

PQ loses fifth caucus member

SOVEREIGNTY SIDE ISSUE

By MARIANNE WHITE

QUEBEC • The Parti Québécois suffered another setback Tuesday as Benoit Charette became the fifth member of the party's caucus to resign in two weeks, signalling trouble on a new front for embattled leader Pauline Marois.

Mr. Charette, a member of the legislature for Deux-Montagnes, an-

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nounced he is leaving the party but for very different reasons than the four others who preceded him.

He stressed the PQ is too focused on promoting sovereignty at the expense of much more important challenges such as health-care reform.

"I'm still a sovereigntist ... but for the moment I don't feel any appetite for a referendum."

PQ heavyweights Louise Beaudoin, Pierre Curzi and Lisette Lapointe resigned on June 6, dealing a major blow to Ms. Marois' leadership. The following day, Jean-Martin Aussant followed and asked Ms. Marois to step down because she doesn't have what it takes to achieve sovereignty.

The four, who will sit as independents in Quebec's National Assembly, cited major disagreements on the sovereignty agenda.

"I think they made the wrong diagnosis," Mr. Charette, 34, told reporters at a Tuesday news conference in Quebec City. "We need a truce."

Mr. Charette said he is convinced the PQ should have rejected the idea of holding a referendum on sovereignty in a first mandate.

Ms. Marois has refused to commit to hold a referendum in a first mandate, but at the same time she has not discarded the idea.

"I think if the PQ is going straight in that direction for the moment, it will probably compromise the sovereigntist project," said Mr. Charette, who was first elected in December 2008.

He said losing a third referendum

would be "fatal" to the independence movement.

His resignation is a potent symbol the PQ has long been split between those who want independence as soon as possible and a more moderate wing that is prepared to govern and wait.

Mr. Charette said he believes Quebecers want politicians to put the "question nationale" aside and focus on urgent problems, such as fixing the province's health-care system and dealing with its massive debt.

Later Tuesday, the party announced a sixth member of the caucus has temporarily stepped aside pending the results of a police investigation into one of his former political aides.

Rene Gauvreau, who has been on sick leave for several months, has left the PQ caucus "of a common accord" with Ms. Marois, according to a party spokeswoman.

"He is going to have to testify, so Mr. Gauvreau and Ms. Marois agreed it was better for him to leave the caucus to ensure the investigation goes smoothly," Sophie Villeneuve said.

Jean Paquette was charged in February in connection with an alleged fraud of some \$10,000 in the riding association in Groulx.

Ms. Marois didn't react to the new resignations Tuesday. Her party is meeting for a special caucus retreat Wednesday outside Quebec City.

This leaves the PQ with 46 members in the 125-seat National Assembly, compared with 65 for the governing Liberals.

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