

Tories in need of reform

Joe Clark's recent comments on campus serve as a reminder that Harper's Conservative party still has a long way to go towards achieving real unity



PATRICK ROSS

It isn't every day that a former Prime Minister of Canada visits the U of A campus. But while visiting his *alma mater* last week, Joe Clark took the opportunity to offer criticism on Canada's current Conservative government.

In an interview, Clark pointed to the modern Conservative party's roots in the Reform party as a source of problems. "Mr Harper's party, [formerly] known as the Reform party, began self-consciously as a protest movement," he asserted.

For his part, Clark fought tooth and nail against the merger of the Progressive Conservative and Reform/Canadian Alliance parties. While a portion of Clark's resistance to the merger could be attributed to personal animosity—being as he is favourite target of Preston Manning, who often noted "there wouldn't be enough evidence to convict [Clark] were he on trial for being a conservative"—Clark must have understood the difficulties in forging a coherent party out of the two.

Perhaps the chief internal dilemma for the Conservative party is the resolution of a conflict of political cultures. When the modern Conservative

party was forged through the merger of the Canadian Alliance and the PCs, a need to resolve the different traditions of each was forced upon Stephen Harper.

The Canadian Alliance, through its roots in the Reform party, was a populist party, a tradition whereby the state is held to be responsible to the will of the people.

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The Progressive Conservative party, on the other hand, was built upon the British Tory tradition, an aristocratic approach wherein the people are believed to have a more organic relationship both between each other and with the state through their traditional allegiance to the crown.

But it doesn't take a PhD in political science to realize that the Reform party's populist traditions and the PCs' Burkean foundations aren't necessarily compatible. This is the high wire on which the party must walk.

Over the past four years, this tension

has rarely been so obvious as when the Conservatives have been in government. While the 2005 defection of Belinda Stronach—who acted as a mediator between Harper and then-PC leader Peter MacKay in creating the modern Conservative party—was an earlier warning sign of this tension, little verifies it as thoroughly as the more recent expulsion of Halton MP Garth Turner from the Conservative caucus.

Turner, who had previously served as a Cabinet minister in Kim Campbell's PC government, was known to be ill at ease with what he often referred to as "hats and horses" Conservatives, a label clearly meant for the members from the former Reform party. Many credit this tension as one of the principle causes for his suspension from caucus and disqualification as a future Conservative candidate.

While resolving these differences in political culture would be challenging, the reward would be well worth it. A party capable of governing in the best interests of the people, with a populist undercurrent to act as a brake on elitism, could become a valuable force for social change in Canada. While it remains to be seen whether or not Harper is up to the task—arguably, his performance to date hasn't quite been inspiring—the Conservative party could become such a party.

Unfortunately, capable leaders like Joe Clark have always lacked the political imagination to realize this.



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