

MacKay, Prentice enter PC race

Leadership seekers promise to focus on building party rather than merger

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OTTAWA -- The race to replace Joe Clark as Progressive Conservative Leader began in earnest yesterday with the entrance of the first two official candidates, both of whom offered olive branches to wayward Tory supporters but stopped short of an outright embrace of their Canadian Alliance opponents.

In announcing their plans, Nova Scotia MP Peter MacKay and Calgary lawyer Jim Prentice each said there needs to be a thaw in relations with the political right. Both, however, refrained from endorsing institutional co-operation with the Alliance that would include a merger or running joint candidates in select constituencies.

"I can tell you right now, I am not the merger candidate," Mr. MacKay said at an Ottawa news conference after declaring his candidacy earlier in the day in his Nova Scotia hometown. "I am not interested in institutional mergers with other parties. I am interested in co-operation with persons in other parties."

Mr. Prentice, a political newcomer, said his intention is to first build the PCs and then do what he can to push forward notions of co-operation. He was not specific, however, about how he would do this.

"What I intend to do in the days ahead is to reduce the temperature between the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party and to place the situation on a framework where we can have sensible discussions."

Both candidates said they will abide by the decision of the federal party to run a full slate of candidates in the next election, although they also took great pains to try to appear open to future discussions.

The two men jumped into the race after several candidates high on the Tory wish list -- including New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord and Ontario businessman John Tory -- announced they would not run.

Expected to join the contest later are Nova Scotia MP Scott Brison, free-trade opponent David Orchard, and perhaps Hugh Segal, a well-known Tory who once was chief of staff in the office of former prime minister Brian Mulroney. Heward Grafftey, a former cabinet minister, has also said he will run.

The winner will end up leading a party that is tied for fourth place in terms of seats in the Commons and only two away from losing official party status.

For the moment, the 37-year-old Mr. MacKay has been tagged as the front-runner, a description of which he is not enamoured, he said yesterday.

Earlier, Mr. MacKay told a crowd in Stellarton, N.S., that he is running to promote conservative values. He was joined in his Ottawa appearance by MPs Gerald Keddy and Loyola Hearn.

"I run because I have a burning desire to search for justice that embodies a type of fairness that was kindled right here in my hometown," Mr. MacKay said at his campaign kickoff.

Mr. Prentice has picked up the endorsement of MP Rex Barnes and can also count on a relatively strong campaign structure, led by Susan Elliott and Randy Dawson, both of whom have served as chief of staff to Mr. Clark. He also enjoys the support of former Alberta treasurer Jim Dinning, a leading candidate to one day replace Premier Ralph Klein.

However, Mr. Prentice, a 46-year-old lawyer and businessman, will have to raise his profile over a short period of time. Despite wide experience in the private sector and some backroom roles in the party, he still is a relative unknown. Tories will make their selection at a convention June 1.

He said yesterday that his party must also make its policy views better known to Canadians.

At his news conference, Mr. Prentice launched a broadside against Mr. Orchard, taking issue with his opposition to free trade.

"There is not room in this party for a leader that does not believe in free trade as a principle of the Conservative Party."