

Solid candidates, not much flash in Tory contest

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The good news about the Tory leadership race is that people like Jim Prentice, a successful Calgary lawyer and businessman (and son of Eric, a long-forgotten professional hockey player who had a brief stint with the Toronto Maple Leafs), think there is enough life left in John A. Macdonald's "Grand Old Party" that it is worth making a big personal sacrifice to try to lead it.

The bad news about the contest to replace Joe Clark is that there are opportunities for people like Mr. Prentice because higher profile "name" possibilities such as New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord, former Ontario premier Mike Harris, former Ontario treasurer Jim Flaherty, and prominent businessman John Tory, a millwright in Bill Davis's now-defunct Blue Machine, have given the race a pass.

It is not clear where Hugh Segal, former organizer and policy adviser for Mr. Davis and for former prime minister Brian Mulroney, fits into this panoply. In some circles, he would be considered a "name" and indeed, somebody is out there now polling on his behalf trying to see just how much recognition he has.

But that may all be being done by admirers such as John Laschinger (the Tories' manager in the last campaign) who are trying to persuade Mr. Segal to abandon his previous position that his political itch has been well scratched. A change in the Conservatives' leadership procedure would allow Mr. Segal's wit and erudition to have more impact than they did the last time he sought to lead the party, however.

Yesterday, Mr. Prentice and the House Leader in the Commons, Peter MacKay, made their candidacies official. Nova Scotia MP Scott Brison is expected to follow and David Orchard, a crusader against free trade (who came second to Joe Clark in the last leadership), will probably be in.

Mr. Mackay was asked by a skeptical journalist whether leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party is still something worth fighting for. Although he is only 37, he is a lifer in politics, having begun the immersion at his father Elmer's knee. Of course it is worth it, he replied, because politics is the only way to change the direction of the country.

Mr. MacKay scorned the Liberals' record and insisted Canada deserves better. Mr. Prentice also had a lot to say about pursuing economic prosperity, a better quality of life, and honest and ethical government, all of which would be improved under a Conservative government led by him.

This is the kind of rhetoric we would expect from opposition politicians but there is, as yet, no prima facie evidence that Canadian electors want a change of direction. That may explain why Canadian Alliance Leader Stephen Harper, despite his intelligence, ideological commitment and basic decency, has not been able to move the meter, regardless of the shenanigans on the Liberal side.

As it stands now, there is not much flash in the Tory race but any one of Mr. MacKay, Mr. Brison, Mr. Prentice or Mr. Segal, if he comes in, are credible candidates to lead a mainstream party.

Mr. Prentice risks the "Jim who?" tag for the moment but he has had a long association with the party at the executive level, has a well-organized campaign team and was the Tory candidate in the Calgary Southwest by-election but withdrew to facilitate Mr. Harper's return to the Commons.

He has only two members of the Tory caucus on his list, Rex Barnes from Newfoundland and Senator Terry Stratton of Manitoba, but other prominent Tories such as organizer Randy Dawson, former national director Susan Elliott and former Alberta treasurer Jim Dinning. Mr. MacKay at the moment is the caucus favourite but does not appear well organized.

The media and some frustrated Tory and Canadian Alliance activists remain focused on the so-called unite-the-right slogan. But the realists (and this includes Mr. Prentice, Mr. MacKay, Mr. Brison and Mr. Segal) know their only hope of returning to power is to target the same voters who now support the Liberals, and that means staying in the centre of the spectrum.

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