

## PQ leader's exit could boost Tory fortunes

Duceppe expected to succeed Boisclair, which could help Harper in Quebec in next election

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OTTAWA -- Parti Quebecois leader Andre Boisclair's resignation had instant impact on Parliament Hill Tuesday amid expectations that Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe would soon be leaving for Quebec City, a move that would appear to benefit the Conservatives in the next federal election.

Duceppe further fuelled that speculation when he said in the afternoon that he is seriously considering making a bid for the PQ leadership when he told reporters he has "consultations" to make about Boisclair's dramatic decision to step down earlier in the day. He also denied there was any bad blood between him and Boisclair, even though the PQ leader accused him on the weekend of angling for his job.

Political studies Prof. Luc Juillet at the University of Ottawa said if Duceppe leaves the Bloc, as seems likely, the new leader -- Bloc House leader Pierre Paquette is the early favourite -- will suffer in comparison because of a lack of experience in the job. Juillet pointed out Duceppe struggled greatly during the 1997 federal election to fill the shoes of Lucien Bouchard and the Bloc lost its standing as the official Opposition party.

Juliet said the Conservatives may be in the best position to benefit from a dip in Bloc support because of a leadership switch and the current struggles of the sovereignty movement.

A recent poll by SES Research conducted about a month ago asked committed BQ supporters who they would vote for federally if the separatist party did not exist on Parliament Hill. It found the absence of the party would likely move the Conservatives into position of a majority government with the support of 41 per cent of voters in Quebec (picking up 13 points), followed by the NDP and the Liberals.

Nik Nanos, of SES Research, points out that the poll was taken before the Conservatives' support in Quebec dipped recently, probably due to negative reviews of its new environmental plans and the recent furor over the handling of detainees in Afghanistan. The last Ipsos-Reid poll put the Conservatives in Quebec in third place at 20 per cent (down five points), behind the Bloc and the Liberals.

McGill University Prof. Antonia Maioni said Duceppe's departure will be "a blow" to the Bloc's fortunes and the Conservatives certainly stand to benefit the most from their downfall.

She said the Conservatives stand to win many of the "soft nationalist" votes taken in the recent Quebec election by the Action democratique du Quebec party. "This is the nationalist vote that is not sure if it is sovereignist or federalist. That's the kind of vote that the Conservatives are also trying to attract without a strong Bloc to remind Quebecers who is really defending Quebecers' interests in Ottawa."

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