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TOR. STAR FEB 17 1973

✓ Liberals dream of an East-West alliance

OTTAWA
One of the more adventurous ideas circulating among Liberals at the moment is that the party should abandon Toronto and the Golden Horseshoe of southern Ontario to the Conservatives, and use Quebec as a pivot for a new East-West alliance.

The idea certainly isn't a strategy for an early election. Nor does it exist, at this stage, in as specific a form as the Conservative realization in 1957 that the party might be able to achieve victory by cutting its losses in Quebec and concentrating on Ontario, the West and the Maritimes.

But the idea of encircling Toronto and southern Ontario, and leaving it to the Big Blue Machine of William Davis and Robert Stanfield, has cropped up in political discussion in Quebec. It has found a curious audience among Liberals in the Maritimes as well as among those who are now designing the western policy conference that will be held in Vancouver this spring.

To some extent, the idea is simply a

reaction to the last election. After a decade without any federal members from Toronto, the Conservatives won six Metro Toronto ridings on Oct. 30 and came fairly close to winning in four others. With a broad base of support for the next election, a productive alliance with Premier Davis and his well-funded organization, and a number of new parliamentary stars from Toronto shining in Ottawa, the Stanfield Conservatives should have prospects that are brighter than ever in Toronto and southern Ontario.

Since the Trudeau sweep of 1968, the Liberal experience in Toronto has been almost the opposite. Leadership problems have hindered the provincial party. Cabinet ministers from Toronto have had trouble making their mark in Ottawa, let alone in the rest of the country. And nothing in the immediate future promises to change this situation.

The new aggressiveness of western Liberals now is meshing with this difficult situation in Toronto.

At a recent meeting of the party's

national council, a prominent Liberal from British Columbia warned the eastern delegates that this spring's regional conference in Vancouver isn't going to produce the usual list of bland resolutions.

"I'm telling you now," he said, as another member of the council recalled, "that you're not going to like what comes out of that conference."

Western frustration will surely be directed against Toronto-centred financial power and Ottawa-centred bureaucratic power.

If the Liberals become too closely identified with these expressions of western alienation, how will that affect their support in Toronto and the wealthy and populous ridings of southern Ontario?

Some Liberals are daring to wonder aloud whether perhaps this Toronto reaction could be ignored.

Their text, in this interesting line of speculation, is the first post-election speech delivered by Prime Minister Trudeau in Regina last Dec. 1.

"We have to find a new national

policy," he said, "and that new national policy will apply not only to the old areas."

He also recalled the years when "Mackenzie King forged that alliance between the various regions of Canada . . . And had the people of Quebec and the people of the West in particular understand they had many things in common, a desire to grow, a desire to be treated as adults, a desire to be responsible for decisions."

King's grand alliance, as some Liberals have recalled since the Regina speech, was fashioned at times with virtually no assistance from Ontario. After the election of 1925, for instance, King was able to retain power as head of a minority government with only 11 Ontario seats and not a single cabinet minister from Toronto.

The strategy that some Liberals read into Trudeau's Regina speech wouldn't entirely ignore Ontario. The Quebec-Western-Canada axis that the Prime Minister mentioned would run through northern and western Ontario, and the underdeveloped regions of

eastern Ontario near the Quebec border, where there is strong regional resentment of the power and wealth concentrated in Toronto and southern Ontario.

"It might also coincide," said a senior Liberal cabinet minister this week, "with a strong federal response to the kind of provincial position that Premier Davis has been taking."

If this creates problems in Quebec, where Premier Bourassa has been cultivating an alliance with Davis on the question of provincial powers, the Liberals are probably strong enough there to surmount them.

The Maritimes should also provide a receptive audience for a national policy of decentralization.

Closely related to this kind of speculation is the feeling that the current embryonic search for a successor to Prime Minister Trudeau should concentrate (on the assumption that the next leader will not come from Quebec) on western Canada and the Maritimes.