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### Harper Tries to Reverse Fortunes in Quebec as Canada Vote Nears

By Theophilus Argitis

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Oct. 12 (Bloomberg) -- Canadian Prime Minister [Stephen Harper](#), in a final push to broaden his support in Quebec before elections on Oct. 14, said while he's a conservative from the energy-rich West he's not like U.S. President [George W. Bush](#) and isn't afraid to stand up to the oil industry.

"Just because someone is a conservative, doesn't mean he's George Bush," Harper, 49, said yesterday in London, Ontario, before flying to Quebec for a series of rallies. "Just because someone is from Alberta, he's not an oil man any more than someone from Quebec is a producer of maple syrup."

Harper is spending much of the weekend in Quebec, Canada's second-most populous province and a place where his Conservative Party must win [more districts](#) to control Parliament after the election. Polls show his party has solidified its support in neighboring Ontario, while floundering in Quebec as rivals paint Harper as an outsider who doesn't understand the province's culture and won't protect its factories and lumber mills.

As he's done throughout the campaign, Harper is telling Quebecers that it's in their economic interests to elect lawmakers from the governing party. At yesterday's press conference, he outlined a list of items Conservative legislators from Quebec have won for their districts.

Later, speaking in French, he told about 700 supporters at a rally in Longueuil, Quebec, that electing Conservative candidates would mean sending lawmakers to Ottawa "who will have the power to improve your economic situation, defend your interests and help realize your projects."

#### Quebec Support

According to polling by Ottawa-based [Ekos Research](#), Conservative support in Quebec has plunged from a high of 27 percent in the week before elections were called on Sept. 7 to a low of 17 percent this week.

The Conservatives have the support of 34 percent of voters across the country, compared with 26 percent for the main opposition Liberals, according to the survey, which has a margin of error of 1.8 percentage points.

Ekos released [projections](#) on Oct. 10 indicating the Conservatives will be reduced to five of 75 federal seats in Quebec, down from 11 currently. The separatist Bloc Quebecois, which held 48 seats, is expected to improve its standings.

Nationally, the Conservative lead narrowed to 4 percentage points yesterday in a daily survey by Nanos Research, an Ottawa-based pollster, with the party at 32 percent and the Liberals at 28 percent. That poll of 1,200 voters has a 2.8 percentage point error margin.

#### No Majority

Typically, it takes 38 percent to 40 percent of the popular vote in Canada to win enough electoral districts to control Parliament without having to rely on other parties to pass laws. Harper's Conservatives held 127 seats in Canada's 308-seat Parliament when elections were called.



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[Nik Nanos](#), president of Nanos Research, predicts the Conservatives will retain power with fewer seats. Harper's inability to break through in Quebec is largely to blame, Nanos said, marking "the unraveling of his vision of a national coalition. That's slipped through his fingers."

Harper had hoped to build on his party's surprise victories in Quebec in the 2006 election that brought him to office. That was his party's first hint of success there since former Prime Minister [Brian Mulroney](#), a Quebecer, was in power from 1984-93.

The prime minister has tried to turn slumping support for Quebec secession from Canada into enough seats for a parliamentary majority, reaching out to supporters of the separatist Bloc Quebecois by declaring the province a "nation" and promising to curb federal powers.

#### 1995 Referendum

Early in the race it seemed he was benefiting from those concessions to the province -- which in 1995 voted to stay in Canada by less than one percentage point.

Liberal Leader [Stephane Dion](#), meanwhile, had alienated his fellow Quebecers by opposing greater provincial autonomy. Dion, 53, also leads a party which saw its popularity collapse in the province after a public inquiry in 2005 found party fund-raisers in Quebec received kickbacks in exchange for advertising contracts.

Still, Harper's promise of stiffer sentences for youths convicted of violent crimes and his government's record on arts and culture funding have made it harder for Conservatives to woo Quebec voters.

#### Spoiled Artists

After Harper cut C\$45 million (\$38 million) for arts programs ahead of the campaign and later said "ordinary Canadians" resent state funding of cultural industries, artists in Quebec held protest rallies. Michel Rivard, a musician in the province, parodied the Conservatives in an Internet [video](#).

At the rally in Longueuil, Harper was met by a group of artists holding a sign that read: "S.A.L.A. Spoiled Artists Liberation Army."

And in the campaign's final days, opposition parties including the Bloc Quebecois, which is leading in the province, are taking advantage of global financial turmoil to run ads linking Harper to Bush's economic policies and argue he hasn't been active enough on the crisis.

To contact the reporter on this story: [Theophilos Argitis](#) in Ottawa at [targitis@bloomberg.net](mailto:targitis@bloomberg.net).

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