



October 28, 2003

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Sun, October 26, 2003

They like Mike**Harris must decide whether to take title**

By BILL RODGERS, OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA -- The man many consider The Great Right Hope is in a dilemma. In the space of a week -- an eternity in politics -- Mike Harris' ardour for the leadership of the proposed Conservative Party of Canada has transformed to wary contemplation, as revelations of his girlfriend's divorce proceedings grabbed headlines. When Canadian Alliance Leader Stephen Harper and Tory boss Peter MacKay shook hands on a deal to merge the two conservative parties earlier this month, one of the most astonished people in the country was the man who could end up leading the new party.

"I was caught by surprise," said Harris, who was in Halifax last week for a speech to the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.

"I don't think many of us expected this day would come this fall. I think many of us felt it ... would have to happen after the next federal election."

Harris and his people believed the electorate would do what the two parties couldn't do for more than a decade -- it would wipe one of them, probably the Progressive Conservatives, off the political map.

All of that changed on Oct. 16 and now Harris is under intense pressure to jump into the leadership race that will be decided next March if the members of both parties ratify the merger deal in December.

AHEAD OF MACKAY AND HARPER

"Mike Harris is a credible leader," Liberal pollster





Lorrie Goldstein
Miller time?

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Sun Media Newspapers

Michael Marzolini said. The head of Pollara, one of the largest public opinion firms in the country, told Sun Media: "Harris tests well ahead of Peter MacKay and Stephen Harper in Ontario."

But, he adds, "he doesn't score as high as Paul Martin."

In fact, most political pundits -- Conservative and Liberal alike -- agree while Harris would break the Grit stranglehold on Ontario, it would not be enough to chase a Martin-led Liberal Party out of power.

"I don't think anybody the conservatives put up is going to beat Martin," said Norman Spector, the former chief of staff to Tory PM Brian Mulroney.

But what Harris brings to the table is "profile, media savvy and the ability to win seats in Ontario and hold conservative ridings in the West," Spector said.

His inability to speak French would shut him out of Quebec, Spector predicted, ensuring Martin would pick up a majority of the province's 75 seats.

Nik Nanos of SES Research agrees.

"Although Harris' chances of winning a Conservative leadership race are strong, his chances of winning a national election are questionable," the pollster said. "Without traction among voters in Quebec, a unilingual national party leader de facto concedes defeat."

The former Ontario premier won't have as much trouble in the West. University of Calgary political scientist David Taras said Harris has something going for him no other candidate can claim -- the endorsement of popular Alberta Premier Ralph Klein.

"The word would go out from Ralph that this guy's okay, he's one of us, the West can trust him," Taras said, adding Harris is considered the A team while Harper, MacKay and the other leadership hopefuls are B-team contenders.

The emergence of Harris, he believes, would kill the hopes of any of the crop currently mulling over a run to lead a united conservative party.

"I think if he goes in, it's over," Taras said. "Who else is going to run except just for name recognition?"

For all of those who believe Harris is the man to break through in

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Ontario, there are some who don't buy it.

An aide to Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who did not want to be identified, said: "Martin's best friend is Harris. Liberals will unite to beat him, especially in Ontario."

Harris told reporters in Halifax last week that he would make a decision by mid-November, three weeks before the results of the ratification vote on the merger deal are known.

"It's a personal decision," Harris said. "I want to consult with family, consult with close friends. It's not a consideration for political people. I'm not interested in any polling data."

One of those being consulted is Harris' love interest, Toronto businesswoman Laura Maguire. Both are now getting a taste of the rough-and-tumble effect federal politics can have on personal lives, with published reports this week of Maguire's bitter divorce proceedings.

On Friday Harris issued a press release expressing his disappointment over the "undue attention" the media paid to Maguire's legal difficulties, asking the media "to think twice about what they are doing."

Sources close to Harris told Colin Perkel of The Canadian Press that media interest in Maguire's acrimonious divorce might persuade the former premier to remain on the sidelines.

Nanos says while Canadians tend to respect the privacy of their leaders' personal lives, lurid revelations emerging from Maguire's divorce could hurt Harris among conservatives.

HIGHER ETHICAL STANDARD

"Conservative-minded voters hold their leaders and prospective leaders up to a higher ethical standard on family issues. This could have legs," Nanos said.

Last week Harris was busy on the east coast, unveiling the sequel to his Common Sense Revolution in Ontario. He called it "a common-sense vision for Canada" and it includes tax cuts, smaller, less-intrusive government, a stronger military, improved Canada-U.S. relations and a justice system that he said would "respect the victims more than the criminals."

With the Alliance and PC party on the verge of a merge, Harris has stopped talking about uniting the right, speaking about a new "mainstream conservative" movement instead -- one that would be broad enough to attract conservatives and liberals who are tiring of 10 years of one-party rule in Canada.



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