

The Chronicle-Herald

Business subsidies should be eliminated, Harris says; ACOA-type programs have spotty track record - ex-Ontario premier

David Jackson
Provincial Reporter

Mike Harris has joined the list of federal conservative politicians who think the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency needs a major overhaul.

Mr. Harris, former Ontario premier and potential candidate for the leadership of the newly formed national conservative party, told a Halifax luncheon crowd that Canada should eliminate business subsidies and other forms of corporate welfare to ensure a level playing field.

He didn't say ACOA should be abolished but said it shouldn't be giving money to individual businesses.

"The idea that we can assist is an important concept. It's how you assist," he said. "I would take that, those dollars, away from the bureaucrats and the politicians. . . . I don't think they're very good at picking winners and losers."

Mr. Harris said while he was premier that he actually doubled the budget of a program similar to ACOA in his native northern Ontario. He said the program's mandate changed so communities benefited rather than individual businesses.

Earlier this year, Kings-Hants MP Scott Brison made scrapping ACOA and turning Atlantic Canada into a tax-free zone part of his platform in his unsuccessful bid for the federal Tory leadership.

Canadian Alliance politicians have condemned ACOA in the past. The agency wrote off \$233 million in loans between its founding in 1987 and Jan. 31, 2003.

Mr. Harris's visit to Nova Scotia came less than three weeks after the Ontario Conservatives were trounced by the Liberals in a provincial election.

He had led the Conservatives back to power in 1995, espousing a "common-sense revolution" that featured tax cuts, smaller government and workfare. He resigned in 2002.

Mr. Harris promoted a similar message Tuesday, saying Canada has to aggressively cut taxes to be competitive in a global economy, be open to private investment in health care, highways, and schools and improve regional economies.

He also said Canada has to build on its ties with the United States and criticized Prime Minister Jean Chretien for his handling of issues surrounding the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the States.

"Nothing is more valuable than our unparalleled relationship with the world's only superpower," Mr. Harris said in his speech.

The former premier has been a popular choice among political observers as a leadership candidate for the party created through the merger of the federal Progressive Conservatives and Canadian Alliance. The merger, announced last week, isn't official yet.

Mr. Harris said he'll likely decide next month whether to take a shot at the leadership.

The Chronicle-Herald
Opinion

Mike Harris goes hokey to lure Bluenose Tories

Marilla Stephenson

RIGHT-WING hardliner? Not here, my son, not here. No, it was all small-town, old-style, medium-blue rinse Toryism as the former premier of Ontario came to Halifax this week for the non-launch of his run for the Conservative leadership.

It's no secret that **Mike Harris** has been pushing a merger between federal Tories and the Canadian Alliance. His name is among the first to pop up when contenders are discussed. And it doesn't hurt that Ralph Klein, speaking from the Alliance heartland, has publicly urged Harris to run.

In case you missed it, last month the Alberta premier described Harris as "someone who can unite the conservative movement, someone with political experience, someone with a common-sense attitude. I think he's the right person . . . better than Stephen, better than Peter MacKay at this particular time because Canadians are looking for a fresh face."

Fresh? What a howler.

We know how quickly voters forget and political sins are forgiven, but Harris's provincial successor, Ernie Eves, might have a few expletives to say about that. Harris's checkered record in Ontario laid the groundwork for Eves' recent humiliation at the polls at the hands of the Liberals - exacerbated by Eves' own boneheaded moves, I must add, such as releasing a provincial budget on a TV show instead of in the legislature.

It was a happy coincidence for Halifax event organizers that, with Harris committed to a Tory fundraiser Tuesday, followed by a speech at an AIMS lunch on Wednesday, last week's merger deal was struck. Or, as AIMS president Brian Lee Crowley put it in his opening remarks, "dumb luck is a powerful force."

And Walkerton or no Walkerton, and the Tory annihilation in Ontario notwithstanding, Harris looks like a guy just itching to run.

Officially, he says he'll take a month to make a decision. But everything from his stumbling attempts at a few sentences in French - "Don't worry," he told the AIMS crowd, "I also speak English" - to the contents of his AIMS speech, to his platitudes extended to hometown boys Hamm and MacKay at the Tory event on Tuesday, indicate he's in the game.

And, asked during a scrum about whether his new love, Laura Maguire, backs a leadership run, Harris said "she is very supportive of anything that I may want to do and would be encouraging, whether it is in the private sector, whether it's in business or whether it's in political life. But it is a personal decision and it will be made in consultation certainly with Ms. Maguire and with family members."

Harris also smartly avoided the sort of pothole that Alliance Leader Stephen Harper dove into head first with comments about the Atlantic region having a "defeatist attitude."

Asked whether he would back eliminating ACOA, Harris said no. Based on his experience coming from the similarly disadvantaged region of Northern Ontario, Harris suggested a restructuring that would provide infrastructure funding instead of corporate welfare would be more successful in the long run.

At the \$500-a-head Tory shindig at the Halifax Club, Harris praised Hamm as a leader who may not always have spoken first at the first ministers' conferences, but who was always carefully listened to by everyone around the table.

And he also gave Tory Leader Peter MacKay a big plug, noting that MacKay, with much more to lose than Harper, bravely pushed forward with the merger.

I've also heard Harris was careful to step softly on Nova Scotia turf in order to avoid alienating local Tories who may back MacKay or Scott Brison. He also made sure his organizing muscle stayed home.

This, of course, could turn into healthy second- or third-ballot support, should MacKay and/or Brison decide to run. And MacKay, who is clearly playing for the long game and a future shot at the brass ring, wouldn't hurt himself by an alliance with Harris, either.

One thing is certain: even with all his flaws, **Mike Harris** could bring a legitimacy to a federal Conservative party that neither the cold-fish policy wonk Harper, nor the politically pubescent MacKay, are able to muster. Having Klein in his back pocket helps, too.

If anyone can kill the current scent of adolescence that hangs over the merger and its eventual offspring, it is Harris.

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Toronto Star **Harris ponders doing the right thing**

Kelly Toughill
HALIFAX - Prime Minister Mike Harris?

The former premier of Ontario said yesterday he's thinking hard about the job, and promised to announce within weeks whether he will run for leader of a united Conservative party.

Arriving in Halifax to make a long-scheduled speech, Harris' visit had all the trappings of a politician in full election mode, including a pre-arranged photo-op at Tim Hortons and a catchy campaign slogan.

Pledging a "common sense vision for Canada," he enthusiastically endorsed the proposed merger of the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties.

"I will do everything I can ... to encourage members of both the Alliance and the Conservative party and those Liberals who understand that a virtual monopolistic government is not good for this country ... to be part of an exciting new party that can provide a viable and effective alternative and reach out to those common values that we share."

Harris, 58, said he has received e-mails, phone calls and faxes from every province and territory urging him to run for leader.

But he said he must talk to family and friends before making a decision.

"This is a very important decision I intend to take some time to make," a relaxed and jovial Harris told reporters after arriving here from Toronto.

"It's going to require a 100 per cent change in my life and 100 per cent effort to be successful."

Harris, who has long advocated a merger of the two parties, said he was "caught by surprise" by the "extraordinary leadership" that led to the merger announcement last week.

He played down his own shortcomings, discounting his unpopularity in Ontario and pledging to learn French if elected leader.

"There will be a number of new areas of expertise I will need to focus on; that would be one of them," he said when asked about his poor French.

Harris stepped down as premier in the spring of 2002, after leading his Tories to back-to-back majorities in 1995 and 1999. His successor, Ernie Eves, was defeated in the Oct. 2 election.

Harris said he would not be a liability to the new party in Ontario and suggested the defeat of the Tory government came about because colleagues abandoned his core policies.

"I'm not an arm-chair quarterback; I don't want to get into the last election in Ontario, (but) when those of us that believe in those mainstream conservative values, when we focused on those values, when we took them to the people, we were successful."

Harris said his "mainstream values" agenda is a proven winner in four provinces, including Quebec, where he said Liberal Premier Jean Charest followed the agenda to victory.

"This mainstream conservatism sells all across the country, including in Ontario," he said.

Harris hasn't decided yet whether he wants to lead the new party, but he did offer a blueprint for its platform, a "common sense vision for Canada" that he has already preached in Winnipeg, Calgary, Vancouver and Montreal.

The "common sense vision for Canada" echoes the "Common Sense Revolution," a tax-slashing formula for less government that first brought Harris to power in Ontario in 1995.

Harris was to outline the blueprint to a provincial party fundraiser last night at an exclusive club in downtown Halifax. He was scheduled to have breakfast with key business leaders this morning, and is to be the keynote speaker at a luncheon hosted by a conservative think-tank, the **Atlantic Institute of Market Studies**, this afternoon.

Harris seemed careful to reach out not just to Tories, but to members of the Alliance as well, highlighting two issues at the core of that party: the role of the judiciary and the ability of Canadians to influence public policy.

The only question Harris ducked in his long meeting with reporters was one about his personal life.

Harris, who is separated from his second wife, Janet, recently bought a home with his girlfriend, Laura Maguire, 40, who has three children by a previous marriage. When asked if his new relationship will affect his decision on whether to run for leader of the new party, Harris answered a terse, "Yes."

Harris compared the task facing the leader of the merged party to one he faced in 1990 when he became leader of the devastated Tories, still smarting from a bad election.

"I understand what it means to take a new party forward because in essence that's what I did in the province of Ontario and this is 10 times and three territories bigger than the province of Ontario," he said

The New Brunswick Telegraph Journal

Harris has strategy to boost growth

Former Ontario premier still coy about leadership ambitions

HALIFAX - Former Ontario premier **Mike Harris** made a campaign-style sweep through Halifax on Wednesday, taking direct aim at Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and his expected successor, Paul Martin.

In a half-hour speech at a Halifax business luncheon, Mr. Harris outlined his "powerful new ideas" for the future of Canada and took every opportunity to condemn the policies of successive Liberal administrations in Ottawa.

Mr. Harris took shots at everything from foreign affairs to the country's economic condition, fuelling suspicions he is well on his way to running to lead a unified conservative party.

"Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien just don't understand," Mr. Harris told the luncheon, organized by the **Atlantic Institute for Market Studies**, a conservative lobby group.

"Ottawa has not cut taxes to keep our economy strong. They have refused to end corporate welfare. And they have fuelled a massive growth in government spending . . . Canadians deserve so much more than this."

Mr. Harris, who was on a brief, two-day swing through the region, has been at the centre of leadership speculation since the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives announced plans last week to merge their parties.

He has indicated he's mulling over a run at the job, but is said to be weighing whether he wants to return to the rigours of political life after stepping down as Ontario premier in the spring of 2002.

He has said he expects to make a decision within the next three weeks.

But many who have observed his speeches in recent days say they feel the man known for his so-called common sense revolution in Ontario is gearing up for the race.

"That sounded like a campaign speech to me," said one businessman at the luncheon.

Mr. Harris outlined a strategy of aggressive tax cuts, smaller government, an end to corporate handouts, improved trading relations with the United States and restored defence infrastructure.

The Winnipeg Free Press
The Record (Waterloo Region)
The Guardian (Charlottetown)
The Western Star (Corner Brook)
Canadian Press

Ex-premier Harris makes stump-style policy speech

By Alison Auld

HALIFAX - Mike Harris outlined his vision for Canada yesterday, striking out at Ottawa rivals and upping speculation the former Ontario premier has his sights keenly set on leading the country's united right.

In a half-hour speech that mixed both humourous jabs and hard-edged assaults on Liberal policy, Harris described an agenda of aggressive tax cuts, an end to corporate handouts and an immigration policy tailored to Canada's economic needs.

"Paul Martin and Jean Chretien just don't understand," Harris told a Halifax business luncheon, organized by the right-wing lobby group the **Atlantic Institute for Market Studies**.

"Ottawa has not cut taxes to keep our economy strong. They have refused to end corporate welfare. And they have fuelled a massive growth in government spending... Canadians deserve so much more than this."

On his second day of a campaign-style swing through Halifax, Harris gave a highly partisan speech that defined "powerful new ideas" for the future of Canada and took every opportunity to condemn the policies of successive Liberal administrations in Ottawa.

Transcontinental Media
Halifax Daily News
Cape Breton Post

Bold action needed on the economy, says Harris

By Peter McLaughlin

HALIFAX - Former Ontario premier Mike Harris, who is now mulling a run at the leadership of a new unified, national Conservative party, says if Canada is to become "relevant" again internationally, it must take bold action on the economy.

The architect of Ontario's so-called 'common-sense revolution', told 150 people at a business luncheon Wednesday Canada must slash taxes, end corporate hand-outs, abandon its low-dollar policy, and allow more private-sector investment in education, health and other social programs if it wants to get on economic track.

"We have to confront the conventional wisdom that government has to fund and provide for everything," he said. Although his speaking engagement was booked long before the Progressive Conservatives and the Canadian Alliance signed their merger deal, Harris's speech had the air of a campaign about it.

He took direct aim at Prime Minister Jean Chretien and the man likely to be the next prime minister, Paul Martin, blaming the Liberal government of hobbling the country's potential.

"Paul Martin and Jean Chretien just don't understand," Harris told the meeting organized by the **Atlantic Institute for Market Studies**, a conservative lobby group. "They say we have different values - as if Canadians should accept job losses and lower wages as the inevitable cost of a parliamentary system and a love for hockey," he said.

Harris, who wrapped up a two-day swing through Halifax, said Canada also has to fix its foreign policy, rebuild the armed forces, encourage more skilled professionals to immigrate to this country, and mend fences with the United States. He blamed Chretien for souring U.S. relations.

"Sadly, our federal government is tearing it down and destroying it," Harris said. The ex-premier also advocated an end to regional handouts, although he said he would keep ACOA, albeit with a dramatically changed mandate.

"The idea that we can assist is an important concept; it's how you assist," he said.

"I would take those dollars away from the bureaucrats and the politicians that are going directly to individual companies. I don't think they're very good at picking winners and losers."

After scrumming reporters he was heckled by an anti-corporate activist, who accused the ex-premier of having a corporate-agenda that will impoverish the country rather than enrich it.

Medicine Hat News
Harris coy about leadership plans

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La Presse Canadienne
La Presse
Cyberpresse.ca

Leadership de la droite: Harris nourrit la rumeur

By Alison Auld

Halifax - **Mike Harris** a exposé sa vision du Canada, hier, tout en s'en prenant à des rivaux à Ottawa, alimentant les rumeurs selon lesquelles la direction d'un nouveau parti de la droite unifiée serait dans sa ligne de mire.

Au cours d'une allocution d'une demi-heure mêlant l'humour et les attaques contre les politiques libérales, l'ex-premier ministre de l'Ontario a évoqué un programme axé sur des baisses d'impôt substantielles, la fin de l'aide aux entreprises et une politique d'immigration taillée sur mesure pour les besoins économiques du Canada.

"Paul Martin et Jean Chrétien ne comprennent tout simplement pas", a dit M. Harris au cours d'un dîner d'affaires à Halifax, organisé par le groupe de droite **Atlantic Institute for Market Studies**. Il a reproché à Ottawa de ne pas avoir réduit les impôts, d'avoir refusé de mettre fin aux subventions aux entreprises et d'avoir favorisé la croissance des dépenses gouvernementales.

À sa deuxième journée à Halifax, M. Harris a prononcé un discours nettement partisan définissant de "nouvelles idées" pour l'avenir du pays et a sauté sur la moindre occasion pour condamner les politiques des administrations libérales successives à Ottawa. Abordant les affaires étrangères autant que la situation économique, l'ex-premier ministre, connu pour sa soi-disant "révolution du bon sens" en Ontario, a accusé Ottawa de contribuer à élargir l'écart entre les revenus et de

ralentir l'économie- renforçant les soupçons qu'il songe à tenter sa chance à la direction d'un parti conservateur unifié.