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The B.C. Liberals' fight to unite the centre-right

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The threat behind B.C. Liberal Leader Christy Clark's unity message: If the right-centre coalition splits, the NDP wins the next election

Images of Social Credit premiers Bill Bennett and W.A.C. Bennett loomed up on a screen in the ballroom of the Fairmont Chateau Whistler on Friday. It was the first day of the B.C. Liberals' pre-election convention and Brad Bennett, the youngest in the family dynasty, was in the spotlight in a packed ballroom of centre-right political activists.

"I am here to stand up for the values of free enterprise," intoned Mr. Bennett, now serving the cause of Premier Christy Clark and her struggling party. He has repurposed the legacy of his father and grandfather to promote what he says is the only vehicle today that can protect those values.

Officially, the two-day convention is convened to craft the policies that will carry the party into the May, 2013, election. But really this meeting is engineered to bury the B.C. Conservative Party. Ms. Clark has turned to political icons of the old Socred party to back her claim to the throne – as the sole leader of the centre-right forces of British Columbia.

Ms. Clark was the warm-up act: "We want to open the tent, we want the biggest tent we can possibly be," she told delegates at the party's "Free Enterprise Friday" session, where Liberals and non-Liberals alike were invited to help build the coalition.

To understand how the governing party of B.C. for a dozen years was derailed by an upstart rival with no money, no star candidates and no organization, one has to look first at the makeup of the B.C. Liberals. It has served as a sponge for supporters of the old B.C. Reform Party and the Socreds before that, and for both federal Conservatives and federal Liberals.

It has never been an easy alliance to maintain.

The right-wing forces stick together, usually, because British Columbia is by and large a province divided into only two political faiths, with the NDP or its predecessor, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, on one side and some type of centre-right coalition on the other. When the coalition splits, the NDP wins. That is the threat her predecessor Gordon Campbell used when he pulled together the factions under the Liberal umbrella to win the 2001 election. And the 2005 election. And the 2009 election. It is the threat Ms. Clark is using to drive a unity message in Whistler this weekend.

Mr. Campbell's coalition was strained by his New Relationship policy with first nations, and later with his climate-change agenda. Those policy shifts hurt him in the populist heartlands so crucial to the Socreds' success. But there

was no real alternative at that time for disaffected voters. The deep fissures generated by his introduction of the harmonized sales tax, however, could not be patched over, and the B.C. Conservative Party under a new leader, John Cummins, was a ready haven for a protest vote that would not hop the fence over to the NDP.

There was another pivotal event in the disintegration of the coalition, which a number of senior B.C. Liberals acknowledge but few will say out loud: the party's selection of Christy Clark as Liberal Leader.

John Reynolds, a key player in the unite-the-right effort, said the split really began with Ms. Clark's leadership victory over Kevin Falcon, who was the preferred candidate of right-leaning members of the B.C. Liberal coalition. Some key people, especially behind the scenes, switched over to Mr. Cummins's organization in the months after Ms. Clark's win, or simply dropped out of the game. There is also the string of high-profile Liberals who will not seek re-election under Ms. Clark's banner in 2013, including Mr. Falcon, George Abbott and Colin Hansen.

"Basically, the majority of Conservative people were supporting Kevin," said Mr. Reynolds, a former Progressive Conservative, Reform and Alliance MP.

During the leadership race, Mr. Reynolds had warned that if Ms. Clark won, the coalition would fall apart. "Well, it did," he said this week.

He has since taken up a role as an ally of Ms. Clark, a power broker on the right urging conservatives to return to the B.C. Liberal tent, and he said the work is now paying off. "This weekend will prove that the coalition is back and doing fine."

Martyn Brown, former chief of staff to Mr. Campbell, isn't so sure that this pep rally will address the problems facing the party. Ms. Clark and her party have not presented a vision or agenda that has clicked with voters. "I am not optimistic for the B.C. Liberals' chances that this convention will change very much at all," he said. "The coalition has shrunk under her leadership. That's self-evident," he said.

Winning back conservative activists has absorbed much of Ms. Clark's attention over the past year. Yet while her party has turned itself inside-out to win back the right, swing voters – British Columbians who occupy the middle ground of the political spectrum – have drifted to the New Democratic Party. NDP Leader Adrian Dix has worked to rebrand his party as a moderate alternative; at a sold-out party fundraiser Thursday night, he hosted bankers, forestry and oil executives alongside top labour leaders – a vivid demonstration that he is reaching out across the spectrum with a promise of modest and predictable change.

Jim Shepard is a former forestry executive who isn't buying the NDP line. He was one of the delegates at the Liberals' open-door session on Friday. He doesn't carry a party card but has been working to bolster Ms. Clark's fortunes since the summer, aiming to scorch the earth for the Conservatives by winning over Mr. Cummins's lieutenants.

"There is a lot of that going on behind the scenes," he said in an interview earlier this week. "We're not there yet, but it's coming along nicely."

Pollster Greg Lyle, a former B.C. Liberal strategist, said the change in Liberal leadership was a real opportunity to pull the coalition together and to reconnect with voters: "That was the great opportunity of Christy Clark, talk show host."

But, he added, she's been unable to bring her cabinet and caucus along with her to be an agent of change: "There was a tug of war between a desire to do something new and different and a desire to do more of the same."

Ms. Clark is promising renewal this weekend. After 19 months in office, she is now under pressure to show herself to be, finally, the agent of change.

"We have a plan for British Columbia," she told her convention on Friday. "But what do we do next? Help us."

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