



Liberal Leader Philippe Couillard with wife Suzanne Pilote, stormed down the home stretch and closed the deal with voters for a Liberal majority. Montreal Gazette photo

A Referendum on a Referendum: Non, Merci!

Celine Cooper

The Quebec election campaign was launched on a breathtaking miscalculation and went downhill from there for the Parti Québécois. From Pierre Karl Péladeau's fateful fist pump to scare tactics about Muslim swimmers, the PQ's campaign was a parade of missteps. But in the end, the PQ was selling two things: a divisive, inward-looking "values charter" and the prospect of a third referendum on sovereignty. Quebecers just weren't buying.

The trend was evident from the get go. Half an hour after the polls had closed for the 41st Quebec general election, media outlets were already projecting the outcome. It would be a Liberal majority.

On April 7—less than two years after the last provincial election that sent them to the opposition benches in the National Assembly—voters handed Philippe Couillard and the Quebec Liberal Party a solid majority. By the end of the night, the Liberals had won 70 of Quebec's 125 ridings and 41 per cent of the vote.

But the story here is, in many ways, more about who lost than who won. A

win for the Liberals meant a stunning defeat for the Parti Québécois.

Seven high profile PQ cabinet ministers, including the premier herself, failed to win their seats, lopping off a lobe of the party's brain trust.

The third party, François Légal's Coalition Avenir Québec, upped their seat count to 22 from 19, with 23 per cent of the vote—a much better showing than predicted early in the campaign. Three seats in Montreal went to the left wing pro-sovereignty Québec Solidaire.

As the province was painted red, the PQ hemorrhaged from 54 seats to 30. Their vote share plummeted to 25 per cent, down from 32 percent in 2012. It was their worst performance since 1970.

But it was when Pauline Marois herself—leader of the PQ and Quebec's first female premier—lost her own seat in the Charlevoix-Cote-de-Beaupré riding to the Liberal candidate that the message was driven home. Voters were repelled by the prospect of a third referendum and a values charter that pandered to prejudice and intolerance toward immigrants and minority groups. They abandoned the PQ and turned to the Liberals en masse.

At PQ headquarters, supporters looked shell-shocked. Appearing ashen, democratic minister values Bernard Drainville, international relations minister Jean-François Lisée and star candidate Pierre Karl Péladeau—all of whom won their seats—took to the stage and talked about sovereignty. Clearly, they didn't get the message from voters.

Marois emerged to cheers and tearful hugs to deliver an emotional concession speech. Marois—the *dame de be-ton* who had dedicated her life to Quebec's sovereigntist movement, spent over three decades in the National Assembly and celebrated her 65th birthday during the campaign—blew a final kiss to the crowd, and left the stage.

She had presided over Quebec for a mere 19 months. It was the shortest-lived government in the province's history.

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What went wrong for the PQ?

Convinced that the popularity of their secular values charter (Bill 60)—that called for a ban on the wearing of overt religious symbols, including hijabs, kippas, turbans and oversized crosses in the public sector, had them on track to win a majority government—Marois was persuaded by her ministers and political advisers to drop the writ earlier than expected.

The plan was to leverage support captured in public opinion polls in February which showed the PQ in majority territory at 40 per cent and that the bulk of Quebecers supported the charter. Once a majority was secured, the PQ could then move to a third referendum on sovereignty.

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The defining moment came early when Quebecor media baron and newly minted PQ candidate Pierre Karl Péladeau let fly his now infamous "fist pump for a country" at his first press conference in the riding of St. Jérôme on March 9. Standing behind him in the shot, smiling and leading the applause, was Marois.

It was a revealing gesture. This was not an election about the secularism charter, or any of the other priorities Quebecers wanted to talk about—economy, education, infrastructure or health care. This was an election about sovereignty.

This was an incredible gift to the Liberals, who were now free to frame their election campaign around the possibility of a third referendum.

In the following days, Marois shared her vision of an independent Quebec during morning news conferences dominated by questions about a sovereign Quebec. Yes, there would be different passports and a separate national identity, she said, but no border controls or tolls. Quebec would continue to use the Canadian dollar, and would negotiate a seat on the Bank of Canada board. Quebecers and Canadians would continue to be friends and visit the Rockies and Prince Edward Island together.

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From that point on, the Péquistes lost control of their message. They stumbled forward for the next month with one of the most incoherent and disastrous political campaigns in recent memory.

The adhesion of Péladeau was meant to be a gesture to the business community that the PQ would be strong stewards of the economy. After riding a wave of iden-

tity politics with the charter to get this far, he was supposed to be the economic star to put the party into majority territory. Instead, pro-union and left leaning Péquistes, a huge slice of the PQ base, were horrified by the entry of the union-busting mogul into their party. He faced extensive criticism over refusing to relinquish his extensive media holdings, despite arguing that they would be placed in a blind trust.

At each stop, Couillard hammered home a key message: a vote for the PQ was a vote for a referendum in the first mandate. It struck a chord because a huge majority of Quebecers simply do not want another referendum. An online CROP poll taken for Radio-Canada just before the election was called indicated that six out of 10 Quebecers were opposed to sovereignty. This is where the numbers were around the 1980 referendum.

For the next few weeks, Marois crisscrossed the province facing persistent questions about the loonie, sovereignty and passports. She repeated her mantra: there would be no referendum in a first majority mandate... unless Quebecers were ready. No one believed her.

As voters fell back into familiar sovereignist-federalist patterns, many CAQ supporters—the ones the PQ was hoping to court with Péladeau—sought refuge with the Liberals. The PQ's left flank in Montreal looked to Québec Solidaire for an inclusive, social democratic alternative.

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One Sunday, halfway through the campaign, Justice Minister Bertrand St-Arnaud raised an alarm after a story in *Le Devoir* suggested anglophone students from other provinces were fraudulently registering to vote. “Will the Quebec election be stolen by people from Ontario and from the rest of Canada?” he asked ominously. Marois herself said she was worried about democracy. Other PQ candidates joined in sounding the alarm. The chief electoral officer shot down

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the story within hours. It turned out there was no conspiracy, just students acting on their own, trying to get on the voters list in a province that requires voters to be Canadian citizens, domiciled for six months in Quebec, and declaring their intention to remain.

Then they tried their hand with the integrity file. They pounded Couillard for his connection to the disgraced Arthur Porter, former head of the McGill University Health Centre, whom Couillard got to know when he was health minister in the first Charest government.

Then Couillard was put on the defensive after Radio-Canada reported he deposited money in an offshore tax haven in Jersey, the Channel Islands, while working as a neurosurgeon in Saudi Arabia from 1992-96. He pointed out, quite properly, that there was nothing illegal about the account at the Royal Bank of Canada branch, and that he paid taxes on the interest when he returned to Canada. Financial advisers and tax experts generally agreed.

The PQ also ran against Jean Charest, whose name was not on the ballot. Marois kept pointing out that 18 of Charest's former ministers were running on the Couillard team, and that many Charest era Liberals were under investigation for fund raising from construction firms—in effect, cash for contracts.

But even that backfired. Marois was forced to explain her party's decision to keep quiet about a meeting between two of its senior officials with provincial anti-corruption officials in February. Then it emerged that 60 companies linked to Quebecor (where Péladeau was still controlling shareholder) and its subsidiaries were registered in the state of Delaware, a tax haven.

And then, in the waning days of the campaign, there was 89 year-old cul-

tural icon Janette Bertrand. In the presence of Marois and Drainville at a “secular brunch” in Laval, she lectured the audience that a charter was needed to prevent rich McGill Muslim students from taking over the pool in her condo and disrupting her aqua-fit class.

It was, in so many ways, a fitting coda to the PQ's charter debate, and the debacle of their campaign.

After its drubbing in the 2007 election, when they finished third, the PQ's strategy for rebuilding the party was to position itself as the guardian of cultural survival for the francophone majority. To do this, party strategists looked to the past instead of the future for inspiration. But one problem with the PQ's brand of national identity was that it abstracted Quebec not only from Canada, but also from the globalized world in general—a world that is increasingly diverse, rapidly changing and interconnected. The PQ reanimated a nationalism rooted in fear, the need to turn inward to survive. But times have changed. In the end, Quebecers just didn't buy it. **P**

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