

Mulcair to lead NDP's Quebec charge

Ex-liberal MNA. Was also wooed by Conservatives

ELIZABETH THOMPSON

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The New Democratic Party hopes to give its bleak Quebec fortunes a boost today, when party leader Jack Layton announces that former Quebec environment minister Thomas Mulcair has agreed to run as its star candidate in the province, The Gazette has learned.

"We are obviously very excited," said a source close to Layton.

It has apparently not yet been decided which Quebec riding Mulcair will seek to represent.

He lives in Beaconsfield, but grew up in Laval and was Liberal MNA for the Laval riding of Chomedey until he announced at the last minute that he would not seek re-election in the March 26 provincial election.

If no general election is held this spring, the party would consider running Mulcair in a by-election in a riding like Outremont, which former Liberal transport minister Jean Lapierre vacated in late January, and where the NDP ran a respectable third in the 2006 election.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has until late June to set a date for that by-election.

Mulcair plans to help build the NDP in Quebec - a significant challenge, given that it has only ever elected one MP here, Phil Edmonston, who won a Chambly by-election in 1990.

In public-opinion polls, the NDP runs a distant fourth, behind the Bloc Quebecois, the Conservatives and the Liberals.

However, most pollsters agree the political climate in Quebec is volatile, with many voters looking at alternatives to the established parties and the traditional federalist-sovereignist divide.

And Mulcair's announcement comes only a few days after a poll by SES Research suggested the NDP, along with the Conservatives, stands to gain should the Bloc follow the Parti Quebecois's lead and lose support in Quebec.

In fact, the poll found so few committed Bloc voters would switch to the Liberals that the NDP could tie with the federal Liberals for support in Quebec.

Sources say the NDP is hoping Mulcair can boost the party's profile, prompt Quebecers to take it more seriously, and perhaps persuade some Liberals to switch.

Insiders say if the party can prompt a few four-way races, the NDP could make a



CREDIT: MARCOS TOWNSEND, THE GAZETTE

Speculation about Thomas Mulcair's political future intensified on March 12, when he appeared with Jack Layton (left) after the New Democratic leader spoke at the Universite de Montreal.

breakthrough.

As for paying the bills until an election, Mulcair is a lawyer by profession and, as an outgoing MNA, is entitled to a year's salary from the National Assembly.

While Mulcair had been actively courted behind the scenes by both the NDP and the Conservatives, sources close to him said he chose the NDP because he felt it is best positioned to make a difference when it comes to the environment.

Those sources said the Tories were interested in the ex-minister because they believed he could help improve their image on the environment, but he turned them down once he realized they were more interested in having him toe their line than in adopting his positions.

The Green Party wasn't an option because Mulcair feels it is unlikely to get enough support to make a difference in Parliament, a source said.

Nor were the federal Liberals an option. While the Quebec Liberal Party's environment minister, Mulcair publicly butted heads with federal Liberal leader Stephane Dion. Nor did the federal Liberals make any serious attempt to court him.

The idea that Mulcair might join the NDP first arose last fall. In one of his few public speeches after refusing a demotion when Premier Jean Charest shuffled his cabinet, Mulcair was a guest speaker at the NDP's national convention in Quebec City.

In his speech, Mulcair sharply criticized the Conservative government's position on the environment and the assertion by Rona Ambrose, who was then environment minister, that Canada's Kyoto Protocol targets for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions were impossible to attain.

Speculation heightened a month ago when Mulcair attended a speech Layton gave in Montreal, then was spotted having lunch with Layton and human rights lawyer Julius Grey at a downtown restaurant.

As environment minister, Mulcair beefed up enforcement of Quebec's environmental laws and was determined that Quebec meet its targets under Kyoto - even if it meant taking on his federal counterparts.

He also took on big corporations - earning Charest's ire. When Coca-Cola quietly dropped the deposit on containers of non-carbonated beverages, Mulcair called it unacceptable.

He also clashed with Charest over plans to allow development of part of Mont Orford provincial park and a project to build a liquid natural gas port.

ethompson@thegazette.canwest.com

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Thomas J. Mulcair

Born: Oct. 24, 1954, in Ottawa

Education: Graduated from McGill with a law degree in 1977

Joined the Quebec Bar in 1979

Legal career: Attorney for Quebec government 1978-1983

Alliance Quebec's director of legal affairs, 1983-85

Partner in law firm of Carbonneau, Donald, Duggan, Waxman, 1985-87

President of the Office des Professions du Quebec 1987-93

Political career: First elected to National Assembly for the Laval riding of Chomedey in 1994. Re-elected in 1998 and 2003

Made deputy opposition House leader on Dec. 9, 1998

Made official opposition critic for commerce and industry in October 2000

Appointed minister of the environment and deputy government House leader on April 29, 2003

Resigned from the cabinet after turning down a demotion to a lesser cabinet position on Feb. 27, 2006

Announced he would not seek re-election in the next provincial election on Feb. 20, 2007

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