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What the Tories need to do in Quebec

For starters, Stephen Harper may need to share the spotlight

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Amid the gloom of polls placing them behind even the NDP in Quebec, the Conservatives hosted a fundraiser in Montreal in May at the posh Queen Elizabeth Hotel. Some 2,000 people attended the Tory pow-wow, the largest Conservative event in the province in five years. And in case the evening's theme—"We're taking root in Quebec"—wasn't clear enough, Stephen Harper took to the podium to insist rumours of the party's death in the province [had been greatly exaggerated](#). "They'll never again be able to say that I wrote off Quebec," he said. "Our party and our organization are getting stronger in all parts of Quebec, including Montreal."

Meanwhile, organizers were scurrying across the room, pleading with attendees to keep quiet during the PM's speech. Despite shelling out \$150 for the privilege, diners didn't appear particularly interested in listening to what Harper had to say. In fact, Harper didn't even get the evening's warmest reception. That privilege went to Maxime Bernier.

According to pollster Nik Nanos, Harper has become the "lightning rod of discontent" for Quebec voters. And in order to compensate for the rapidly souring relationship, he suggests Harper should allow prominent local candidates to take his place as the centrepiece in any future election campaign. Bob Plamondon, a longtime Conservative and the author of *Blue Thunder: The Truth about Conservatives from Macdonald to Harper*, goes even further. He says Harper needs to strike a power-sharing agreement with someone able to countenance the prime minister's sharply partisan instincts when it comes to Quebec. It's the only way, Plamondon says, for Harper to avoid making missteps like those on culture and young offenders that are widely credited with sinking his chances of a majority in the last election campaign.

“I don’t think it was so much that those specific policies were abhorred by Quebecers,” Plamondon says, “because in the scheme of government activities, they are relatively minor issues. But they spoke to larger issues—does Stephen Harper understand Quebec and can he be trusted? I think Quebecers drew the conclusion that he’s disconnected from them. They couldn’t identify among Harper’s team a particularly strong lieutenant who had near-veto power over what went on in Ottawa with respect to those matters that are of particular concern to Quebecers.”

So far at least, the Conservatives have opted for another tack entirely. Instead of appealing to Quebecers’ parochial instincts by slapping a familiar face on the Tory brand, they’ve sharpened their attacks against the Bloc Québécois and the Liberals in an attempt to tear down their opposition. This past spring, they [launched an ad campaign](#) that attempted to portray Michael Ignatieff as an ultra-federalist snob whose French is spoken with an accent “*de France*.” And late last month, the Conservatives [mailed out flyers](#) to voters in Bloc-controlled ridings that Bloc MPs said accused them of siding with child traffickers. While it may seem counter-intuitive for the Tories to return to the ideological territory that may have played a role in derailing their campaign in 2008, a spokesperson for Conservative MP Christian Paradis, Harper’s Quebec lieutenant, says the party plans to stick with the tough-on-crime pitch to Quebecers.

It’s still early, but neither a breakthrough on crime, nor a complete collapse of support for the opposition parties, nor a move by Harper to share the stage with a prominent Quebec figure (like, say, former ADQ leader Mario Dumont), appears likely. The Tories may therefore have to woo Quebec the old-fashioned way: more power. “Harper still has one arrow left to shoot,” says Tom Flanagan, a political science professor at the University of Calgary and a former campaign manager for the Conservatives. “He’s not yet fulfilled his 2006 campaign platform promise, repeated since then, to limit the federal spending power. That would be popular in Quebec, as well as with conservatives in other provinces who don’t want to see the federal government undertaking new social programs.”

With the spectre of a fall election looming, the pressure will likely mount on Harper to do something—anything—to appease his critics in the province. After all, nearly two months have passed since the fundraiser in Montreal and there are few signs Quebecers are holding Harper any closer to their hearts. The [latest Léger Marketing poll](#) puts the Tories in roughly the same shape they were back in May—at just 11 per cent, the Tories are 21 points behind the Liberals and the Bloc and trailing the NDP by four points, which puts the party in line to see most of the gains it made in Quebec in 2006 wiped out. “In a way, it’s a bit like retro hour,” says Nanos. The Conservatives’ fight for relevance, he says, is eerily similar to the one faced when the Progressive Conservatives merged with the Canadian Alliance in 2004. But while their return from Quebec’s political wilderness in the ‘06 election may provide some inspiration, the only thing that matters now is whether they can do it again.

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Since Quebecers are the smartest voters in all of Canada, I have to figure they got to the right conclusion about Harper before the rest of Canada knew Le Grand Guy is political coo-coo.

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