



Tuesday » June
6 » 2006

Manning trounces Tory hopefuls in poll Ex-Reform boss favoured to succeed Klein

Jason Fekete and Tony Seskus

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Reform party founder Preston Manning would instantly become the heavy favourite to win the Tory party leadership and succeed Ralph Klein as premier should he enter the race, a new poll for the Herald reveals.

Manning, 63, has more than double the support of early front-runner Jim Dinning among Albertans, and would immediately leapfrog the former provincial treasurer as the odds-on choice to replace Klein if he seeks the party reins, says the survey conducted by Leger Marketing.

"Clearly there's another front-runner and that's Preston Manning," Leger vice-president Marc Tremblay said Thursday.

"He's got a support base with the population and now it's just a matter of whether he wants to capitalize on that."

Indeed, Manning has more support than Dinning and former cabinet minister Lyle Oberg combined.

Of 900 Albertans surveyed across the province on Tuesday and Wednesday, 23 per cent said they would vote for Manning if they could select the next provincial Conservative leader.

By comparison, 11 per cent selected Dinning and nine per cent chose Oberg.

None of the other four contenders in the poll did better than three per cent.

Interestingly, Manning's dominance also spreads to Alberta Progressive Conservative supporters, with 28 per cent of Tory followers questioned backing the political icon, versus 16 per cent for Dinning and nine per cent for Oberg.

Political observers say there is little doubt about the groundswell of support building for a Manning campaign, should he join the race.

"There's no question he would be the leader," said David Taras, political analyst at the University of Calgary. "If you're Dinning, you know you're in the fight of your life and he has to build profile in the public very, very quickly."

The other four candidates seeking Klein's crown include recently departed cabinet ministers Ed Stelmach and Dave Hancock, as well as Edmonton candidate Mark Norris and backbench Tory MLA Ted Morton.

There was a large undecided vote, with 38 per cent of all respondents and 33 per cent of PC backers saying they didn't know who they'd support.

However, should Manning enter the race, the entire dynamic of the contest will change, Taras noted.

"All bets are off," he said Thursday night. "The reality of three weeks ago has been turned on its head and Dinning is wondering whether or not he got hit by a truck -- and we'll find out very soon."

Manning, the son of Alberta's longest-serving premier, mused during last weekend's Alberta Tory convention in Calgary that he's "open to being persuaded" to run for Klein's throne.

"A lot of people have asked me about that," he told reporters. "I may be persuaded that it should be done and could be done."

Taras said Manning has a lot of pluses: instant name recognition, political pedigree, ready-made support and access to campaign dollars.

"There's a lot of attributes. The most important is name recognition," Taras added. "This is someone whose father was premier and the Manning name means an awful lot in this province. And he is deeply respected."

Despite the strong showing in the poll, however, Taras noted Albertans still don't know what Manning might raise in terms of policy or would look like as premier, noting there could be potential landmines lurking in the weeds, like health care.

Manning's popularity would translate into more electoral success for the Tories compared with Dinning, Oberg or any of the other leadership aspirants, according to the Leger poll. When asked which party they'd vote for with Manning at the Tory helm, 51 per cent of respondents said they'd back the Conservatives, compared to 17 per cent for Kevin Taft's Liberals and seven per cent for Brian Mason's NDP.

The Green party, with four per cent, and Paul Hinman's Alberta Alliance, with three per cent, round out the mainstream parties.

As Tory leader, Dinning would garner 46 per cent support from Albertans, while a Conservative party under Oberg would nab 42 per cent.

The Leger poll was conducted throughout Alberta, with a margin of error of 3.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, or 4.8 percentage points among PC supporters. The margin of error in both Calgary and Edmonton was 5.8 percentage points, and 5.4 percentage points in the rest of the province.

Last week, Dinning said he would welcome Manning into the race, although his candidacy could erode support for all the other candidates.

"This is one of the finest pieces of political real estate in all of North America," Dinning told reporters. "It's bound to be a highly competitive race and I welcome the competition."

An examination of the data reveals Manning has significant leads in all areas of the province.

In Calgary -- Dinning's home base -- Manning has the support of 26 per cent of 288 people polled, compared to Dinning's 15 per cent and Oberg's seven per cent.

"It's a little surprising because that is Dinning's stronghold," said pollster Tremblay.

In Edmonton, where 284 respondents were surveyed, Manning snatched 18 per cent, versus Oberg's 11 per cent and Dinning's eight per cent. And in the rest of the province, the former Reform leader received 24 per cent support, while Dinning grabbed 10 per cent and Oberg nabbed eight per cent.

"Manning has support not only in the cities, but rural areas," Tremblay said. "The magic formula is two out of the three (regions)."

Stelmach, Hancock and Norris had their best results in Edmonton, with about five per cent support, while Morton's strongest figures were in rural areas.

Support appears to be building for a Manning run at the Alberta Conservative leadership. On Wednesday, former Calgary alderman John Schmal and financial adviser Steve Syms launched a "Preston for Premier" campaign, while former Reform MPs say they've heard from a large swath of Albertans energized by the prospect and wondering how they can support Manning.

jfekete@theherald.canwest.com

tsekus@theherald.canwest.com

If You Could Choose the Next Pc Leader, Who Would You Most Likely Vote For?

23% - Preston Manning

11% - Jim Dinning

9% - Lyle Oberg

Four others below 4%

Source: Leger Marketing Margin of error is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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