

Federal Tories Too Leftist For Radical Youth Wing

By Samer Muscati

OTTAWA (CUP)--Nini Krishnappa's commitment to conservatism has never been questioned.

His bedroom walls are decorated with posters of his two political idols -- Ronald Reagan and Brian Mulroney and ever since he can remember he has preached conservative ideology. We must act tough on crime, enforce family values, remove restrictions from big-business and repeal all affirmative action and multiculturalism policies, the 25-year-old tells anyone who will listen.

But after five years as a national executive of the Progressive Conservative Youth Federation, Krishnappa's commitment to the Conservative party has run out.

Two weeks ago, Krishnappa retired his membership card to an old shoe-box in his closet. Now he waits for his Reform Party card to arrive in the mail.

"It was a difficult decision for me to make," says Krishnappa, who works for a Toronto Marketing firm. "But the issue for me now is policy, not party names."

He is one of many disillusioned youth who are leaving the Tory Party in favour of Reform's "grassroots and conservative" views.

They are upset with Party leader Jean Charest's "moderate" stance, and would like to see him follow the budget-slashing ideology of Alberta Premier Ralph Klein and Ontario Premier Mike Harris.

"I don't think the Conservative Party is going in the right direction," said Kelly Sherwood, former Youth Coordinator for the Tories. "The

Party is conservative in name only. Right now, even the Liberals are more conservative than the (Tories)."

For many young Tories, the last straw came at the August policy convention when they saw less than a quarter of their motions and amendments passed by the Party. Even those that were passed have yet to be adopted as policy by Charest.

"Everything that was brought to the convention was defeated, and defeated soundly," said Sherwood, who joined the Reform Party a week after the convention.

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The policies that the youth were pushing for included a 20 percent income tax cut, reinstating the death penalty, ending employment equity, tightening up immigration laws and ending funding for all multiculturalism programs including anti-racism campaigns.

Such views were too radical for many in the Tory party, but not for Reform. They have welcomed the defectors with open arms.

"We recruit anyone we can," said Scott Mudford, the national youth coordinator of the Reform party.

Mudford says that the exodus of youth from the Tories shows no signs of slowing down and he expects it to increase dramatically until the next federal election.

However, Charest

staunchly denies that there is a problem with youth defections to the Reform party.

"I think nothing of that because it's not happening," said Charest.

"I don't see any evidence at all, apart from very marginal cases, of young people going over to the Reform... I'd have to challenge anyone to name me four people who have gone over."

But the facts are clearly against Charest. All across the country, young Tories, the future of the Party, are jumping ship to Reform. In the four weeks following the convention, over 10 high-profile young Tories have called it quits and defected.

Most recently, the president of the young Tories at Carleton University, Ben James, resigned on Sept. 16, and joined Reform.

James says that the youth in the party essentially believe in fiscal responsibility, elimination of all debt and downsizing government services and responsibilities.

"We're not a bunch of extremists," said James. "We're just conservative."

Much of the youth criticism is focused on Party leader Jean Charest, who they say lacks direction and is selling out the youth-wing in an attempt to appeal to Liberal voters.

"Jean Charest isn't a conservative. He's abandoned the right wing," said Krishnappa. "If the messenger doesn't believe in the message, then the message will get lost."

And many of the youth are adamant that the party can only survive by making a dramatic right-ward shift in its philosophy, to attract conservative voters. They say that if

nothing changes, the catastrophe of the 1993 federal election -- where Tories went from 169 seats to two -- will relived in the next one.

"The people haven't chosen what the policies are, Jean Charest has chosen policy," said Andrew Stec, former President of the University of Ottawa young Tories who joined the Reform. He says that despite the traitor stigma attached to youth who leave the party, many more will leave unless things change drastically.

Charest admits that the youth wing is a vital to the Tories, but he believes they will stay because his party is the only national conservative political party.

"We can't delude ourselves into thinking that the Conservatives are a national party," said Sherwood. "A party of two seats isn't a national party."

"The problem is that (the Reform Party) are not a national political party," said Charest. "They are regional in their views and deliberately maintain that regional perspective and have presented pretty extremist views on a number of occasions."

But Sherwood scoffs at the idea that the Tories are a more national party than Reform.

"We can't delude ourselves into thinking that the Conservatives are a national party," said Sherwood. "A party of two seats isn't a national party."

"Ask yourself whether you're married to a name or to

an ideology," is Sherwood's advice to young Tories still loyal to the party. "If you're married to an ideology, you're in the wrong party."

Krishnappa says that he is proud to be a young Reformer, and disagrees that he is a walking press release for the Party. He hopes that one day the political right will be unified under one national conservative banner.

"It's just a matter of who's going to survive and which party is going to fade away," said Krishnappa. "I'm waiting for the day

when the names Reform and Tory can be interchangeable."

--With files from David Cochrane



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