Canadian Alliance leadership race: Why the media buzz over Tom Long?

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Tom Long has never held elected office. Until last month few Canadians even knew his name. Yet his entry into the race to lead the Canadian Alliance, Canada's Official Opposition, has been heralded by the corporate media as a major realignment in Canadian politics.

"The logic in Tom Long's candidacy," declared a lead editorial in the *Globe and Mail*, "... is so strong that it threatens one national institution [the Conservative Party] and two national figures: [the Canadian Alliance's chief architect] Preston Manning and [Conservative Party leader] Joe Clark.... [The] very structure of Canadian national politics is at stake."

Conrad Black's stable of newspapers has likewise made sweeping claims for Long's candidacy. "In 1993," wrote the *National Post*, the Conservatives "lost two of their three political legs to new parties when the West fell to Reform [the Alliance's predecessor] and Quebec" forsook the Tories for the Bloc Québécois. Now Long "is leading the final exodus of Ontario conservatives" from "Joe Clark's desperately unfocused Tories."

The naïve might ask: where is the groundswell of popular support for Long? A mere 200 people attended his campaign launch last week. But the *Globe* and *Post* know of what they speak. Long's leadership bid has the support of powerful sections of Canadian big business who are dissatisfied with the Chretien Liberal regime and want to use the Alliance to press for radical tax and social spending cuts. Quipped one journalist, "The big money's backing Tom."

It is an open secret that powerful sections of the Bay Street financial establishment pressed Ontario Premier Mike Harris, whose Tory government has spearheaded the assault on social and public services, to enter federal politics. Harris resisted their entreaties, but did lend his support to Reform's unsuccessful effort to reach an electoral understanding with the federal Tories.

Now Harris is mobilizing his well-funded political machine behind Long's Alliance leadership bid. Indeed, the more honest and astute media commentators concede that through Long, the Harris Tories and their Bay Street bankrollers are attempting a takeover of the Reform cum Canadian Alliance.

While publicly Harris maintains that he cannot take sides in the Alliance leadership race, a majority of his parliamentary caucus and cabinet have broken ranks with their sister federal party and are campaigning for Long. Ontario Treasurer Frank Eves, generally considered the second most powerful man in the government and a longtime friend and ally of federal Tory leader Joe Clark, announced last month he was breaking with Clark to support Long. "How close is the connection between Harris money and Tom Long?" asks political commentator Jeffrey Simpson. "Mr. Long's chief financial officer is the former treasurer of the Ontario Conservative Party and his chief fundraiser is the chairman of corporate fundraising for Mr. Harris's party."

The corporate support for Long's leadership bid is a huge blow to the federal Tories, who have been confined to fifth place in the House of Commons since they were toppled from power in 1993. Even last year, corporate donations massively favored the federal Tories over Reform. But in business circles Clark is increasingly dismissed as a "Red Tory" who will not force through the radical changes in socioeconomic policy needed to boost corporate "competitiveness."

Long, by contrast, was one of the chief architects of the Ontario Tories' Common Sense Revolution, a series of right-wing measures patterned after the US

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Repubilcans' *Contract with America*. His principal claim to fame is that he chaired the Ontario Tories' victorious 1995 and 1999 provincial election campaigns. Long's ability to script Tory attack ads and frame “wedge issues” that harness voter anxiety over economic insecurity and deflect social anger onto welfare recipients and other marginalized sections of society have won him accolades as a brilliant political strategist. The truth is the Tories were able to come to power and have been able to prevail in the face of widespread opposition only because the trade unions and New Democratic Party have suppressed the class struggle in the interests of big business.

Be that as it may, Long is acutely conscious of whose support he is seeking. Much of his maiden campaign speech could have been cribbed from the Business Council on National Issues' recent broadside against the Chretien Liberal government. Long argued that Canadian governments have hindered business, while cosseting the inefficient with social programs and public services. “We have dissipated our economic vitality by subsidizing failure and undermining initiative, risk taking and the work ethic,” declared Long. “We're going to make this country an enterprise zone. It's time to unshackle our over-taxed, over-regulated, over-governed economy.”

Long said he favors sweeping tax cuts and spending reductions, drastic cuts to employment programs, the elimination of any federal role in social housing, and the adoption of legislation making all tax increases subject to binding referenda. Through various code-phrases, he also signaled that were he to lead Canada's government he would move to further reduce unemployment insurance, welfare and other income support programs.

Long's principal rivals for the Alliance leadership, Manning and Stockwell Day, are by no means opposed to such an agenda. Both pushed for the Alliance to make the replacement of a progressive income tax system by a 17 percent flat tax the centerpiece of the party's founding platform. But much of the Toronto-based banking and corporate elite remain leery of Manning's and Day's religious conservatism and their association with attempts by the economic and political elite in the Canadian West to wrest greater autonomy and power within Canada's federal state. Also, in regards to Manning there is much unease over his past readiness to appeal to anti-Quebec chauvinism.

Reform's founder-leader, Manning floated the Canadian Alliance with the aim of repositioning himself and his party so as to remove Bay Street's doubts as to their political dependability and malleability. But important sections of Canadian business have concluded that the leadership race affords them the possibility of even more directly molding the Alliance to serve their interests by promoting Long's leadership bid.

Whether they will succeed or not remains to be seen. Although Long is a consummate insider in the Ontario Tory party, he is very much an outsider in traditional Reform circles. Between them, Manning and Day have the support of more than three-quarters of the 57 Alliance MPs. At present just five Alliance MPs are backing Long.

Already a section of former Reformers is bristling at the thought that the Alliance could by taken over by Ontario Tories. According to Alliance MP Lee Morrison, Long's campaign is peopled “with re-treaded Mulroney apparatchiks,” a reference to former Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, whom Reform castigated for “pandering to Quebec” and failing to aggressively cut public spending.

Whatever the outcome of Long's leadership bid, his candidacy and the entry of a major part of the Harris Tories into the Canadian Alliance underscores that powerful sections of Canadian capital are determined to see the assault against the working class greatly intensified.

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