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Harper is turning out to be an under-estimated political genius

There are two men in Ottawa today for whom the universe is unfolding as it should. One is Paul Martin. The other is Steve Harper.

Both are emerging as titans from the depressing political wreckage of the past decade. They will soon face each other, probably this spring, in one of the most interesting federal elections in recent history. And if I were a gambler, I'd put my money on Harper.

Martin will probably win. But Harper's the one to watch.

Martin has been over-sold. Harper, by contrast, has been underestimated from the beginning, and will continue to exceed expectations.

In one year he has reunited a feuding, back-stabbing caucus.

And, just as only Nixon could go to China, only Harper could actually effect a merger. As the Alliance leader who was always least enthused about merging, he was best able to get the Alliance to do it.

He has (it seems safe to say) persuaded tens of thousands of Tory-hating western Alliance members to rejoin their party with the Conservatives--on Conservative terms.

At the same time, by strenuously opposing gay marriage he has proved to his own party's distrustful social conservatives that he will

support them, if not on all issues at least on those that stand some chance of winning.

Some say his real political ambition all along has been to nudge the Tories back to the right, and hopefully the nation too.

Biding his time, he chose the perfect moment. New Tory leader Peter McKay had just betrayed his own right-wing supporters by striking a secret deal with leftist leadership contestant David Orchard. Harper realized that McKay could now be pushed into betraying David Orchard by resuming secret unity talks with the Alliance.

Result: no one in the old Conservative Party trusts Peter McKay to be leader of anything, and no other credible Tory candidates exist. Which leaves only Harper.

The only other Tory possibility was former Ontario premier Mike Harris, but last weekend he gave it a pass, as I suspect Harper figured he would.

There were other forces in play. There was enough time--just barely enough--to pull off a merger before the election next spring.

On January 1 the election financing rules will change dramatically, forbidding corporate political dona-

tions upon which the Tories, badly depleted in members, depend.

Harper also knew that though Red Tories like Joe Clark and David Orchard were bound to oppose a merger, more influential figures like Brian Mulroney and Don Mazankowski would recognize reality and support it. So Harper made them an offer they couldn't refuse: a merger on their terms, but which in effect hands their party over to Alliance leadership.

If Tory members do refuse it next month they will not be forgiven by the electorate. The nation is yearning for a viable alternative to the Liberals. With their party running out of members, money and credible candidates, the Tories will either accept or they will implode, once and for all.

Either way, it's check mate. Harper has won.

- Link Byfield

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

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