Canada's Official Opposition to found new right-wing party

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The Reform Party, the Official Opposition in Canada's Parliament, is seeking to create a new right-wing political vehicle to unseat the Chretien Liberal government at the next federal election. This initiative, which amounts to an admission that Reform as presently constituted has little likelihood of coming to power, is born of Reformers' frustration at the Liberals' appropriation of much of their right-wing economic agenda, on the one hand, and the strong popular opposition to Reform's social conservatism and Anglo-chauvinism, on the other.

Last month a political conference, convened by Reform but purportedly open to all Liberal opponents, voted to found a new political party with the aim of forging a "united alternative to the Liberals." Reform members will be asked to endorse this decision in a mail vote.

In championing the "United Alternative" (UA), the Reform Party leadership has two aims: to repackage the party so as to broaden its electoral support; to bring about a merger or, failing that, a hostile takeover of Canada's traditional right-wing party, the federal Progressive Conservative (or Tory) Party

At present, neither the Reform nor the Tories can truly claim to be a national alternative to the Liberals. Founded in 1987 with the express aim of demanding more power for Western interests in the Canadian federal state, Reform has failed in its subsequent efforts to transform itself into a party drawing significant support from all of Canada's regions. Reform does not even register on opinion polls in Quebec, has little support in the four Atlantic provinces, and has only ever elected a single MP in Ontario, home to 40 percent of Canada's population.

Canada's ruling party from 1984 to 1993, the Tories were almost obliterated in the 1993 election, winning just 2 of the then 295 House of Commons seats. If the Tories rebounded somewhat in the 1997 federal election, regaining official recognition as a parliamentary party and capturing the same share (19 percent) of the national popular vote as Reform (although only one-third of the seats), it was largely because of a protest vote in Atlantic Canada against the Chretien government's spending cuts, particularly the gutting of Unemployment Insurance.

There is considerable support for a Reform-Tory merger in the Tory provincial governments that rule Alberta and Ontario. (The provincial Tory parties were formerly affiliated with the federal party, but over the past quarter-century, as Canadian politics became ever-more regionalized, they reconstituted themselves as autonomous parties.) Alberta Premier Ralph Klein, Ontario Transport Minister Tony Clement and other prominent provincial Tories addressed the UA conference and endorsed the creation of a new right-wing party. Ontario Premier Mike Harris, while not endorsing Reform's UA initiative, has repeatedly urged the two federal parties to unite.

The leadership of the federal Tory party, however, is adamantly opposed to any link-up with Reform. Tory leader Joe Clark refused to participate in the UA conference and in the days since has reaffirmed his opposition to any merger with Reform. Declared Clark, "I'm saying 'never' to anything that would mean the killing of the PC [Progressive Conservative] party." Pressed by Manning for a meeting, Clark said he is willing to speak with the Reform Party leader, but "I personally don't think we have much to discuss at this stage."

Many federal Tories hold Reform responsible for the party's electoral rout in 1993. Former Tory cabinet minister John Crosbie told the UA conference, "We had a united alternative which you disrupted."

But more is at issue than just bruised egos and the scramble for pelf and position. Reform and the Tories have significant policy differences over such issues as abortion, capital punishment and immigration, and have staked out opposed positions on Canada's constitutional crisis.

Although historically the party of the British Empire, Orangeism (i.e., anti-Catholic bigotry), and Anglo-chauvinism, the Tories have over the past quarter-century embraced bilingualism and championed an accommodation with Quebec's elite, based on granting Quebec some form of special constitutional status within the Canadian federal state. Reform, on the other hand, has repeatedly exhibited a profound ambivalence as to whether Quebec should even remain in Confederation. Certainly it views Quebec's secession as preferable to any increase in Quebec's power within the existing federal state. In the most recent election campaign, Reform openly appealed to anti-Quebec chauvinism, with television ads that argued federal politics are dominated by Quebec-based

leaders like Prime Minister Chretien and the then federal Tory leader Jean Charest.

In an op-ed piece explaining why she would not have any truck with Manning's UA, former federal Tory minister Barbara McDougall charged Reform with making "incendiary statements particularly on immigration and language issues.... Reform members of Parliament habitually deride minorities, gays and women and are not repudiated by their party or their leader."

Reform's rise in the late 1980s and early 1990s exemplified the break-up of Canada's postwar political order. The bourgeoisie could and can no longer rule in the old way. Intensifying global competition for market and profits has compelled the Canadian bourgeoisie to repudiate the welfare state policies by which it mitigated class conflict during the post-war boom. At the same time, Canada's increasing economic integration with the US has greatly exacerbated the struggle between various regionally-based factions of Canadian capital.

Reform has voiced the demand of increasingly powerful sections of capital, particularly in Alberta and British Columbia, for a greater say in national policy. But it has done so by portraying itself as an anti-establishment party, by appealing to the anxieties and sense of alienation in the middle class and among sections of workers in the face of rapid socioeconomic change. Reform has drawn on western Canadian traditions of evangelical Christianity and populist opposition to economic domination by eastern-based banking and railway interests, while scapegoating minorities and baying for law and order.

Although Manning has captured most of the traditional Tory vote in the West, he comes from a distinct, right-wing political tradition that emerged in Alberta during the Great Depression and subsequently developed intimate ties with Alberta's oil, natural gas and agribusiness interests. Manning's father, Ernest Manning, rose from radio preacher to be the long-time Social Credit Premier of Alberta. Preston Manning has himself been a right-wing political activist and Christian fundamentalist all his adult life. He quit giving sermons on Canada's National Bible hour only after assuming the Reform Party leadership.

Canada's oldest political party the Tories are, by contrast, the quintessential establishment party, the party most closely identified with the interests of the Bay Street banking and financial houses.

Said one political commentator, "Where *is* the point of congruence between a party that lives and breathes the gospel of populism and one that sees this as the next thing to mob rule?... Between a party firmly rooted in social conservatism, and a party that cannot call itself conservative without first adding the word progressive?"

Initially, Reform was shunned by the dominant sections of the Canadian bourgeoisie. But in the 1993 election, when Reform championed dramatic social and public spending cuts, it won the accolades of the likes of the *Globe & Mail*, which saw it as a useful tool for pressing the Liberals and the entire political spectrum sharply to the right.

The Liberals' adoption of Manning's right-wing economic agenda, however, has undercut big business support for Reform. In his keynote address to the UA convention, even Alberta Premier Ralph Klein lavished praise on Liberal Finance Minister Paul Martin, who has pushed through the biggest social spending cuts in Canadian history.

Reform and the UA are, of course, not without significant business support. Newspaper mogul Conrad Black's new national daily, the*National Post*, has served as a virtual house organ for the Reform Party's UA initiative. Autoparts manufacturer Magna International and the Canadian Brewers Association were among the business organizations to sponsor hospitality suites at the UA convention.

Reform's stance on Quebec, however, continues to trouble much of the political and financial elite in eastern Canada. The Liberals, it is true, have joined Reform in threatening Quebec with ethnic-linguistic partition in the event of separation. But unlike Reform, the Liberals have deep historical roots in Quebec and have traditionally been the principal political vehicle for reconciling conflicts between sections of capital based in Quebec and the rest of Canada.

However Reform's crisis is not rooted only or even primarily in its failure to win the backing of the dominant sections of big business. There is widespread popular opposition to Reform's baiting of minorities and its social conservative agenda. And, just as significantly, there is an increasing questioning of the market mantras of the 1980s and 1990s.

But if Reform and similar such political instruments are to be prevented from channeling mounting social discontent in a reactionary direction, the popular opposition to chauvinism, attacks on democratic rights and working people's jobs and living standards must be fructified by a socialist critique of the capitalist market.