

October 27, 2003

Western provinces must adopt the Reform Party's vision and values

Members of the Canadian Alliance will soon be asked to vote their party out of existence, and rejoin the national Progressive Conservatives after a bitter 16-year divorce.

It looks like an unconditional surrender by the Alliance--and an odd one at that.

The Alliance has a big caucus, strong funding, clear principles, democratic structure, effective organization, large membership and talented leader. Why submerge itself in a party with none of them? It's like "submerging" an elephant in a washtub.

On the face of it, it makes no sense. So why does it feel like a good idea?

It comes down to this. The Reform Party (let's call it by its real name) did not work. It failed to achieve the goals it set when it broke away from the Conservative Party in 1987.

It didn't get Senate reform, democratize Parliament, or downsize the bureaucracy. It didn't make sense of aboriginal policy, bilingualism, multiculturalism, or stop charter activism by judges. All these problems are worse--much worse--than before.

The Reform Party demand was "The West wants in." But the West

did not get in. In fact the West has lost ground faster by voting Reform/Alliance than it did voting Conservative, because the Liberals have been allowed to rule with a free and abusive hand.

Regrettably, our choice still lies between two federal parties that have always been run from Ontario and Quebec, both of which see the West as a federal colony rather than a federal partner.

So what to do?

First, we should understand that the West wants a revolution in federal government, while Ontario and the rest of eastern Canada want merely an alternative to the Liberals. They want a new team. We want a new country.

Second, we must learn from Quebec.

Few westerners realize that until the 1960s, Quebec was not an equal partner with English Canada.

There was no talk back then about "two founding nations," no endless concern about "what Quebec wants," no ooing and ahing over Quebec's culture, history and intellectual brilliance. The province was seen as backward, priest-ridden, unpatriotic and semi-feudal.

All this changed when the "quiet revolution" totally trans-

formed and modernized Quebec in the 1950s and '60s. But note, this began as a PROVINCIAL movement--"maitres chez nous"--masters in our own home.

Only AFTER it had completely dominated provincial politics and policy did the movement start taking over the federal government.

What Stephen Harper has engineered amounts to a western takeover of the federal Tory party, in much the same way Trudeau, Chretien and crew commandeered the Liberals in the 1960s.

But Harper's manoeuvre can succeed in the long run only with provincial government backing from the West--something the Reform Party never got.

If the West wants fundamental change, it will have to learn to play both cards--provincial and federal--like Quebec, and outgrow the naïve notion that eastern Canadians will give up national control out of the goodness of their hearts.

They won't.

- Link Byfield

Link Byfield is chairman of the Edmonton-based Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.

"Just Between Us" is a feature service of the Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy. The purpose of the Citizens Centre is to improve the quality of life for all Canadians by promoting policies that foster individual initiative and personal responsibility.