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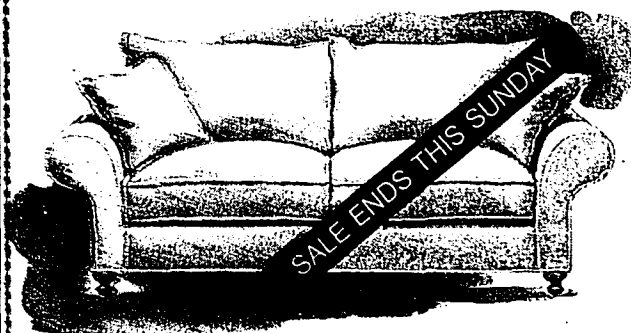
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PUBLIC LIVES: JASON KENNEY

Up and comer hopes to forge new alliance

KEEPING THE FAITH

Reform MP from Alberta believes politics and religion do mix when it comes to being true to oneself.

BRIAN LAGHI
Parliamentary Bureau, Ottawa

Jason Kenney wonders why so many people seem to find his religious choices so fascinating. As a devout Roman Catholic, the Reform MP from Alberta says it's unfair to grill politicians like himself about their convictions while neglecting to do the same with those who live a secular life.

But press Mr. Kenney a little and he will discuss the recent reports about his decision to remain celibate. He will tell you that he tries as best he can to live his faith and that inquiring minds can make of that what they will.

"Compartmentalizing my faith into a vacuum-sealed corner of my life is not an option," Mr. Kenney said. "It's not an option for any serious person of faith."

As an up-and-comer in the Reform Party benches, Mr. Kenney is known by the media and politicians for his strong views and now, apparently, for his sexual abstinence. This weekend, at the Reform-sponsored united alternative convention aimed at bringing together Canada's conservatives, 1,400 delegates from across Canada will get to know him, too. He is the MP that Party Leader Preston Manning has deputized to help steer the new movement he hopes to one day ride into office.

But as a man known for his strong views, is Mr. Kenney the man to forge compromise between the Reform Party and the PCs? Those who have known him say maybe not.

"He was a very old young kid," recalls a colleague of Mr. Kenney's when he worked in the mid-1980s with former Saskatchewan Liberal leader Ralph Goodale, now the federal Minister of Natural Resources.

"He didn't strike me as a guy

who saw a lot of grey."

Mr. Kenney, too, admits that his personality is more "drawn to guns than to peacemaking" — one of the reasons that the priesthood was not a real option. But he believes himself capable of making compromises, save for a few personal views inspired by his religious beliefs.

Born in Oakville, Ont., but raised for the most part in the small Saskatchewan town of Wilcox, Mr. Kenney did not come to Catholicism in the way many do.

His father was an Anglican, but not devout. He was, however, the president of Athol Murray College of Notre Dame, a Catholic high school for boys, where Jason found himself exposed to the Catholic faith.

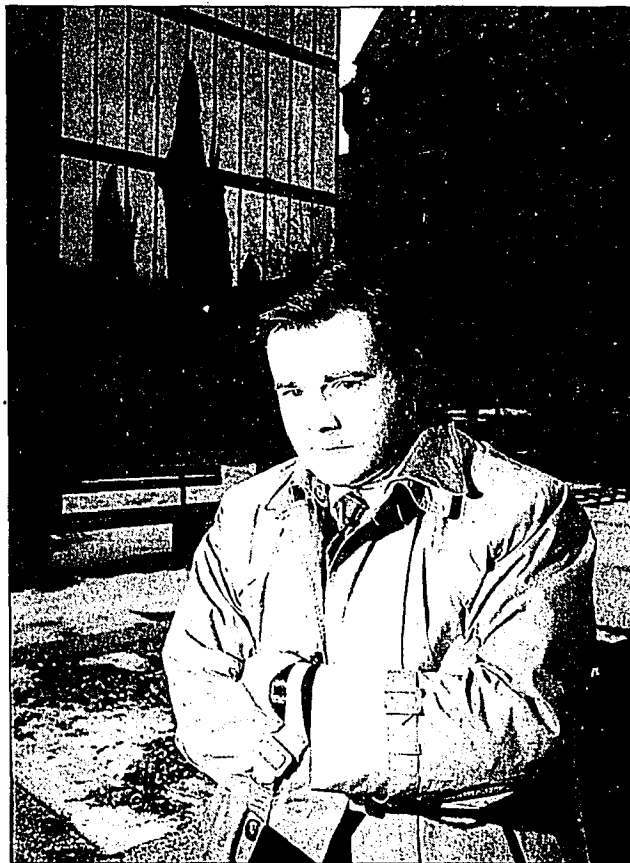
As a youngster, Mr. Kenney decided on his own to begin attending mass and taking some religious instruction. As a young teen, he asked the parish priest if he could be confirmed in the Catholic faith. He was rebuffed, and was told instead to go back to learn more about the Anglican Church.

For a short time, Mr. Kenney forgot about the faith, but became interested again when he began attending a Catholic college in San Francisco.

One day, he found himself in a late-night theological discussion with some fellow students. It was then that he began the personal examination which led to his conversion.

"It was a long, painful deliberate process, not some kind of epiphany," he said. "It's always a struggle. It's a gift that you're given, but it's something that you have to always kind of struggle with."

Today, he attends church as regularly as possible, but admits it can be difficult because he is



Jason Kenney is the Reform MP that Party Leader Preston Manning has deputized to help steer the new united alternative movement he hopes to one day ride into office.

MIKE PINDER/Macleans

often out of town.

Sometimes the media make it tough, too. Three weeks ago, he was asked by a reporter why he supported giving charitable status to a national youth group that promotes chastity. The discussion turned personal, and the story ended up being about his celibacy and that of some other young Reformers.

Despite his concerns that the media make too much of politicians with religious convictions, he does agree that voters have a right to know their MPs' religious views.

Just how does his faith inform his politics? For one, Mr. Kenney says he would never find himself voting in the House of Commons on matters that he could not, in

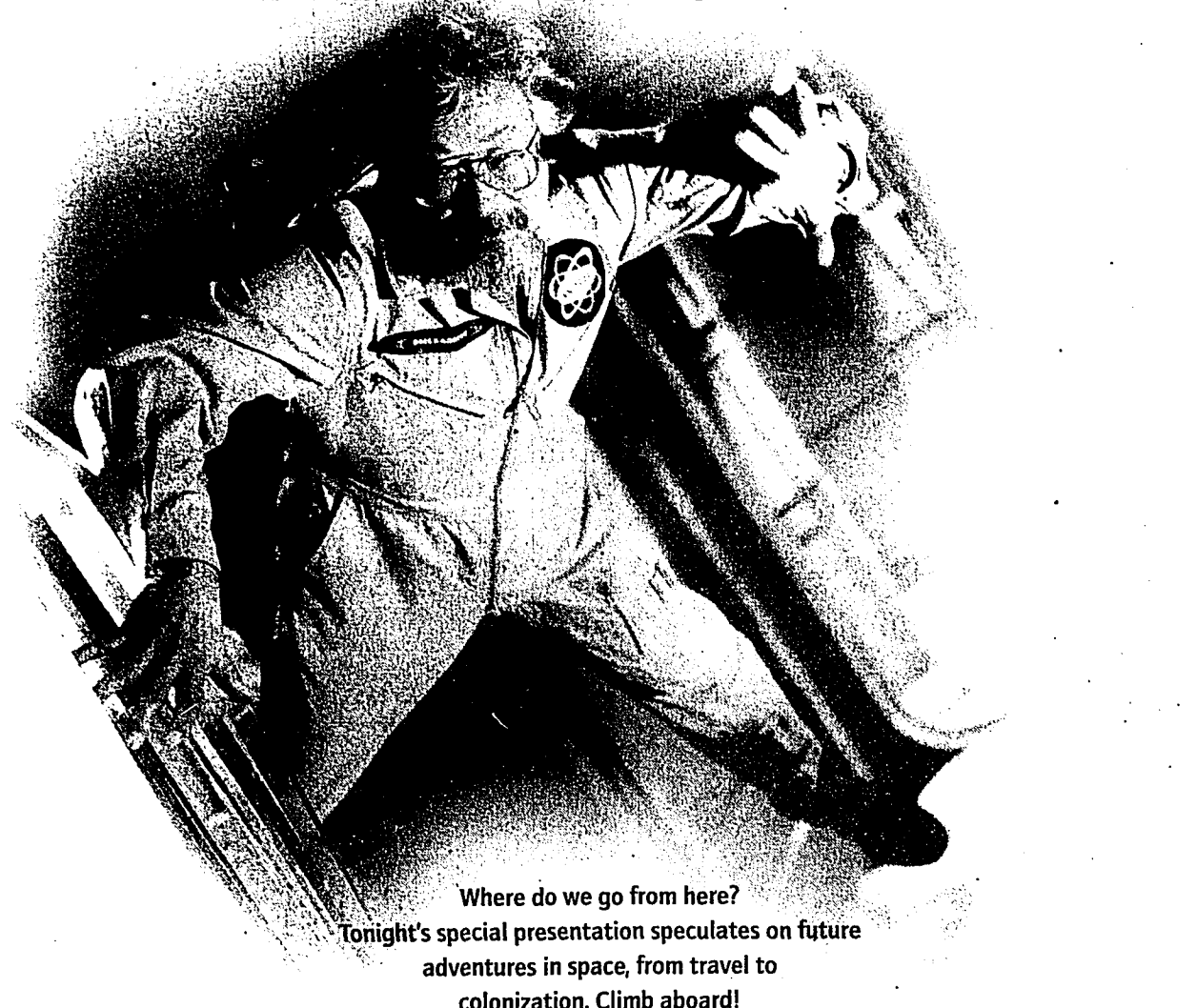
good conscience, support, citing abortion and euthanasia.

Would he be able to swallow his views in a new conservative coalition; one that is probably much more moderate than the party he currently represents?

The former colleague from his Liberal days wonders. "The things he was committed to," said the man, who asked not have his name published.

Mr. Kenney, however, disagrees. Although he hopes the new movement will hold fast to some of Reform's family-oriented policies, he said he decided to run for the party because he knew it was contemplating a rapprochement with the Progressive Conservatives.

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