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Quebecers transform their province: Gains by Conservative party signal end of love for Liberal-style big government

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Michel Kelly-Gagnon, a towering, bespectacled young man, is as affable as he is tall and as committed as he is genial. He hides a stinging wit behind a pardon-my-English-it-is-not-so-good charm.

Kelly-Gagnon's official title is president of the Montreal Economic Institute (MEI), a public policy think-tank. But his real job is missionary -- prophet of free enterprise in a province known for its love affair with big government: big government in economic planning, big government in social programs, even big government to monitor the use of French in signs outside tiny convenience stores. Sorry, outside tiny *depanneurs*.

"Lorne," Kelly-Gagnon often reassures me when we speak. "There is a big change going on in Quebec. Trust me." He has maintained over all the years I have known him that Quebec is undergoing a transformation. That the province is getting beyond the One Big Question: In or out? More and more Quebecers are casting off their preoccupation with sovereignty -- yes or no -- and getting down to the business of making a living, growing businesses, integrating *la belle province* into the global economy.

As proof, he has offered me the popularity of the Action Democratique du Quebec, the province's right-of-centre third party, which won four byelections in 2002 and briefly led both the Parti Quebecois and the provincial Liberals in opinion polls by advocating a platform that could appeal to an Alberta Tory -- elimination of federal interference in provincial jurisdictions, flat taxes, dramatically reduced regulation on business, school vouchers and private health care choices.

When the ADQ won just four seats out of 125 in the general election the following year, I suggested to Kelly-Gagnon he had overestimated Quebec's shift towards economic liberty. Still, he remained unwavering, insisting his MEI's growing membership and influence was all the proof he needed.

Monday's election may have provided more justification for his hope.

In a province where the Conservatives received less than nine per cent of the vote in 2004, and where a vote for the Conservatives seemed an equally eccentric gesture at the start of this campaign, the party outpolled the Liberals, won 10 seats, finished second in 40 more and, most importantly, stemmed a bid by the separatist Bloc Quebecois to win 50 per cent of the popular vote.

Thanks to a smart Tory campaign, the Bloc registered just 42.1 per cent of Quebecers' votes, slightly above the historic level of support for separation, but well below the level that would be needed to take Quebec out of Confederation in a referendum.

At one point last fall, when Quebecers believed their only federalist option was the Liberals, support for the BQ and for sovereignty were registering nearly 60 per cent. The 20-per-cent turnaround since, which is the difference between a 10-per-cent victory for Quebec independence and a 10-per-cent win for Confederation, was due to the Tories.

The federal Liberals love to portray the Conservatives as anti-Quebec, even anti-Canada and indifferent to national unity. Yet their performance may well have saved Canada from another painful sovereignty referendum anytime soon; a referendum that seemed a certainty just a few months ago thanks to Quebecers' disgust with Liberal corruption.

The Liberals won three more seats (13) in Quebec, but they received 142,000 fewer votes than the Conservatives and finished second in only about half as many ridings. Their greater seat count is the result of how their support is concentrated largely on the west island of Montreal.

Admittedly, a single election does not a trend make. Still, the Tories would seem to have greater growth potential in Quebec than the Liberals, who could remain badly discredited for as much as a generation because of Adscam.

The Conservatives are a party on the rise in Quebec, the Liberals a party in decline, a pattern that would be reinforced if any of the purported frontrunners for the Liberal leadership -- Frank McKenna, Belinda Stronach, Michael Ignatieff -- wins. All, like Conservative prime minister-designate Stephen Harper, are anglophones, yet none is as proficient as Harper in French.

The appeal of the Conservatives seems to be that they are a new kind of federalist, the kind my friend Michel Kelly-Gagnon has long assured me was growing in numbers. Before this election, Quebec voters were faced with either big-government Liberals or big-government Bloc candidates. Their only choice was between federalism or sovereignty: Where did you want the big government administered from, Ottawa or Quebec City?

Montreal chose the Liberals again because its voters are still enamoured of big-government federalism. But as Beauce Conservative winner Maxime Bernier told the National Post, voters in his Quebec City-area riding "want no more government on their back, no more government in their pocket."

They want federalism, but no longer the kind offered for 40 years by the Liberals. It's too early to declare the Conservatives the new dominant federalist party in Quebec or claim that Alberta may have a new fiscal, ideological and political ally in Quebec.

Still, Kelly-Gagnon looks as if he may have been right all along.

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