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NEWS STORY

Clark agrees to give up leadership

Ex-PM will step down to avoid subjecting party to divisive fight over top job

Tim Naumetz, with files from Rick Mofina and Joanne Laucius

The Ottawa Citizen

Wednesday, August 07, 2002

Joe Clark averted a divisive showdown over his leadership of the Conservative party yesterday, announcing he will step down next year after the danger of a snap election call by the governing Liberals has passed.



Reuters

'I've carried the party as far as i can': Joe Clark says he will step down as leader of the Conservative party next year, because his popularity and trust ratings have not paid off in voter support for his party.

Mr. Clark made the surprise announcement after he and his officials briefed the Conservative caucus of MPs and senators on a public opinion survey taken earlier this summer that showed the party has no chance of winning power if Mr. Clark remains at the helm.

Saying the decision gave him a sense of "relief," the former prime minister said the poll results, as well as personal discussions, finally convinced him it was time to announce he will leave.

"For my part, the good news is that I am widely trusted and popular," Mr. Clark told a news conference. "The bad news is

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that we cannot seem to translate those qualities into votes for the party."

The Tories' national council will decide when to hold a leadership convention after the Liberals' scheduled leadership review in February.

Mr. Clark, who recaptured the party's leadership in 1998 after losing it in 1983 to Brian Mulroney, said the House of Commons summer recess gave him time to reconsider his earlier statement that he intended to lead the Conservatives into the next federal election and contest an automatic review of his leadership at a party convention later this month.

"It was useful for me to get away from the House and to stand back a little bit and see myself as others saw me, and that helped me come to the view that I was not likely to be able to lead the party to success in a normal election," said Mr. Clark.

"I've carried the party, I think, as far as I can."

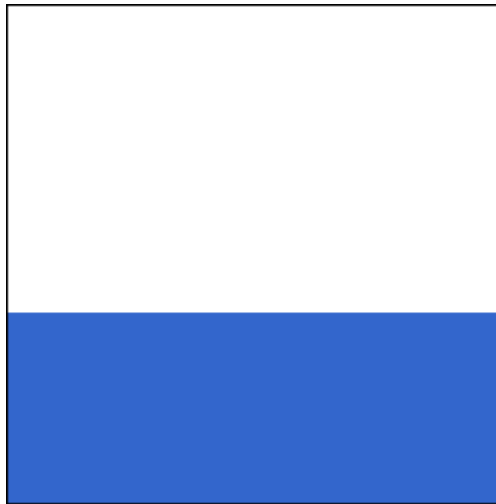
However, he added he will stay on until a new leader is chosen, possibly late next year, in case the Liberals call a sudden election if Prime Minister Jean Chrétien steps down after a review of his leadership in February. "I would relish, I think the party would relish, fighting a campaign against either of the potential Liberal leaders who tried to call an early election," he said.

Within hours of Mr. Clark's announcement, Canadian Alliance leader Stephen Harper dusted off his offer to the Tories to work with the Alliance as one party. "It is now appropriate, we believe, to plan a joint leadership race instead," Mr. Harper said. "With this in mind I wish to reiterate that my offer remains on the table."

Mr. Harper said the two parties must run a single slate of candidates in the next election, that they begin the process by forming a full coalition in the House of Commons, and that they commit to eventually forming a single political entity. He said his offer will be good until the end of the summer.

"I would still expect to have an indication by then of whether the leadership and executive of the (Tory) party wishes to embrace this offer, or whether it wishes to pursue its own leadership race," Mr. Harper said. "If the Tories reject this, then they will pretty well close the door (on uniting)."

A poll of 1,000 Canadians conducted by Toronto-based SES Canada Research Inc. concluded that 39 per cent of Canadians believe the Tories should elect a new leader. Another 17 per cent believe the party should merge with the Canadian Alliance, while 15 per cent believe the party should continue with Joe Clark as leader.



The poll was conducted between July 26 and Aug. 1, so yesterday's announcement played no part in the respondents' choices, said SES managing director Nikita Nanos.

But it does demonstrate that voters have an appetite for a new leader. The Alliance has a new leader, the NDP is getting a new leader and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien will be facing rival Paul Martin for the Liberal leadership.

"We're almost going through a generational change," said Mr. Nanos. Voters see the Conservatives as a viable alternative, but they want a new leader to capitalize on that. "It's a credit to Mr. Clark that he stepped down," he said. "It will cast a new light on Chrétien."

Meanwhile, he believes that 29 per cent of the voters were unsure simply because the Conservatives don't interest them. "The average Canadian couldn't name one or two people to replace Joe Clark." The poll, to be released today, is accurate plus or minus 3.1 per cent 19 times out of 20.

Opponents praised Mr. Clark's decision. "This is a very intelligent, in-depth decision that he has come to and it's one that is supported by the caucus, and I think he showed a lot of grace and class in the way that he has done it," said Nova Scotia MP Peter MacKay, a leading potential contender in the eventual race to succeed Mr. Clark.

New Brunswick MP Greg Thomson, who had threatened to challenge Mr. Clark at yesterday's caucus meeting, said Mr. Clark came face-to-face with voter reality and made the right decision. Mr. Thomson said a private party poll showed the Conservatives with only 12 per cent support under Mr. Clark's leadership.

Mr. Clark and several of his MPs said the announcement will give the party a chance to highlight policy and the credentials of Mr. Clark's potential successors during the Edmonton meeting. New Brunswick MP and potential contender, John Herron, said it is time for a generational change in the party's leadership and cited himself and other "thirtysomething" members of caucus who are ready to take centre stage.

Mr. Clark, who was first elected as a rural MP in Alberta in 1972 and won the party's leadership only four years later as a compromise candidate in a heated contest between Quebecers Brian Mulroney and Claude Wagner, became prime minister in a minority government in 1979 but lost to the Liberals the next year. He quit politics before the Conservative rout of 1993, and returned to help salvage the party's current handful of seats in the 2000 election.

Mr. Clark, who said he will continue to represent his Calgary Centre seat for at least the remainder of the current Parliament, said his decision was a tough one considering his long career in politics and his desire eventually to become prime minister again.

"These personal decisions, when you make them, when I make them, are always difficult," said Mr. Clark. "You have to weigh a lot of factors, and having weighed them and having decided is a relief. I would have liked to have been prime minister, I would have liked the party to do better in the last election (but) many people, some in the room, were counting us absolutely out of contention and I think we demonstrated that was wrong."