

## Tories vote to unite the right

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Globe and Mail Update

Saturday, Dec. 6, 2003

UPDATED AT 3:33 PM EST

The Progressive Conservative party sealed a historic political union with the Canadian Alliance Saturday, when they voted overwhelmingly in favour of the merger that was endorsed almost unanimously a day earlier by Canadian Alliance members.



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A total of 2,234 Tories — or 90.4 per cent of the 2,481 who took part in the vote — said 'yes' to ratifying the agreement reached between Tory Leader Peter MacKay and Alliance Leader Stephen Harper last October to unify the two parties.

Only 247 Tories voted against the new political entity, called the Conservative Party of Canada.

One of the closest votes took place in Saskatoon, where 29 Tories voted in favour and 23 voted against the merger. Saskatchewan is the home province of Tory activist David Orchard, who has fiercely opposed the merger throughout the two parties' courtship.

The only other close votes were seen in Victoria, with 37 in favour and 20 opposed and Trois-Rivières, with 20 in favour and 13 opposed.

"What an overwhelming victory for Canada," Mr. Mackay said to a cheering crowd after the vote. "With this overwhelming vote we have just become Paul Martin's worst nightmare."

"Finally after 10 years, the Liberal Party of Canada will be facing a united, strong conservative family in the next federal general election. And today has been an incredible exercise in Tory participatory democracy," he said.

The vote was convened from Ottawa and commenced simultaneously in 26 other cities

across Canada, by way of a video link-up. Delegates who were elected between November 29 to December 2 voted on a resolution to ratify the agreement.

Before the vote, two opponents of the merger — former Tory cabinet ministers Flora MacDonald and Sinclair Stevens — were given a chance to convince members to oppose unification.

Ms. MacDonald told them the merger would serve "no higher purpose but opportunism. "The people of Canada will not be fooled," she said. "The people of Canada deserve better."

After the vote, Mr. Mackay addressed those who voted against ratifying the union, as well as those who chose to abstain.

"I respect your concerns, but as we move forward today, I ask you, I implore you, to not only think about the accomplishments of the past, but think of the challenges ahead in the future.

"Play a part. Stay involved. Stay active in the New Conservative Party of Canada. We not only want you, we need you with us to build this national alternative," he said.

On Friday, more than 50,000 Alliance members from across the country — or 96 per cent — voted in favour of joining forces in the new party.

Sweeping majorities of Alliance members in every province supported the deal, but most of these votes came from Western provinces.

Fewer than 1,700 of the more than 53,000 voters were from east of the Ontario-Quebec border, which speaks to the inroads the party is going to have to make in Eastern Canada if they hope to pose a serious challenge to the ruling Liberals in the next federal election.

About one-third of the Alliance votes came from Alberta, and less than 1 per cent came from Quebec, while a mere 44 votes came from Newfoundland.

A yes vote from both parties — which required a 50 per cent plus one vote among Alliance members and at least a two-thirds majority among Tories — was established as a mandate for the creation of the new party.

Members of the unified party can now discuss sitting together in the House of Commons in the new year, setting up a new headquarters and probably appointing an interim leader while the new party conducts a leadership race to select its first chief.

Both Mr. Harper and Mr. MacKay are expected to run for the leadership, as is Calgary lawyer Jim Prentice.

Others considering taking the plunge include MPs Scott Brison, Brian Pallister and Chuck Strahl. Mr. Harper is seen as the front-runner and has already assembled a campaign team.

The two parties have also appointed individuals to cobble together other sections of the deal, including drafting a constitution, establishing new riding associations and filing the appropriate papers with Elections Canada to have the new party incorporated.

They have also agreed to set up a Conservative Fund Trust, which will be asked to raise money and retire the debt of either party.



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