

Aftershocks of Mario earthquake being felt in Ottawa

Federal poll indicates former Bloc voters would choose Tories or NDP, not Liberals

L. IAN MACDONALD

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One month after the Quebec election and one week before the minority legislature even sits, a CROP poll in La Presse on provincial voting intentions isn't very meaningful. It's no surprise that Mario Dumont, who has the momentum, would be up, while Jean Charest and Andre Boisclair, would be down from their party's scores on election day.

For the record, the Action democratique du Quebec is at 32 per cent, up a point from March 26, the Liberals are at 27 per cent, down six points, while the Parti Quebecois is in the basement at 23 per cent. In six months, no one will refer to these numbers as any kind of benchmark. No one will even remember them.

More significant is CROP's take on federal voting intention in Quebec, and the impact of the election. To the surprise of absolutely no one, the Bloc Quebecois has taken a big collateral hit, and the Conservatives are the principal beneficiaries.

With 1,000 respondents from April 19 to 29, CROP saw 28 per cent of Quebecers supporting the Bloc, down eight points from February and 14 points from the January 2006 election. The Conservatives were at 26 per cent, up four points; the Liberals were at 22 per cent, down four points, and the NDP were at 15 per cent, up from 7 per cent.

This confirms the findings of an SES Research poll last month, that in the hypothetical situation of the Bloc being off the federal ballot, the Conservatives and NDP would divide up most of that vote. Or as SES president Nik Nanos puts it: "Everyone benefits except the Liberals."

This makes a great deal of sense.

Just as in the provincial campaign, there were disillusioned PQ supporters who could never vote Liberal and found their way to the ADQ on the right and Quebec solidaire on the left, so there are "tired" Bloc voters who would never vote for les rouges, and gravitate to les bleus. But there's also a leftist segment of the Bloc vote, especially in the Greater Montreal area, that would be more at home with the NDP than the Conservatives. These voters, like the NDP, strongly oppose the Canadian mission in Afghanistan, and strongly support same-sex marriage.

In the SES hypothetical of the Bloc being off the federal ballot, the Conservatives surged to 41 per cent, the NDP to 23 per cent, while the Liberals were at 21 per cent. In other words, the disappearance of the Bloc from the federal scene would not benefit the Liberals. This would be the reverse of the Liberals having been the sole beneficiaries, among the federalist parties, of the polarization caused by the Bloc in the four elections between 1993 and 2004.

But when Stephen Harper and the Conservatives established a beachhead of 10 seats in Quebec last year, the polarization was broken. With a campaign platform including family allowances for daycare and a cut to the GST, Harper gave Quebecers something to look at it, and with his promise of open federalism, he gave soft nationalists a respectable place to go.

In retrospect, the 2006 federal election was the beginning of the realignment of the Quebec political landscape that occurred with the force of an earthquake on March 26. The PQ, which formed four governments and held two referendums in the last 30 years, was relegated to third place. Every Quebec election since 1973 had been a two-party race between the Liberals and PQ, polarized around the national or constitutional question. Even more than the federal Liberals and the Bloc, the Quebec Liberals and PQ had a co-dependency, one to which two generations of voters were held hostage. But the weakness of Boisclair's leadership - notably over his character - and the absence of an agenda of grievance with Ottawa, created a huge opportunity for Dumont.

Like Harper, Dumont's policy book gave Quebecers something to think about, and his autonomist outlook gave them a place to go. The symbiotic nature of the Liberal-PQ relationship was underlined in the campaign, when neither was able to think outside the box in response to Dumont's challenge. The Liberals called him a crypto-separatist, while the Pequistes called him a one-man band, simply reinforcing the comfort level Dumont had created with the voters over four campaigns.

On March 26, he walked in Harper's footprint and created a much larger one, winning 41 ridings and finishing second in 45 more in the 125-seat National Assembly. If you lay the federal map of 75 Quebec ridings over the provincial one, you'll find Harper's tour plan for the next election.

What yesterday's CROP numbers confirm is that the Bloc has taken a major hit from the Quebec election. The aftershocks of the Mario earthquake are being felt on the other side of the Ottawa River.

www.lianmacdonald.ca

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