

NATIONAL AFFAIRS: Local MPs speak out on Reform party leader Preston Manning

Manning wouldn't win leadership today, MP says

BY MIKE ADLER
STAFF WRITER

Despite the squabbling in its caucus, Reform won't run out of steam with Preston Manning as leader, the party's riding association in Markham says.

It's Manning's own principles which have built Reform in a short time, from a small group into Canada's Official Opposition, said Ed Brown, Reform's riding spokesperson and association vice-president.

"I don't see any reason to

believe Reform cannot maintain its momentum," he said.

MP Jim Hart left Reform's caucus last week after saying Manning had taken the party as far as it could go. A few other Reform MPs also questioned Manning's leadership.

Markham MP Jim Jones, Ontario's only Conservative in the House of Commons, said Manning stands in the way of any merger of the two parties.

"He has always been the problem," said the MP, who, after Tory

leader Jean Charest stepped down in March, predicted a showdown between Reformers and Tories for the conservative vote.

If there was an open election to pick the leader of a "United Alternative" to the Liberals, Manning wouldn't win, Jones charged.

But he added having two right-of-centre parties "spells trouble" for both sides. "Hopefully, when we select our leader, it will bring a lot of Reform votes back (to the Tories)," said the MP.

Brown said trouble in the Reform caucus has been exaggerated and argued the vast majority of party MPs are loyal to Manning. "I think in any party there's going to be some dissidents."

Hart's comments were probably meant as a smokescreen to disguise his decision to opt into the MP pension plan, argued Brown.

Since Manning was then out of the country, he added, Hart's remarks on leadership were probably a cowardly thing to do.

Nine-tenths of Reform's caucus

is still opting out of the lucrative plan, said Brown.

The "United Alternative" put forward by Reform is not a proposed merger with the Conservatives, but with all Canadians, who are dissatisfied with the present state of our country," he said.

Jones said he knew Reform was headed for a caucus revolt, but he hadn't known which MPs would opt into the plan. "It wasn't the six that I would've picked and there might be more," he said.

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