

NEWS: Conservative Party Elects Leader; Turns Focus to Federal Election

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Reporter

The former leader of the Canadian Alliance Party became the first official leader of the new Conservative Party of Canada, a party formed late last year when the Progressive Conservative Party and the Canadian Alliance merged under a single banner.

Stephen Harper captured 55% of support in the 308 federal constituencies, with Belinda Stronach coming in 2nd place with 35% and Tony Clement pulling up the rear with about 10%. Preliminary polls indicate, however, that with each riding given equal weight the actual distribution of the 92,000 votes cast is closer to 65% for Harper, with the other candidates finishing up with 22% and 13% respectively.

While competitive in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, on PEI Harper's support was at a national low of 21% with Stronach capturing 68% and Clement maintaining his national average of 10%. This pattern continued throughout the Atlantic Provinces with Stronach winning all four provinces in the region. This is assumed partially to be a result of Harper's suggestion that it is a region encompassed by a "culture of defeat." Stronach also won the province of Québec with 61% and Nunavut with 55%.

Upon winning the leadership by a comfortable margin in the first ballot, Harper was quick to attack Paul Martin and his governing Liberals, suggesting that "They will try to divide Conservatives by region or ideology...we must unite to win because it is the only way Conservatives can win." He later

warned Ottawa that an election call would be unwise before the sponsorship scandal is resolved.

Regardless of his warnings, there have been indications that the Conservative Party is gearing up for an election run, with nominations in full swing in the 308 ridings and with the preparation of pre-campaign ads supposedly underway.

For her part, Belinda Stronach is prepared for her campaign in the riding of Newmarket-Aurora, where she has already been nominated as the Conservative Party candidate. She was gracious in defeat and was quick to stand behind the party's new leader. "I very much look forward to working with [Harper]...and the caucus members as we go forward to build a stronger party and restore democracy back in this country." The upcoming campaign will be Stronach's first bid for public office.

Tony Clement is also primed for a race for the federal seat in Brampton-West, his first attempt to reenter public office since losing his provincial seat in the Ontario Legislature this past fall. As former Health Minister of Ontario, he also has already been nominated in his constituency and is positive about his abilities to contribute to the party. "I contributed ideas, I contributed passion, I contributed a great series of organization throughout the country which will now be a part of our national organization."

Clement had been endorsed by many high-profile Tories and Alliance members in his bid for the leadership, including MP Chuck Strahl. "He's had his foot in both camps." said Strahl of Clement. "I think people are very comfortable with him."

Mr. Harper and the party's

focus will now be centered on an upcoming election, expected either this spring, or early next fall. Insider polling suggests that many issues are important to Conservatives Party members, including re-structured government, tax cuts, increased provincial powers, increased military funding, and improved Canada-US relations. Harper is expected by many to move the party towards the center of the political spectrum, albeit slightly, and to bring Stronach and Clement in to help develop better policy in order to build a successful election campaign. Already Harper has attempted to enhance party unity by appointing popular Nova Scotia MP and former PC leader Peter MacKay as his deputy party leader. These indicate Harper's willingness to heal party divergences in order to present a unified front to the Canadian electorate.

In Lethbridge, Prime Minister Paul Martin stated while announcing a mad-cow relief package to farmers last week, that Harper's victory would make for an interesting campaign. New Democratic Leader Jack Layton was not so polite, instead attacking Harper's assertion that the NDP were as dangerous to Canada as the Bloc Québécois. "The NDP is the party that brought us medicare, affordable housing programs, and public auto insurance...Is this the same party that Mr. Harper says would be destructive to Canada?" asked Layton. He also challenged the new Conservative leader to a debate on the issue "anytime, anywhere." Harper declined the invitation.

With this optimism among the Conservatives, faithful of late, many problems continue to face the beleaguered party. Only about 37%

of the 250,000 party members bothered to vote in last Saturday's convention and it hosted only 1,500 delegates, while the Liberal leadership vote a few months ago in the same city filled the Air Canada Centre two nights in a row with 15,000 people. Facing the party now is Harper's allegedly radical right-wing ideologies and the controversial comments that he has made in the past condemning certain regions and groups, most notably his comments about Atlantic Canada and his description of bilingualism as being "a god that failed." Political pundits also claim the Harper's victory propagates the idea that the "merger" was simply a take-over of the Progressive Conservatives by the Canadian Alliance Party. This idea is advanced further by the absence of former PC members such as former Prime Minister Joe Clark at the convention.

Regardless, confidence remains high amongst the ranks of the Conservatives and pollsters with Ipsos-Reid hypothesize that the newly minted party should experience a slight rise in coming weeks, given their newfound stability with an official leader.

Whether an election comes this spring or not until the fall, Harper maintains that the Conservatives will be real contenders this time. "I think it's also important that Canadians are really going to have a choice to make."

The most recent Ipsos-Reid polls show that the Liberals have stabilized at 36% the Conservatives at 27%, with the NDP following up with 17%, the Bloc with 11% and the Green Party attracting 4% of persons asked.