

Harper to take on Martin's Liberals in federal vote as new Conservative leader

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BN AUDIO

TORONTO (CP) - Stephen Harper will face off against Paul Martin's Liberals in the federal election that could come within weeks after the Western-based former economist was anointed Saturday as the first leader of Canada's newly merged Conservative Party of Canada.

Harper's victory was without drama. He was chosen to helm the right-wing party after polling over 56 per cent support on the first ballot, easily out-distancing Magna executive Belinda Stronach, who had 34 per cent, and former Ontario cabinet minister Tony Clement, at 9.

The former Alliance leader immediately trained his guns on Martin and the Liberal government and warned his fellow Conservatives to expect an unrelenting assault from the Grits.

"The tired, old, corrupt Liberal party is cornered like an angry rat," he told the 1,500 assembled Conservatives.

"They are going to attack us like never before."

An old-school Tory stalwart was immediately dispatched to douse the perception that the former Alliance party had taken over the Progressive Conservatives. Interim leader Senator John Lynch-Staunton took to the stage before Harper to announce "there is no takeover here."

"This is coming back together. This is what Canadians have been urging us to do."

Harper noted that he had inherited a legacy that stretches from John A. Macdonald to Brian Mulroney, adding his own perception of the takeover question.

"There's going to be a takeover: the Conservatives taking over the government of Canada, that's what we're doing."

Prime Minister Paul Martin was far less partisan when he extended congratulations to Harper for "a decisive triumph."

In a statement, Martin said he looks forward to "a vigorous and informative debate in the days ahead."

A majority of the 92,500 Conservative voters who participated (37 per cent of all eligible voters) signalled they had overcome reservations about the former Alliance leader's ability to attract voters from all regions of the country. Harper's win came exactly two years after he captured the Alliance leadership. On Saturday, he had a strong showing in Ontario, the Prairies and British Columbia, while Stronach was ahead of her two rivals in several ridings in Atlantic Canada and Quebec.

Stronach and Clement pummelled away at the notion that Harper could not win votes in seat-rich Ontario and Quebec during the leadership race, but Conservatives set aside those concerns in favour of an experienced leader who has been accused of having a paucity of passion.

Harper acknowledged the importance of Ontario if his party is to have a chance at forming government.

"A solid Ontario has been the basis of a Liberal government in the past three elections and I just think that's a thing of the past."

Stronach's concession speech included a promise to work with Harper while pointedly insisting she would work to keep the new party from straying too far to the right.

She said she and Clement will work to ensure the Conservative party "does reflect the views of mainstream Canadians."

Clement was first to concede and he made an immediate effort to unify the young party.

"Stephen you have our support, you have our hopes and aspirations, you have our good will. You certainly got a lot more votes than we did."

The results mirrored opinion polls taken of party members over the last month.

The 59-day campaign focused on which leader would most likely appeal to Canadians across the country when the merged Alliance and Conservative parties take on Martin's Liberals.

Harper has been viewed by some as limited in his appeal because of his inability to draw significant support east of Manitoba. Stronach and



The new leader of the conservative party Stephen Harper is applauded by candidates Tony Clement and Belinda Stronach as he leaves the stage following his win, at the Conservative party leadership convention in Toronto, Saturday. (CP/Tom Hanson)

Clement, who are both from the Toronto area, tried to capitalize on Harper's lack of success in Eastern Canada and cast themselves as candidates who could sell the new party as a truly national entity.

Harper's win comes just over three months after a landmark merger between the former Progress Conservative and Alliance parties in a controversial move to end years of vote-splitting among Canada's two right-wing parties. A united right represents the greatest threat to the current Liberal dynasty, which dates back to 1993.

The new party has already made gains in public opinion polls. That momentum has been fuelled by public outrage over Liberal patronage scandals. That anger made Saturday's selection more significant. Conservatives confined to the political wilderness for over a decade now believe they have a legitimate chance of forming the next government.

But some analysts say Harper will have trouble dodging allegations of anti-Eastern bias. His past suggestion that Alberta erect "firewalls" to protect itself from "an aggressive and hostile federal government" is sure to be used as fodder by the Liberals during a campaign. His characterization of Atlantic Canadians as defeatists has also haunted him.

Early reaction from the east coast was positive. New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord - touted early on as a potential leadership candidate - said the convention and vote showed "Canadians will have a clear alternative in the next federal election."

Nova Scotia Senator John Buchanan, a former Conservative premier, noted Harper did better than expected in Atlantic Canada and predicted Harper will be "a great leader" who can bring success to the party in the region.

Stronach's defeat came despite spending millions of dollars on consultants, pollsters and spinners. Still, the former auto parts magnate attracted significant attention to a race that might otherwise have been considered dreary.

Her failure to capture the leadership, while partially attributable to Harper's formidable organizational advantage, will also undoubtedly be blamed on heavily scripted and stilted appearances that reflected the 37-year-old's embryonic political development.

Clement was hoping to capitalize on his experience as the only candidate to have served in cabinet. But his record as a defeated minister under former Ontario premier Ernie Eves failed to inspire voters and his organizational weakness proved impossible to overcome.

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