

## Merger backers win day PC brass zero in on vote, shrug off legal torpedo

By Sandra Cordon / The Canadian Press

Ottawa - Despite a flurry of protests, the federal Conservative leadership set the process in motion Saturday for a historic vote by members on whether the party should merge with the Canadian Alliance.

In a controversial decision, the national management committee agreed that Tories will elect delegates to regional ratification meetings that will be connected by telephone on Dec. 6 for a virtual national meeting, instead of a major convention.

"It's constitutional, it's legal and it's fair," said Conservative Leader Peter MacKay, who entered Saturday's all-day session amid cries of "traitor" from a small group of about 20 opponents of the plan to marry Canada's two right-wing parties.

"It's in the hands of our membership which, of course, was always our intent," added MacKay. But one vocal dissenter on the management committee promised continued legal action to fight what she said was an unpopular idea that has been shot down before.

Marjaleena Repo said fellow committee members didn't scrutinize the merger proposal closely enough to realize that it represents a "hostile takeover" of the historic Conservative party by the Alliance. "That is why I have called this whole manoeuvre, this whole process, a coup d'état on behalf of the Canadian Alliance," said Repo, a supporter of failed Tory leadership candidate David Orchard. Other opponents of the merger released an ominous legal decision Friday which warned that Tory officials could be personally sued if they approved the "hub-and-spoke" proposal for regional delegates that has now been endorsed.

The party leadership shrugged off the legal opinion as nothing more than a desperate tactic with no serious merit.

MacKay said lawyers within the Tory brass examined "and essentially debunked some of the very bogus arguments that were put forward I think intentionally ... to put a stick in the spokes of this process."

And if there is a legal challenge, "then there's a legal challenge and we'll deal with it when it comes," added Conservative national party president Bruck Easton.

Saturday's protests against MacKay's leadership were offset by another small group of vocal proponents of the merger, which they believe is necessary to present a larger, more viable right-wing alternative to the governing Liberals.

Saturday's decision by about 40 management committee members from across Canada sets the clock ticking now for a policy convention just in time for a possible federal election next spring.

Many expect that Paul Martin, who is poised to take over as Liberal prime minister from Jean Chretien, will seek a public mandate in perhaps May 2004.

MacKay said a two-thirds majority vote from the "20 - give or take" regional sessions will be required to approve the merger, adding he was "extremely happy, extremely proud of the reaction by management committee" to support the vote.

And he predicted Tory members, who will chose delegates between Nov. 29 and Dec. 2, will vote in favour of the merger.

Still, his opponents won't be backing down.

They insist their legal opinion means any such change as a merger must be "implemented by a properly constituted national meeting. It cannot be implemented by a mail-in ballot, regional meetings, or any other truncated version of a national meeting."

A national meeting where everyone must attend in person would be difficult to set up quickly and could slow the process.

More than 3,000 new party memberships have been sold since the merger proposal was announced on



*File*

Peter MacKay: Legal move meant to 'put a stick in the spokes of this process.'

Oct. 16.

The marriage proposal has been greeted within Tory ranks by both wild applause and withering criticism.

Accolades have rolled in from Alberta Premier Ralph Klein and former prime minister Brian Mulroney.

MacKay negotiated the pact with Alliance Leader Stephen Harper to speed the formation of a new entity called the Conservative Party of Canada, pending ratification by the respective party memberships by Dec. 12.

Many of the protesters outside Saturday's meeting were supporters of Orchard, who remains a senior Tory strategist.

They said MacKay doesn't have the mandate to negotiate a deal with the Alliance and that any ratification process in the prescribed time frame is "a hoax."

Orchard was the third-place leadership candidate whose convention-floor deal last spring gave MacKay the party leadership on condition there be no merger with the Alliance.

Meanwhile, MacKay acknowledged there was nothing he could do to keep Alliance members from skewing the merger vote, but urged them not to join the Tory party in order to vote twice in order to try to get a pro-merger result.

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