

It is our pleasure to make this article from Inroads 22 available to you free of charge.

Please consider a subscription (or a small donation) to help us to continue to provide timely, thought-provoking articles in print – and often on-line – to readers across Canada and beyond.



On the last page, you will find information about subscribing. You can print it out or just send us an email or give us a call. Or you can subscribe on-line.

www.inroadsjournal.ca

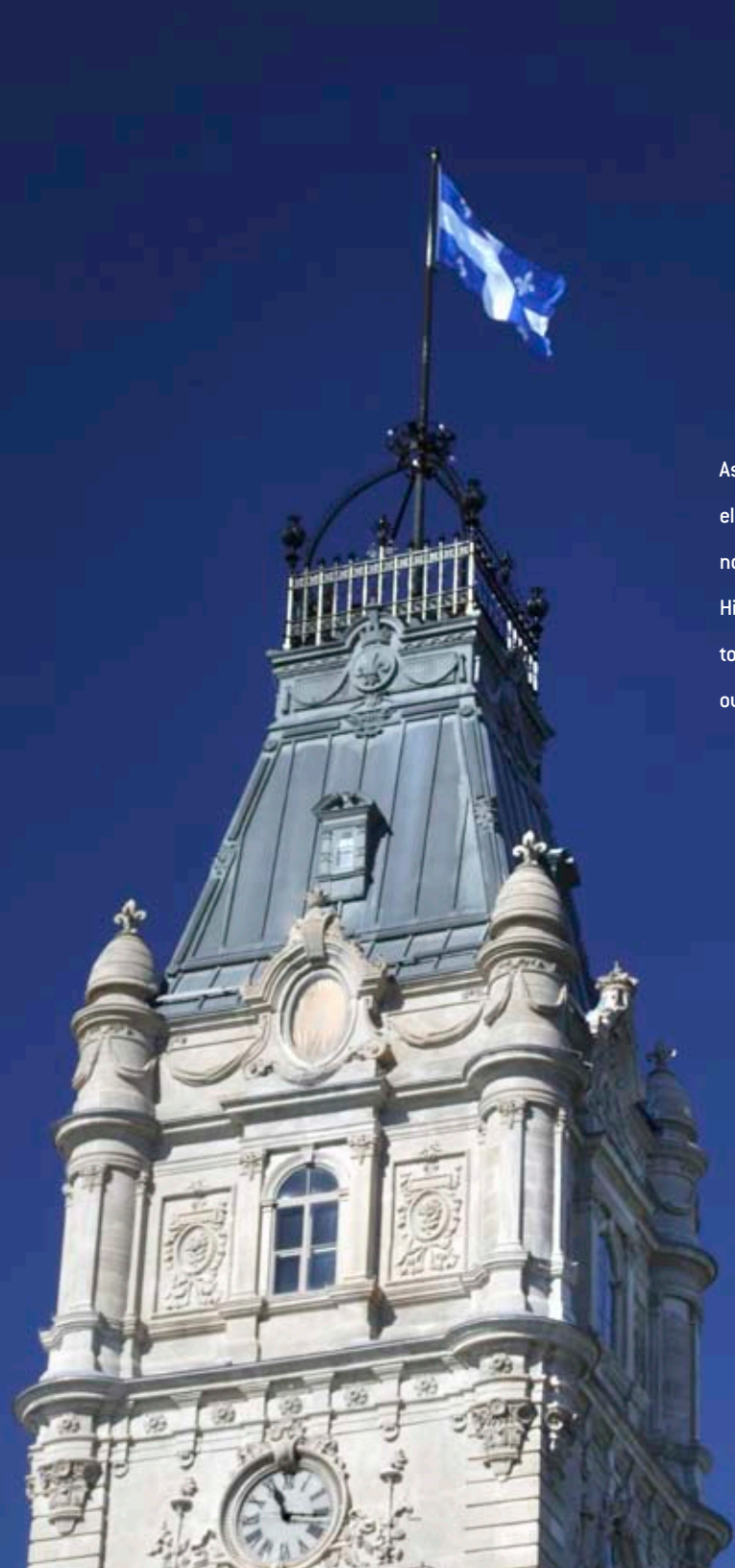
Check out our website to find out more about Inroads, our special anniversary issue, and our other back issues.

Thanks

A WORD ABOUT PRINTING THIS ARTICLE: These pages are intended to print on legal (8.5 x 14 inch) paper, two pages per sheet, in a horizontal landscape. Pages can also be printed onto letter sized paper, vertically, at a reduced size.

Quebec politics after the ADQ breakthrough

An introduction by Henry Milner



As a result of Quebec's March 26 election, the National Assembly is now home to three major parties. History suggests an eventual return to a two-party system, but such an outcome is by no means certain.

As longtime readers know, Inroads follows Quebec politics closely. So it is only natural that developments this past March should have caught our eye. Five key insiders share their observations with us about an election that was, in a number of ways, unprecedented – at least in recent memory. First of all, it was the closest Quebec election in years; second, it was a three-party race to the finish line; and finally, all three party leaders had spent their entire adult lives in politics.

Though it won enough seats to hold on to power, the Quebec Liberal Party's share of the popular vote fell from 46 to 33 per cent. Jean Charest's forces lost a third of their seats in the National Assembly, leaving a caucus formed almost entirely of MNAs from Montreal, the Outaouais (Ottawa valley) and the Eastern Townships. The result was the first minority government in Quebec since 1878.

It was an even worse showing for the Parti Québécois. Its popular support fell to 28 per cent, the lowest since 1973, and it fell to third place in the legislature with 36 seats. Its strongholds were effectively reduced to the outlying, resource-extracting regions of Quebec.

The remaining regions saw huge breakthroughs for the upstart Action Démocratique du Québec, which made big gains in the Quebec heartland. The ADQ won seven of eleven seats in Quebec City, swept the Chaudières-Appalaches and Beauce regions southeast of the Quebec capital, and made significant gains in the Mauricie, Lanaudière, Laurentian and Montérégie regions near Montreal. In all, its share of the 125 seats went from four in 2003 to 41 in 2007. Most startling was its strength in the "450" belt surrounding Montreal (named for its telephone area code), where young francophone families, many of whom had voted PQ, proved receptive to the ADQ's message of small government and lower taxes.

Henry Milner is co-publisher of Inroads.

The star of the campaign was ADQ leader Mario Dumont. In the fall of 2006, Dumont managed to seize the limelight that had long been denied him. Concerns over the integration of ethnic and religious minorities were gaining the attention of both the public and the media – though not the mainstream politicians. By publicly questioning the politically correct doctrine of reasonable accommodation, Dumont helped set the terms of the debate right in time for the 2007 election – and place himself firmly in the middle. Still only 37, Dumont is a consummate politician. In 1992, when he was 22 years old and president of the Young Liberals, he left the Liberal Party over its rejection of the decentralist Allaire Report, and along with its author, Jean Allaire, established the ADQ. He has headed – indeed personified – the party since 1994.

The ADQ was founded to promote a massive decentralization of powers toward the provinces, and in the 1995 sovereignty referendum Dumont prominently supported the Yes side, his role being to rally “soft sovereigntists” to the cause. The ADQ’s current position on the “national question” is here outlined by Eric Montigny, an adviser to the ADQ leader who has been closely associated with Dumont since the two left the Liberals to found the ADQ. Montigny summarizes ADQ policy as being to strengthen Quebec autonomy without separating from Canada through a written constitution that will set out Quebec’s powers.

The ADQ was unable to translate Dumont’s high profile in the 1995 referendum campaign into more seats in the 1998 election (though its popular vote rose to 11.8 per cent). By the

Most startling was the ADQ’s strength in the “450” belt surrounding Montreal (named for its telephone area code), where young francophone families, many of whom had voted PQ, proved receptive to its message of small government and lower taxes.

time of the 2003 election, it had sharpened the socioeconomic side of its program and managed to capture 18.2 per cent of the vote – though it actually lost seats won in byelections in 2002 as a result of the biases in the electoral system. Many expected the same result in 2007, with the ADQ’s autonomist stand enabling the Liberals and PQ to whittle down its support among federalists on one side and sovereigntists on the other.

But the opposite transpired. Dumont successfully campaigned on the theme that the Liberal-PQ cleavage over the national question was a sideshow. He maintained that the real issues were socioeconomic – and here only the ADQ stood out among the three. To test this assertion, Inroads asked Bryan Breguet and leading conservative Quebec economist François Vaillancourt to analyze this aspect of the ADQ’s program and how it played out



in the 2007 campaign. Dumont had studied economics at Concordia and the Université de Montréal and his conservative economic views were not unknown. But few expected him to be so effective in attacking the “Quebec model” and pushing hitherto unpopular causes, most notably debt reduction and private sector involvement in health care.

One of those who had a pretty good idea of what was happening was Camil Bouchard. A leading academic expert on youth psychology, Bouchard was elected to the National Assembly for the Parti Québécois in the south shore riding of Vachon in 2003. In 2007 he led the committee that drew up the PQ’s election platform. But few paid attention to this quite pragmatic document. The campaign focused instead on the PQ’s official program and its new leader, André Boisclair. Despite personal misgivings, Boisclair had endorsed the PQ’s program, which promised another referendum on Quebec sovereignty, and it proved to be an albatross he could not break free of.

Boisclair, like Dumont, had been a politician since his school days (in 1989, at age 23, Boisclair became the youngest member elected to the Quebec National Assembly). However, Boisclair is a sophisticated, openly gay Montrealer who conveyed an image that did not serve the party well. In the aftermath of Jacques Parizeau’s blaming “money and ethnic votes” for the narrow defeat in the 1995 referendum, the PQ avoided risking being “politically incorrect” on issues related to “reasonable accommodation,” effectively denying the existence of such concerns. Boisclair’s technocratic, pseudosophisticated “*langue du bois*” exacerbated this. Without saying so, Dumont, the small-town family man, was able to run as the candidate of “*le Québec profond*” against multicultural, metrosexual Montreal.

But this does not fully explain the ADQ breakthrough in the 450 zone that lies just across the bridges from Montreal Island. In his contribution, Camil Bouchard dissects the underlying causes of the discontent he saw as he campaigned door to door in a key 450 riding:

I frequently encountered young adults, new parents, living in brand new homes and, apparently, spending rather freely ... They complained, often bitterly, of lack of both time and money. They were exasperated with politicians and politics and frustrated by the taxes they had to pay while working so hard to make ends meet. The perception that Quebecers are the most-taxed population in North America and never get their money’s worth was spelled out regularly, in no uncertain terms.

At the end of his article, Bouchard offers some general ideas as to how the PQ might address this challenge. But they do not go very far. The PQ bought some time in the spring, when it forced out Boisclair and replaced him with former cabinet minister Pauline Marois. She immediately took her distance from the program, in effect going back to the party’s position at the time of Lucien Bouchard: there will be a referendum when conditions warrant. In addition, as a response to the ADQ’s success, she has launched a rethinking of the party’s “social democratic” position on the role of the state. This will not be easy for her since, as a former minister of health,

education and finance, she is the author of a number of the policies so effectively contested by Dumont. At the time of writing, she was also embroiled in controversy over the Quebec identity bill she had introduced in the National Assembly, which proposed to institute Quebec citizenship and a Quebec constitution and broaden the scope of Quebec's language legislation. Some critics attacked the bill as divisive and xenophobic and even former PQ premier Bernard Landry called it a legal minefield. It is hard to say at this point what effect – if any – this will have on the fortunes of the PQ.

Perhaps the biggest question mark surrounds the Liberals. The party has been around forever: indeed, not only was the ADQ formed out of a split in the Liberal Party, but so was the PQ 25 years earlier under René Lévesque. If history is to be the guide, we could foresee a return to a two-party system, with the Liberals challenged by the ADQ which will have taken the place of the PQ, just as the PQ replaced the Union Nationale in the 1970s and the Union Nationale replaced the Conservatives in the 1930s. But there is no reason to assume history will repeat itself this time.

Inroads asked two leading figures in the Liberal Party to take stock. John Parisella was chief of staff to premiers Robert Bourassa and Daniel Johnson in the late 1980s and 1990s. Geoffrey Kelley, who was attracted to the party when it was led by Claude Ryan, is a West Island MNA and served in Premier Charest's cabinet from 2005 to 2007. Drawing on their experiences, each suggests how their party might solidify its centrist, federalist position, admitting that the Liberals have their work cut out for them and may not even be up to the job. Neither, however, addresses the question of leadership.

At 50, Jean Charest is not old for a politician but is old compared to Dumont. Like Dumont, Charest has been in politics pretty much all his adult life. More than 20 years ago, at age 28, Charest was appointed to Brian Mulroney's cabinet, the youngest cabinet minister in Canadian history. But the freshness he brought then, or even in 1998 when he became Quebec Liberal leader, has long since faded. A new leader would surely enhance the party's chances of picking up enough francophone votes to keep from being further reduced to its nonfrancophone enclaves and becoming a mirror image in Quebec City of what the Bloc Québécois is in Ottawa.

In the short term, Quebec will continue to have three parties, but the first-past-the-post electoral system normally places the one that comes in third at a great disadvantage. Like Ontario, which has had a three-party system for generations, Quebec is considering changing its electoral system (see *Inroads*, Winter/Spring 2007).¹ If such a change occurred, it would stabilize the current three-party breakdown, while opening a bit of space for the left and the Greens. But its prospects are at best uncertain. Indeed, one way or another, uncertainty reigns in Quebec politics. Watch this space.

¹ In a referendum that coincided with its October 10 election, Ontario defeated a proposal to switch to a Mixed-Member Proportional electoral system.



No half measures.

Every issue of *Inroads* is chock full of intelligent, approachable analysis of Canadian and world events.

regular subscriptions • 2 years (4 issues) • \$48

students \$36 (2 years) • institutions \$60

single issue \$15 plus shipping

Complimentary copy of the special retrospective *Inroads* 21 with every paid new subscription.

www.inroadsjournal.ca