

Brian Mulroney gives speech praising Harper



CTV.ca News Staff

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Former Tory prime minister Brian Mulroney picked New Brunswick to give his first speech to the new Conservative Party.

In a 45-minute speech in Moncton Saturday night, he praised new leader Stephen Harper -- an implacable ideological enemy in the 1980s -- as a man who can take the Conservatives back to power.

"This is the kind of party Stephen Harper is leading: a moderate, successful Conservative party," he told about 600 people who had paid \$500 per plate.

"I tell you, that in this room and every room like this across Canada, if we rise together in solidarity and support, the Conservative Party will live again!"

Mulroney was believed to be supporting auto parts executive Belinda Stronach behind the scenes during her unsuccessful run for the Conservative leadership. He was a public supporter of the effort to merge the Tories and the Canadian Alliance.

Harper, Mulroney and New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord, who some had wanted to see run for the new party's leadership, mingled together during the fundraiser, a symbol of unity.

"That's the way it used to be, for 125 years. Then it took a 10-year hiatus, and now we're all back together," Mulroney told CTV.

The right-wing split

Mulroney won a massive landslide in 1984, after people decided they had enough after almost 16 unbroken years of Liberal rule (Tory leader Joe Clark formed a minority government in 1979, but it only lasted eight months).

In 1987, Preston Manning -- with Harper as his policy chief -- launched the right-wing, populist Reform Party with the slogan "The West Wants In!"

Ironically, with powerful ministers like Albertans Don Mazankowski and Joe Clark, Westerners had never had so much influence in the federal cabinet.

While Mulroney prevailed in the 1988 free trade campaign, his coalition between Western conservatives and Quebec nationalists broke up, especially after the failure of 1990's Meech Lake constitutional accord.

His government was battered by a series of scandals, documented in the book *On The Take* by journalist Stevie Cameron, which turned into a huge bestseller.

Mulroney was even falsely implicated in the Airbus affair.

Policies like the Goods and Services Tax stuck in the nation's collective craw. A 1986 decision to award a CF-18 jet fighter maintenance contract to a Quebec company after it had been fairly won by a Winnipeg firm enraged the West.

The Reform Party held its first convention in Winnipeg on the first anniversary of the CF-18 announcement.

"Obviously we will always have our disagreements. I think in terms of major

policy initiatives he took, most have been continued by his successors," Harper said. "In that sense much of his programs have been vindicated."

Mulroney, his popularity bottoming out, stepped down in 1993, and his successor Kim Campbell led the Tories to a disastrous defeat as they won only two seats.

In 1997 and 2000, vote-splitting between first the Tories and Reform, then the Canadian Alliance, helped Liberal prime minister Jean Chretien form majority governments.

Split healed?

With the merger between the Progressive Conservatives and the Alliance last December, the split appears to be healed.

"I think the more messages we can send to Canadians that we're not fighting among ourselves, that that's something Chretien and (Prime Minister Paul) Martin do, I think the better it is," Harper said.

Asked if being seen with Mulroney might hurt, Harper said Mulroney's image is changing, particularly in light of the sponsorship scandal.

Interestingly, a former Tory prime minister who has stayed away from the new party is Clark.

After he won the new party's leadership on March 20, Harper made an effort in his victory speech to reach out to all different types of Tories, including so-called Red Tories like Clark.

When asked by a reporter if he would personally reach out to Clark, Harper testily said it wasn't about individuals.

With a report from CTV's John Vennavally-Rao

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