

Assembly returns with lots of controversy

Slim majority, renewed calls for inquiry as fall session kicks off on Tuesday

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QUEBEC – The fall sitting of the National Assembly, which starts Tuesday, could be full of surprises.

With the resignation of Nathalie Normandeau, who was deputy premier, Premier Jean Charest's Liberals only have a three-vote majority.

If four Liberal MNAs are absent and Charest loses a crucial vote, an election could be triggered.

As well, the revival of demands that Charest call a public inquiry into allegations of corruption in Quebec's construction industry, costing Quebec taxpayers billions, has set the tone for raucous assembly debates.

Calls for a construction inquiry died down in the spring sitting of the assembly, but a leaked report by Jacques Duchesneau, a former Montreal police chief,

has stoked the fervour anew.

Duchesneau found systematic collusion to fix bids on government construction contracts, describing "a clandestine universe, well-rooted, of unsuspected size, harmful for our society in terms of safety and the economy and for justice and democracy as well."

Charest stonewalled on the new clamour for an inquiry, a move that will likely sap his polling gains over the summer, when divisions in the Parti Québécois and discontent with the leadership of Pauline Marois boosted Liberal numbers.

There was speculation Charest would use his bump in popularity to call a snap fall election, taking advantage of the PQ's decline and the advent of a new party, not yet created, under François Legault.

In that scenario, a split in the opposition between a

weakened Marois and the inexperienced Legault would benefit Charest's Liberals.

But the premier has said flatly there will be no election in 2011, although skeptics recall he said before the 2008 election he had no intention of calling a vote then.

Meanwhile, Marois is using the threat of a fall election to appeal for party unity.

And Québec solidaire has called for an election over Charest's refusal to call a public inquiry.

At a news conference after his Quebec Liberal caucus met in a posh woodland resort to prepare for the new session, Charest did not even mention Marois.

Instead, he seemed obsessed by Legault, a former PQ minister, whose Coalition pour l'avenir du Québec is committed to not calling a new referendum on Quebec sovereignty. Legault wants to apply a program of radical reforms in education, health care and public finance.

"Mr. Legault is a separatist," Charest said, charging he is hiding his option, and grousing at his strategy of

entering the political arena without forming a party first.

Legault is touring the province seeking feedback on his ideas, and says he will decide whether to form a party at the end of his tour in December.

If there is an early election, however, Legault intends to accelerate the process, choosing candidates in all 125 Quebec ridings from CVs he has been collecting.

Marois said she is not worried that Charest is ignoring her: "If he continues talking about Mr. Legault, that's all right by me," Marois said after a meeting with her caucus.

Meanwhile, PQ ranks remain divided over Bill 204 – the amphitheatre bill sponsored by Agnes Maltais, the only PQ MNA left in Quebec City, who seemed to be trying to tap into populist sentiment favouring the return of the Nordiques to the capital.

Montreal-area members of the PQ caucus balked when Marois tried to force them to vote for Bill 204, which would block legal recourse against an agreement – negotiated without public tenders – between the city of Quebec

and Quebecor Media Inc.

Quebecor would have sole management of the proposed \$400-million "multi-functional amphitheatre" – in reality a new hockey arena – for 25 years, with possible extensions to 40 years.

Marois lost five high-profile MNAs over Bill 204.

Four of them – Lisette Lapointe, Pierre Curzi, Louise Beaudoin and Jean-Martin Aussant – said Marois lacks a commitment to making Quebec a separate country, while the fifth – Benoit Charette – said she is moving too quickly toward a new sovereignty referendum Quebecers do not want.

Charette is close to Legault, and could be the first sitting member of his new party.

There are now a record nine independent MNAs, including a former Liberal, two Action démocratique du Québec defectors and six ex-PQ MNAs.

And Aussant is talking about forming a new pro-sovereignty party.

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