

Joe Clark says Martin a less dangerous choice for country than Harper

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OTTAWA (CP) - Former Tory leader Joe Clark put the boots to Stephen Harper on Sunday, saying it would be "dangerous" to let him run the country and suggesting even Paul Martin would be better.

In a television interview, Clark said he sees no evidence that the revamped Conservative party headed by Harper can show the kind of leadership needed on issues like health care, the role of women, gay rights, the environment and foreign affairs.

On the contrary, said Clark, the new party is dominated by former Canadian Alliance hard-liners, while most Red Tories from the former Progressive Conservatives have been relegated to the sidelines.

Clark said he doesn't like Prime Minister Martin either, or the scandals that have plagued the Liberal government.

But if forced to a choice between two evils, he suggested Martin would be the lesser one.

"I think the question is a very tough one," said Clark. "I think that there is a good question which one is more dangerous for the country

"I would be extremely worried about Mr. Harper. I personally would prefer to go with the devil we know (Martin). I'm that concerned about the imprint of Stephen Harper, not only what he stood for in the past but the way he has led this party now."

Harper shrugged off Clark's comments at an appearance in Toronto.

"We've seen the parties come together, I think Conservatives across the country are feeling great about the election," he said on television. "I think it is unfortunate for Joe."

John Reynolds, the Conservative House leader in the Commons, dismissed Clark as a "bitter old man" and a political turncoat.

"I can't believe it," said Reynolds. "Anybody who would tell you that Paul Martin is better than the leader of the Conservative party right now is a traitor to the cause."

Loyola Hearn, a Conservative MP from Newfoundland, dismissed suggestions that the renewed infighting would hurt the party's chances should Martin call the spring election that is widely anticipated.

"Mr. Clark has never been part of our (new) party, he chose not to be part of our party," said Hearn. "I'm not sure how many people are listening to him."

Clark's assault came a day after Harper and former prime minister Brian Mulroney tried to orchestrate a show of Conservative unity at a party fundraiser in Moncton organized by New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord.

Mulroney, who played a key role in the merger of Alliance and PC forces that gave birth to the new Conservative Party of Canada, lauded Harper on Saturday as a moderate and a bridge-builder.

"I believe we have in Stephen Harper a new leader who can take the new Conservative party to government and restore vision, daring and achievement to Canada's national agenda," said the former prime minister.

Harper, for his part, said it's time to forget past battles on the political right and concentrate on the coming election.

"The country wants a change of government, it has lots of reasons to do so, and we should obviously do everything we can to take advantage of that," he said after the fundraiser.

"We should be together fighting the Liberals."

Clark, who adamantly opposed the Alliance-PC merger, quit the party caucus after it went ahead and is not seeking re-election in his Calgary riding.

He insisted he isn't endorsing either Martin or the Liberals, noting that the prime minister has been unable to unite his own party and is suffering from internal feuding with former Jean Chretien loyalists.

"I don't think either one of these so-called national parties merits support," said Clark, who advised voters to pick the best candidate on a case-



Former Progressive Conservative leader Joe Clark. (CP /Fred Chartrand)

by-case basis in their local ridings.

Clark said he's working for the Conservative candidate in his hometown of High River, Alta., which he represented in the Commons for years before moving to a Calgary constituency.

But he's also supporting former Tory John Herron, who has jumped to the Liberals, in his riding in New Brunswick.

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