

As the PQ crumbles

Though it is too early to book the hall, federalists are getting ready to celebrate what appears to be the imminent implosion of the Parti Québécois, the separatist provincial political party founded by René Lévesque in 1968.

Four MNAs already had quit by the time a fifth, Benoit Charette, followed suit on Tuesday morning. Mr. Charette said that he tried to convince the party to shelve the holding of another referendum on separation, at least for a first mandate, but found that the idea was "written in the party's DNA" and could not be changed. Quebecers aren't ready for a referendum, he told the media, and a third unsuccessful referendum would be "disastrous."

Mr. Charette's case is interesting because he can't be lumped in ideologically with the four others who quit the PQ in recent days — Louise Beaudoin, Pierre Curzi and Lisette Lapointe, later joined by Jean-Martin Aussant. That group generally is as strongly pro-sovereignty, and impatient with the go-slow approach favoured by party leader Pauline Marois. Mr. Charette, on the other hand, is in the opposite camp:

If the party schisms, opportunities will open up for Quebec's federalists and conservatives

He realizes that, as the Bloc Québécois' disastrous performance in the May 2 federal election shows, most Quebec voters want nothing to do with separatism. Indeed, Mr. Charette (age 34) was one of the 12 younger members of the PQ who recently signed an open letter addressed to former PQ premier Jacques Parizeau, a sovereigntist hardliner, asking him to stop meddling in party politics.

Meanwhile, the three original PQ defectors have held a public meeting to explore alternatives to the PQ — a "parallel" party which, of course, would be headed by someone other than Pauline Marois.

Ms. Marois, whose receipt of a 93% approval rating at the party's April convention now seems eons ago, has become the scapegoat for the party's troubles. But as poli-

tical observer Joseph Facal has noted on his blog, the PQ's problems pre-date her tenure. "Since 1994, the PQ's election results show a steady erosion of its vote: 45% in 1994, 43% in 1998, 33% in 2003, 28% in 2007," he wrote. "With four successive leaders at the helm. It is in fact Ms. Marois

who stopped the slide in 2008. It is therefore too simple to blame everything on her."

The reasons for the slide run deep. For one thing, many Quebec voters now are recent immigrants who want nothing to do with parochial separatism squabbles animated by a nativist conception of Québécois identity (a conception that Mr. Parizeau epitomizes). Moreover, even many erstwhile Quebec nationalists now shrug their shoulders at the separatist cause — because the province has won so many powers and fiscal prizes from successive federal governments (including Mr. Harper's) that there seems little left to fight over.

The schisming of the PQ likely would do little to increase the prospects for separatism. But the move would shake up Quebec politics: A recent poll suggests a new party headed by former PQ cabinet minister François Legault would get 33% of the vote, sweeping to power and crushing both the PQ and Jean

Charest's scandal-ridden Liberals — despite the fact that many of Mr. Legault's views seem quite fuzzy (though he has been clear in saying that he would put the question of Quebec's identity on hold). Just as the orange wave washed away the Bloc federally on May 2, a demand for change seems poised to sweep the province in advance of the next provincial vote in 2013.

If federalists want to get out in front of this wave, they have to present a credible alternative to the status quo as well — and the obvious one is a departure from Quebec's love affair with statism. Last year, the well-attended kickoff of the Réseau Liberté Québec, or Quebec Freedom Network, shows that energy is building amid the province's long-dormant conservative cadres. Indeed, the poll cited above suggests that a rightward tilt in the province, in the form of a merger with the free-market-oriented Action démocratique du Québec, would give Mr. Legault's as-yet-unofficial party 41% of the vote.

Perhaps there is hope not only for federalists, but small-c conservatives, in Quebec's changing political landscape.