

# Canadian Alliance leadership race: Will big business embrace the religious right?

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Canada's Official Opposition, the right-wing Canadian Alliance, will choose a new leader today in a membership vote that pits former Alberta Treasurer Stockwell Day against Preston Manning. The founder-leader of the Reform Party, which transformed itself into the Alliance last January, Manning was considered the prohibitive favourite to win the leadership of the new party. But in a first ballot, held June 24, he captured just 36 percent of the vote, as opposed to 44 percent for Day.

Third-place finisher Tom Long, a key advisor to Ontario Premier Mike Harris, has rallied to Manning, but many of Long's supporters from Ontario's corporate elite and ruling provincial Conservative Party (Tory) are plumping for Day.

A Christian fundamentalist and the son of a former Social Credit premier of Alberta, Manning is a self-proclaimed social conservative—an opponent of abortion and proponent of the death penalty. Yet Manning has charged that Day won the first ballot by enrolling in the Alliance 30,000 to 40,000 members of “special interest groups,” a euphemism for militant anti-abortionists, opponents of gay rights, and supporters of public funding for religious schools. With increasing vehemence and desperation, Manning and his key aides, who include most of the Alliance's top leaders, have charged that should Day become party leader, the Alliance risks alienating “fiscal conservatives”—i.e., big business and the urban, upper middle-class—and being stigmatized as intolerant.

Whatever the outcome of today's voting, the Alliance leadership race has demonstrated two unmistakable facts of contemporary political life. Big business, its political representatives and the corporate media are lurching ever-further to the right, embracing policies and views that only a few years ago were confined to

the political margins. As they do so, the popular base for official politics is becoming ever narrower.

Manning spearheaded Reform's transformation into the Alliance in the hopes of convincing Canada's corporate elite that he and his party are its best bet to form a national government committed to dramatic tax and social spending cuts. Not that big business ever took exception to Reform's right-wing economic agenda. But it was wary of Reform, because of its right-wing, populist roots, including its penchant for bible-thumping, its support for the demands of sections of the economic and political elite in Western Canada for a greater say in national affairs, and its readiness to appeal to Anglo-chauvinism and to court confrontation with Quebec.

Manning's personal political fortunes aside, his gambit has met with a fair measure of success. Angered by the governing Liberals' failure to heed their calls for a radical shift in policy, important sections of big business have used the Alliance leadership race to signal that they would like to see a change in government. The Conservatives, the Liberals' traditional rivals, meanwhile, have suffered a slew of high-level defections to the Alliance. Among those supporting Day's leadership bid are former federal Tory cabinet ministers, Jake Epp and Doug Lewis; a former party president, Senator Gerry St. Germain; a former principal secretary to Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, Peter White; and Mulroney's former chief of staff, Stanley Hartt.

A further measure of the shift in elite opinion is the saturation media coverage accorded the Alliance leadership race. The Alliance has no seats outside the four Western provinces, which are home to less than a third of Canada's population. According to the most recent opinion polls, the Alliance has the support of just

16 percent of the electorate. Only 120,000 people, in a country of 30 million, voted in the first-ballot of the Alliance leadership race. According to the second-place finisher, “special interest groups” are in the process of determining the party leader. Yet the media has with few exceptions accepted the Alliance's claim to be the only governmental alternative to the Chretien Liberals.

Just as significant is the lack of media debate about the Alliance's right-wing socioeconomic program. Generally, it is only Alliance enthusiasts like *Globe and Mail* commentator John Ibbitson who make much of the fact that the Alliance “is ready to campaign on ... the most profoundly radical program of fiscal, social and constitutional change ever put before the Canadian public by a government in waiting.” The centerpiece of the Alliance's election program is the call for the replacement of the current progressive tax system with a 17 percent flat tax. Not only would this measure result in a massive tax reduction for the most privileged social layers, it would necessitate a further \$20 billion per year cut in the federal government's \$112 billion program expenditure. Even the Republicans in the US have rejected the flat tax as a measure too patently of benefit only to the well-to-do, yet the Canadian media has for the most part refused to interrogate Alliance leaders as to its implications.

Initially much of the media buzz and big business interest in the Alliance leadership race centered on Tom Long, who was seen as having invaluable connections to Toronto's corporate elite and Ontario's right-wing Tory government. But when Long's campaign derailed, at least in part because of revelations some of his workers had used Long's \$4 million campaign chest to enroll phony members, many well-connected and well-heeled one-time federal Tories transferred their support to Day.

Even more dramatic was the shift in attitude of Conrad Black's *National Post* and the Thomson-owned *Globe and Mail*. Prior to June 24, both of Canada's national dailies had attacked Day for courting the social conservative vote. On the eve of the first-ballot, the *Post* complained that Day had “allowed his campaign to become overwhelmed by his social conservative message” and warned he “is likely to drive the Alliance backwards as forwards.” But once Day topped the polls, both the *Globe* and *Post* indicated they were ready to embrace him in the interest of securing

massive tax and social spending cuts.

Declared *The Globe*, “Even fiscal conservatives who disagree with the Alliance views on abortion and capital punishment might figure that the Supreme Court and Charter of Rights would keep major legal changes at bay and might vote Alliance regardless.... A savvy political strategist might suggest” the Liberals and federal Conservatives “get busy developing clear, compelling, politically attractive visions of their own.”



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