ongoing WTO deals. Some polls put the number of Canadians who actually want closer ties to the United States at 65 percent. The issue is how close and how fast. If Orchard has too much say in both discussions with the Alliance and the free trade study, the Tories risk further marginalization.

Defenders of MacKay’s decision talk about “the big tent” (i.e., the traditional Tory strategy of broadening out from the core). They claim “knowingly” that “the Deal” is only a general agreement and that, while MacKay may have signed it, Orchard’s influence will be minimal. However, Mr. Orchard may have something to say to his supporters if he feels he’s been double-crossed. They also claim with some justification that free trade agreements should be reviewed after more than 10 years.

There appears to be a lingering bitterness in the party, and some members are in fact moving to the Alliance. Faint rumblings are also being heard about calling for a leadership review even sooner than the party constitution requires—automatic leadership review 18 months after an election loss (assuming they lose the upcoming election). Principle and integrity versus victory at any cost, this is the dilemma with which the party is now wrestling. (They should talk to the NDP about this conundrum). There may now be some difficulty in recruiting new candidates for all 301 ridings, and some that had committed have either pulled out or are rethinking their commitments.

MacKay must now spend an unanticipated amount of energy and time to heal the party, while at the same time reducing its substantial debt load in order to prepare for an upcoming national election with a full slate of candidates. The controversial win will also likely dilute the traditional bump in the polls political parties get after such conventions. Mr. MacKay has his challenges in front of him. In his first major speech after his election, MacKay walked a fine line, saying that he was willing to give cooperation with the Alliance a chance—but in private.

In the end this may all boil over. MacKay may be able to heal the wounds and move on. The results of the upcoming election will be the true barometer. To a large extent the problem is more with first impressions. They are not good, as judged by the media and pundits. It will be up to the members of the party and the Canadian electorate to ultimately decide. This is a party on the verge—either rebirth or oblivion.

(Sources: PC Party of Canada, Center for Research and Information on Canada, CBC, Globe & Mail, Library of Parliament, candidate bios and public statements, members of the PC Party of Canada.)

About the Author

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