

## **UA split erupts over pot policy: Delegates divided on marijuana vote**

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The Reform party shed some of its skin Friday in an attempt to spawn a new political entity, but the process wasn't painless and will exact a few more wounds today as young and old delegates head for a standoff over marijuana policy.

The 1,100 delegates at the United Alternative conference in Ottawa Friday debated and approved a series of party policies including a commitment to pursue a flat tax where most Canadians would pay one income tax rate of 17 per cent.

A motion that recognizes Canada's two official languages and bilingualism sparked the most controversy as hard-core Reformers faced off with those trying to leave some of Reform's hard-right principles behind.

``One language for one country," demanded one woman.

``I just want to make sure the UA is not embracing official bilingualism," said another man.

But in the end, that's exactly what a majority of delegates did, voting to recognize Canada as a bilingual country, accepting the federal government's responsibility to uphold minority rights.

``That makes my day," said Edmonton Reform MP Peter Goldring. ``Yes, it's hard to understand why you have French on a can of beans in Okotoks," he said. ``But all the way through (history) there's been a continuation of two languages. We can't escape that."

The policy to decriminalize marijuana, to be voted upon today, could reveal deep division within the fledgling party as young members square off with older MPs and delegates adamantly opposed to loosening the law on pot.

``I'm definitely opposed," said Calgary East Reform MP Deepak Obhrai. ``We have a drug problem in this country and we're trying to find a solution. This is not the solution."

**But other MPs such as Keith Martin or Rahim Jaffer say it makes sense to decriminalize the drug, a move that would free up countless hours of expensive police and court time. They plan to rally support for the motion.**

While delegates etched out most of the new party's constitution and values Friday, an emotional and intense battle was brewing over the old Reform party.

This afternoon as the Reform assembly gets under way, Preston Manning loyalists and backers of the United Alternative will engage in sharp debate with those who want to preserve the grassroots principles of Reform.

So far the two factions have been quiet, but a pro-Reform rally is scheduled for today just before the close of the UA conference and the beginning of Reform's assembly -- which could see members voting in favour of a leadership review.

Members are also expected to hear Manning tell them why it is so important they endorse the UA in a speech many say will have to be one of Manning's most impassioned ever if he is to quell party discontent and convert more members to his movement.

Manning, 57, has kept a low profile throughout the convention that ends today once a new party name is decided from a shortlist that includes "United Reform" or some other version of "Canadian Alliance."

He gave a brief address to the crowd, who gave him a standing ovation and cheered for an encore. But he reappeared for only a few seconds before retreating behind the stage.

During his short address, he congratulated delegates for building the framework "for a new political home that can unite all of us who believe in common principles to achieve the new government Canada so urgently needs."

Manning, who will quit as leader of Reform if the UA fails, described a Canadian as someone whose ancestry and heritage includes leaving the old behind, despite all the fears and difficulties in doing so.

That is our Canadian heritage, he said, "and that is also precisely what the United Alternative is about."

Manning, who will speak again tonight at the Reform Assembly, tried not to steal the spotlight from other prominent politicians such as Ontario Tory Tom Long or Alberta treasurer Stockwell Day -- two potential candidates for the leadership of the new party.

Day would not rule out the possibility of running for the new federal party. Many Reformers said privately they had great hopes that Day would run, while others who support Manning began to openly muse that the only way the new party could succeed was with a new leader.

A former Reform candidate from Ontario, Joe Peschisolido, announced Friday he would run against Manning for either the leadership of a new party or the Reform party.

Tom Long, who helped Ontario premier Mike Harris get elected twice, spoke passionately about the potential behind the new party, urging delegates to stand firm, keep a burning sense of purpose, and have the courage to forge ahead. Yet Long was not

blind to the challenges ahead, including the referendum on the issue to be held by Reform members in March.

“Anything as big and as bold as starting a new party won't be easy to achieve,” he said.  
“But experience tells us that it can be done and it will be worth it.”