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SUN COMMENT

Sun, March 25, 2007



Quebec sucks Canada dry

No matter who wins in tomorrow's election, don't expect demands for country's cash to stop

By GREG WESTON

- E-MAIL TO A FRIEND
- PRINT PAGE
- WRITE US
- LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Stephen Harper's clever attempt to cook up a federalist victory in tomorrow's Quebec election with gluttonous servings of political pork, has instead fed fresh meat to the separatist cause, and left Premier Jean Charest choking on his own graft.

Harper used this week's federal budget to pour a record \$3 billion of new loot into Quebec's seemingly bottomless tin cup -- that's an average of almost \$200 more from every Canadian taxpayer -- ostensibly to help the country's biggest have-not province make ends meet.

WINDFALL

Instead, with the provincial election campaign coming down to the wire in a virtual dead heat among the three leading parties, Charest announced \$700 million of the federal windfall would be used to give every Quebec family a \$750 personal tax cut.

The backlash was immediate and harsh from both inside and outside Quebec.

Canadians across the country, and particularly in the West, complained they are once again being ripped off to bribe Quebec voters.

They have a point: Where is the fairness in a federal budget that offered little tax relief to ordinary working Canadians so billions could go into the pockets of Quebecers?

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Make no mistake: In the Harper government's latest fiscal plan to make all provinces equal, Quebec will continue to be more equal than the rest.

For instance, of all the \$12.7 billion in "equalization payments" that will be transferred this year through the feds from the three "rich" provinces - Ontario, Alberta and B.C. -- to the seven have-nots, Quebec will get 56% of the loot, up from 49% a year ago.

Similarly, Quebec may have 25% of the population, but it will now be getting 33% of the nearly \$50 billion the feds will give in total to all the provinces this year for health, education, social programs and equalization.

What is increasingly galling is the reason Quebec remains on the national dole is not due to some economic disadvantage of geography, weather or obsolete industry.

LOW PRODUCTIVITY

The reason Canadian taxpayers are once again being sucked dry is to compensate a province with a huge debt and bloated bureaucracy, a labour force dominated by big unions and low productivity, language and education laws that discourage new industry, and a political climate of uncertainty that keeps investors looking elsewhere.

This year, the average Canadian taxpayer will send just under \$1,000 to Quebec, money that will help pay for cheap government auto insurance, and subsidized \$7-a-day child care.

While it may be small consolation to Canadians furious over this latest federal fleecing, Quebecers apparently share the same sentiments for somewhat different reasons.

Even before last week's federal budget, a poll conducted by the leading public opinion firm SES Research found even supporters of Charest's Liberal party were not comfortable with the prospect of the federal gravy train rolling into Quebec in the final week of an election.

Fact is, Quebecers view their provincial affairs as their own, and resent outside interference, especially such an obvious attempt at federal bribery.

Harper and his ministers didn't help matters with their subsequent comments that the Conservatives would consider more deals with Quebec, but only if voters elect a federalist government tomorrow.

As for Charest, his offer of a provincial tax cut just made him look complicit with Harper, and utterly desperate in the final days of what had already become a lackluster Liberal campaign.

As a result, Canadians may wake up Tuesday morning with a bigger Quebec problem than just a large hole in the federal treasury.

For the first time in the campaign, political analysts in Quebec are conceding that

Andre Boisclair, the gay leader of the separatist Parti Quebecois, could squeeze out a minority victory tomorrow night.

Alternatively, we could get a Liberal minority led by Charest, with the balance of power held by Mario Dumont and his conservative Action Democratique party.

While Dumont's party currently has only five seats in the legislature, he has run a superb campaign, and is successfully capturing a large protest vote disenchanted with both the PQ and the Liberals.

Dumont's message -- slash bureaucracy and government spending, stimulate economic growth and ditch the idea of separation -- is also resonating with voters to the point the ADQ could pick up 20 seats.

The good news is that no matter who wins, if it is a minority government, there will be no referendum any time soon.

Just more demands for more money from all of us.

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