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news

Harper Gains in Quebec Vote; Liberals Lose Seat (Update 1)

By Theophilos Argitis

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Sept. 18 (Bloomberg) -- Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, facing an election as early as this year, was the clear winner yesterday as elections to fill three vacant Quebec seats delivered blows to his two main rivals in the province.

Harper's Conservative Party won a seat held by the separatist Bloc Quebecois, and improved its share of the popular vote in another electoral district. The Liberal Party, Canada's largest opposition bloc, lost the Montreal seat of Outremont for just the second time in more than 70 years.

At stake may be the timing and outcome of the next federal election. Yesterday's showing may embolden the 48-year-old prime minister in a Parliament where opposition parties hold the bulk of seats and can bring down the government. The Conservatives have been in power 20 months, two more than the average lifespan for minority governments in Canada.

"This government will be able to sustain itself for at least another six months," said Nikita Nanos, president of SES Research, a polling company. "The government is usually the first casualty in by-elections but Stephen Harper showed he has traction in Quebec."

Opposition parties have an opportunity to bring down the government next month, when lawmakers vote on a policy agenda the government plans to introduce Oct. 16.

The Conservatives must make gains in Quebec to win a majority of seats in the House of Commons. The governing party is battling the Liberals for the federalist vote, while wooing Bloc loyalists with promises to curb Ottawa's power in the French-speaking province. The Conservatives now hold 11 of 75 districts in the province, Canada's second-most populous.

Conservatives Gain

"Stephen Harper is well on his way to becoming Quebecers' choice as the federalist option," said Geoff Norquay, a lobbyist for Earncliffe Strategy Group in Ottawa who worked as a spokesman for the Conservatives in 2005.

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- The Conservative candidate Denis Lebel won in Roberval-Lac- Saint-Jean, and the party increased their vote in Saint- Hyacinthe-Bagot -- two ridings centered in small, French- speaking towns. The Bloc's Eve-Mary Thai Thi Lac won in Saint- Hyacinthe.

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• [Bloomberg Press](#) The New Democratic Party candidate Thomas Mulcair won in the Montreal riding of Outremont, where non-French speakers are the majority. The Liberals had lost that seat only once since 1935. The loss was a setback for leader Stephane Dion, 51, in his biggest test since he won the party's top job last December. Dion may face questions within the party about his ability to lead the Liberals to victory, according to Nanos.

``The biggest challenge Dion has to face now is within his own party," Nanos said.

More Transfers

Harper raised transfers to Quebec in his last budget by C\$2.3 billion (\$2.24 billion). The Conservatives also won passage last year of a motion recognizing Quebec as a nation within Canada, and pledged to reduce federal interference in provincial affairs.

Dion, who called the loss ``a difficult moment" for his party, said separatists were the biggest losers, with the Bloc Quebecois losing a seat it had held since 1993.

``We must be very proud that the parties that believe in Canada are stronger," Dion told supporters, in remarks broadcast by Radio-Canada television.

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