

New Quebec PM may push for separation

Canada
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By Sridhar Krishnaswami

OTTAWA, MARCH 2. In the next few days, Mr. Bernard Landry will formally take over as the Prime Minister of the province of Quebec and in the process give a fresh momentum to the separatist issue that has been dominating the provincial and national scene for the last several decades. The abrupt resignation of Mr. Lucien Bouchard as the Prime Minister paved the way for the Number Two in the Parti Quebecois to formally clinch the leadership last week.

The separatist issue was by no means dead in Quebec in spite of the movement receiving setbacks and in the general impression that the people there had simply grown "tired" of the whole thing, a sentiment that seems to grip the rest of Canada as well. But Mr. Landry is confident that the movement to break away from the rest of Canada will be reinvigorated.

Even while making it known that he was keen on assuming the leadership of Parti Quebecois, Mr. Landry made no bones of the fact that separatism was the first item on his political agenda. "I have heard the expression 'Separatism is Dead' more than 100 times. The explanation is wishful thinking," Mr. Landry remarked recently.

The question is why Mr. Bouchard decided to call it quits and when the next referendum on the separatist issue will be held. Some analysts feel that Mr. Bouchard realised that he did not have the numbers on his side for Quebec to break away from the rest of Canada and decided to step down instead of being forced

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out after a next failed referendum.

A known hardliner on separation and one who does not believe that Quebec is a "distinct society" but that it is a nation, Mr. Landry's big problem is the timing of the next referendum. With the Parti Quebecois mandate in the province set to last until 2003, the incoming Prime Minister has to make a real and definitive judgmental call.

Many knowledgeable believe that Mr. Landry will not be waiting until 2003; rather that he could be inclined to call for an early provincial election which would then set the stage for the referendum on separation. The key to Mr. Landry's "success" would depend on the extent to which he is able to arouse the interest of the French speaking people in his province and in the extent he is able to egg on the Liberal Party and its leadership. "People do not like useless elections. So our mandate can still last several years to come. But people do not like a democratic deficit...And I will migrate between those two concepts and call an election when it will be necessary," Mr. Landry has been quoted in *The Globe and Mail*. One view is that provincial elections could come as early as this year itself.

The two earlier referendums on separation in 1980 and 1995 failed — the last one on an extremely narrow margin. And successive polls in the last few months have shown that the people of Quebec have not really shown a real appetite for another one. Support for separation is around 40 per cent; and fewer Quebecers believe that the province can attain sovereignty in the next 10 years.

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Ottawa warning up to New Delhi?

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By Sridhar Krishnaswami

OTTAWA, MARCH 2. After a frosty relationship of more than two years or so with India, there are indications that Canada may be moving towards taking steps to putting bilateral relations back in proper perspective. And some of the changes in the offing may have to do with the recent changes in the Cabinet line-up in the aftermath of last November elections here.

Though Ottawa has not veered round to India's explanation of the nuclear tests of 1998 and will not change its position on the subject, there is the realisation that there has to be an element of realism in its foreign policy and constructive engagement with a country like India in South Asia.

The Canadian public felt strongly about the tests and there is a residual feeling of "betrayal," and the argument has been

made that if the tests were to occur today, the reaction would be the same. In fact, there are concerns about plans for conducting further tests by India and Pakistan.

But, at the moment, the official refrain is "we agree to disagree." "India has its own view and we respect that. But, the tests were a mistake, it was a trend in the opposite direction," said a senior official of the Foreign Ministry. That apart, the view that New Delhi "was too important not to be engaged" quickly emerged.

One aspect to the emerging new reality is the Foreign Affairs Minister, Mr. John Manley, who formerly held the Industry portfolio and one who brings with him an economic perspective not any less idealistic but with a different focus. Mr. Manley is said to come from a school of thought which believes that in order to have good political relations with a country there needed to be a depth in

cooperation on the economic side. In Mr. Manley's scheme of things, Canada's first priority will be the United States and Mexico, the Group of Eight, and then, China and India. The bottomline for Mr. Manley is that while "human security issues" are important, going after rights issues which would have an impact on Canada's trade with China, was not in the national interest.

Not too long ago, Mr. Manley, in an interview with *The Ottawa Citizen*, had called for a re-engagement with India. "We are still unhappy about the escalation that has occurred as a result of the explosions by both the sides (meaning India-Pakistan nuclear tests), but I don't think we are achieving anything by continuing to maintain a degree of isolation," he said.

"As far as I can tell, it is not serving any positive purpose. We have made the stron-

gest point that we could and now we're standing back watching while the rest of the world re-engages India. I don't think our position is continuing to have any impact on the behaviour of the Indian Government. I don't think we drop our concerns, but I think it's time we re-engage them."

If Canada is looking at the emerging economic scenario and dimensions in India and South Asia as a whole, it is not without good reasons. Trade with India has tripled in the last five or six years and what used to be balanced is now in New Delhi's favour. Statistics for 2000 shows that the two-way trade is around \$ 1.7 billion, with India exporting \$ 1.2 billion and importing \$ 0.5 billion. And Canadian officials said the objective was to at least double the bilateral trade over the next three years.

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Rightist parties in Canada looking at an alliance?

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By Sridhar Krishnaswami

OTTAWA, MARCH 1. No one is seriously talking about elections in Canada as the last one was held only in November 2000 when the Liberal Party of Mr. Jean Chretien won again. However, sufficient noises are being made by all the major national parties, including the Liberal Party, that has raised questions about the political realignments in store.

The *National Post* has a front page story about the "baby steps" being taken to forge unity among rightist parties — the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives. It started with a highly secretive dinner involving a dozen parliamentarians from both parties — the big question being whether the leadership was in the know of things.

The Canadian Alliance of Mr. Stockwell Day and the Progressive Conservatives led by Mr. Joe Clark are apparently toying with the

idea of political cooperation to avoid a vote split among Conservatives. "There is no agenda at play here," said Mr. Gary Lunn of the Alliance who was a key organizer of the dinner. The bottom line is cooperation in Parliament and perhaps down the road. If there are attempts by parliamentarians of the two Conservative parties to come together at some point, it is not without good reason. Mr. Clark has indicated that he is not too keen to stay on as leader of the Tories and Mr. Day has been having "leadership" problems within the Alliance and hence his future is uncertain.

The Parliamentary elections held last November were an eye opener to both the Canadian Alliance and the Tories. The former managed to get only 66 seats and Mr. Clark lost five seats — dropping from 17 to 12. Prior to the creation of the Canadian Alliance last year, the Tory leadership refused to be a part of the United

Alternative Movement. And in the aftermath of November 2000 there seems to be some loud thinking among parliamentarians of the two conservative parties. If some of them are looking at a longer-term perspective, clearly the leader of the Canadian Alliance is in no mood for change. Mr. Day still believes that his party is the government-in-waiting and has accused his critics of having "selfish interests". But in the view of Mr. Lunn, the time has come to put aside egos.

The rumblings are not merely heard in the Conservative wings; the Liberals have their share too. A feud is on between the supporters of the Prime Minister, Mr. Jean Chretien and his Finance Minister, Mr. Paul Martin. On the surface, there is little evidence of any bloody tussle but those well-versed in Liberal Party and Canadian domestic politics believe that a power struggle has started in full swing. The seasoned Mr.

Chretien defeated Mr. Martin for the leadership of the party in 1990 and went on to win three national elections. Despite speculation that Mr. Chretien may call it quits in the near future, there are indications that he will stay on for a fourth term, a prospect that does not go down well with the backers of Mr. Martin.

Political observers say that except for the fact that both Mr. Chretien and Mr. Martin are from the French speaking province of Quebec, there is hardly anything in common between them. For instance, Mr. Martin came to politics from business whereas Mr. Chretien is seen as a die-hard politician who became a Member of Parliament at the age of 29.

Analysts also make the point that if at all there is anything in common between the Prime Minister and his Finance Minister, it is that they do not discuss their relationship in public.

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