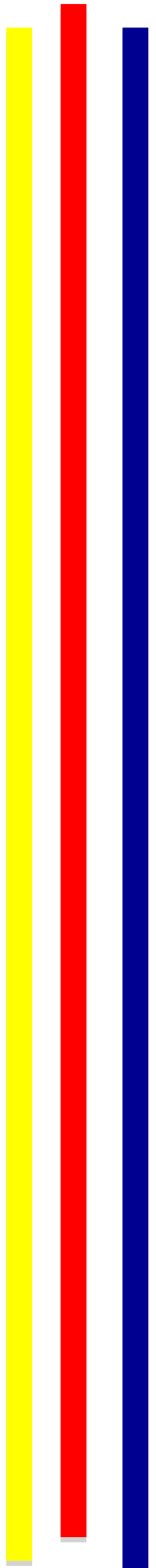


# INSTITUTE OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS WORKING PAPER

## The Orange Wave: a (re)Canadianisation of the Quebec electorate?

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## **Abstract**

The political divide in Quebec has usually favoured the Bloc Québécois. However, the 2011 federal election saw a decline in support for the Bloc Québécois, and an increase in support for the New Democratic Party. This brings forward the question as to whether Quebec has recommitted to Canadian federalism. The overall image of the Bloc Québécois has been analyzed post-election by looking at the press analysis, at Quebec's views of Canadian federalism, as well as by considering issues that are faced by federal parties. This survey recalls that the NDP electoral basis is fragile, and that the divide between Quebec and the federal government is an enduring factor in Canadian politics that cannot disappear overnight. This is shown by Quebec's weak identification with Canada and loyalty to their provincial government.

## **Introduction**

To many observers, the 2011 federal election results, and in particular the sharp decline in support for the Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the exceptional support for the New Democratic Party (NDP) among Quebec voters, has been interpreted as a new commitment to Canada and the federal government. This new reality could have an impact on federal-provincial relations. This chapter addresses these two issues.

It is important to analyze what the 2011 federal election means for Canadian federalism. This will not be a traditional intergovernmental analysis. In a federal system where the executive's prerogatives are decisive, the governing party controls the issues and negotiating processes between the national, provincial and territorial government. The opposition parties are marginal players in the decision-making process. However, they can play a major role in the public debate on the decisions being made by those in power. Consequently, they can offer an alternative view of federalism, bring about disaffection and seek to represent political preferences that are ignored by the governing party. In this respect, the election of fifty-nine New Democrats in Quebec is significant. Likewise, Quebec's very weak presence within the governing party may also have an impact on its ability to properly represent Quebec voters. Since the end of World War II, with the exception of Joseph Clark's short-lived minority government in 1979 that had only two MPs from Quebec, Quebec has never been so ill represented in government. Only five members have been elected to government. They represent three percent of all conservative MPs.

This chapter aims not to provide the definitive answer to the following question: Is the NDP's impressive performance in Quebec a sign of Quebecers' recommitment to Canadian federalism? In the current context, the most honest answer to this important question should be "We don't know yet". I would prefer to highlight a number of factors that must be taken into account when one looks at the 2011 election. In doing so, it would be equally as premature and risky to establish a direct correlation between the BQ's poor performance (which should be put in perspective) and the decline of the sovereigntist option. These considerations lead us to raise a number of challenges that will face federal parties.

This chapter consists of four sections. The first discusses how, during and after the federal election, the English-speaking press analyzed and presented the BQ. This scenario will serve as a backdrop to the second section, which offers an alternative meaning behind the 2011 elections. The third section analyzes Quebec's recent attitudes and preferences regarding Canadian federalism. This enables one to take a critical look at the idea of a renewed interest in the increased political participation of the federalist parties and, moreover, the NDP. Lastly, the final section identifies a number of general issues currently facing federal parties.

### **SHAME ON THE BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS ... AND "GOOD RIDDANCE"**

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the presence of the BQ in Ottawa has been perceived as a source of frustration and annoyance; it has been much more than a threat, not only to the other federal parties, but also to a great number of voters outside of Quebec. Political comments concerning the BQ were generally, if not almost always, negative. In a systematic review of articles published in newspapers between March 25 (the day before the election) and May 21 (19 days after it), we identified 148 articles discussing the BQ's presence in Ottawa and interpreting the campaign's development and the May 2, 2011 results in relation to the Bloc. Factual articles were excluded from the database. Our intention is not to discuss the campaign's key moments (for such an account, see Bélanger and Nadeau, 2011), but rather how the BQ's presence was interpreted in the press. Three moments stood out for us. The first phase of the campaign was characterized by a sense that the results would reproduce an almost identical Parliamentary structure as when it was dissolved. Therefore, commentators were expecting the number of (re)elected Bloc members to be more or less the same. After the French-language leaders' debate held on April 14, polls showed an impressive surge of support for the NDP. The opportunity to witness the weakening of the BQ changed the English press's perception of Quebec voters. Finally, the NDP's unexpected performance and the defeat of all but four Bloc members, including that of Mr. Gilles Duceppe in his own riding, led to differing interpretations of the meaning behind these results.

The election followed the Liberal Party's non-confidence motion that declared the government in contempt of Parliament, which was caused by the Conservative government's refusal to disclose the cost of previous justice legislation. While opposition parties claimed to be centered on transparency and parliamentary democracy, the Conservative leader began his campaign by asking voters to be wary of a possible coalition involving the BQ. Two themes stood out for us. The first relates to the consequences of the Bloc taking part in a coalition government. Commentators urged the Liberals and the NDP to reject this idea, because to do otherwise would open the door to irresponsible and unreasonable demands from Quebec:

If a coalition that included the BQ actually did take power, the blackmail from the Bloc would be relentless. Every community of any size in Quebec would sense its chance to get a new, NHL-sized hockey rink; every crumbling highway bridge in the province might be rehabbed courtesy of taxpayers in the rest of the country. Every sugaring-off festival might become the proud recipient of a federal sponsorship grant. Contracts to build new navy ships, agreements to service new fighter jets, subsidies

for inefficient farms and businesses also would be on the table (National Post, 25 March 2011, A14).

The second recurring theme was the inability to form a majority government and make important (and controversial) decisions while the BQ holds approximately fifty of Quebec's seventy-nine seats (Daly, 2011, A17). Therefore, the BQ has been primarily responsible for the increase in minority governments since the 2004 elections: "Important but contentious legislation languished for lack of support from opposition parties," wrote John Ibbitson in *The Globe and Mail* (2011a, F1). Worse still, Andrew Potter, National News Editor of the *Ottawa Citizen*, states that support for the BQ illustrates a behaviour that is troubling for democracy and toxic to politics:

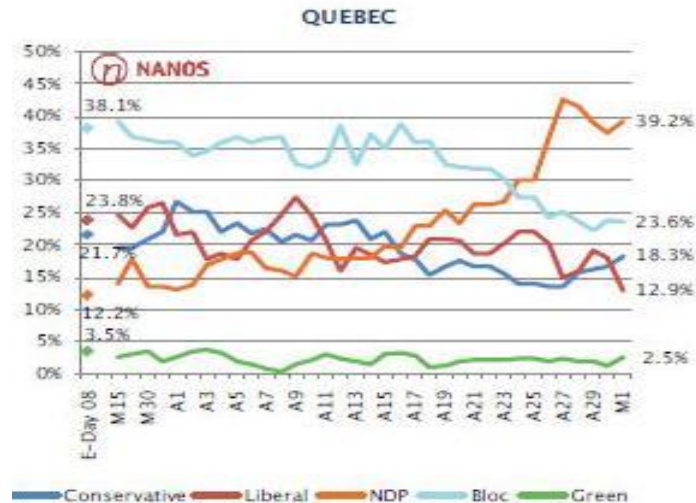
The Bloc Québécois is now supported by what is essentially an ethnic voting block. Ethnic voting blocks are bad enough in any democracy —when people vote according to their race, language, or tribe, rational public policy becomes extremely difficult. But when that block has also decided to abstain from any role in the national government, the effect is absolutely toxic (A11).

Others suggested rather that the presence of the BQ in Ottawa demonstrated Quebecers' withdrawal from federal issues as well as their desire to always demand more without ever actually wanting to participate in Canadian politics (Simpson, 2011a, A19; *Montreal Gazette*, 30 March, A20). Given the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of making political gains in Quebec (Ibbitson, 2011b), the Conservative Party should simply turn their backs on this province:

The Tories may be finally resorting to the strategy advocated by political scientist Peter Brimelow in 2005: "While Quebec is at the centre of every major government decision ... the natural conservative tendencies of [English Canada] will continue to be frustrated. For the Canadian Right, the road to power lies not through Quebec, but around it." Former Harper advisor John Weissenberger advised the same course in 2004: "An Ontario-West electoral strategy is no longer laughable. With 201 of 308 seats ... it's entirely rational and ... a potential winner" (Kheiriddin, 2011a, A16).

The feelings expressed towards the BQ in print media, up until mid-campaign, were negative and defeatist: the party will win just as many seats; this illustrates the disengagement of many Quebec voters vis-à-vis Canadian politics; they behave like spoiled children, demanding everything without wanting to give anything in return; the BQ prevents us from forming a Conservative majority government; perhaps it would simply be better to stop trying to woo this ungrateful electorate. The tone changed mid-campaign when polls began to show a surprising and unexpected rise in NDP support following the French-language leaders' debate. What was even more surprising was that a survey conducted by the polling firm Angus-Reid during the debate showed that voters enjoyed Gilles Duceppe's and Jack Layton's performances equally (Angus-Reid, 2011a). We will come back to the interpretation of the election results later. This increase in support for the NDP was accompanied by a sharp decline in support for the BQ (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
Evolution of voting intentions in Quebec



The Anglophone/English press' perception of Quebec voters changed dramatically. Some themes are recurring. The first was the hope that a federalist party would win the majority of seats in Quebec for the first time since the BQ emerged in 1993. In a burst of enthusiasm, the *Ottawa Citizen's* Kelly Egan wrote, "The NDP are on the verge of doing something magical in Quebec. Giving us our country back", adding that the BQ was on the verge of being marginalized, she then exploded with joy: "Hallelujah! Good riddance to dem bums. One can only hope this pesky genie is back in the bottle for a very long time. In fact, throw the bottle out to sea" (2011, C1). This strong support for the NDP reflects Quebecers' desire to enter into a genuine dialogue with the entire national community. Quebec would once again demonstrate both a sound and credible presence in the Canadian arena (Kennedy, 2011, A16; Anderson, 2011).

The second type of perception concerns the possible reasons for this change, pointing to Gilles Duceppe's participation in the April 17 Parti québécois (PQ) convention. He delivered a speech that reiterated the issues at the heart of the BQ electoral platform: sovereignty and the likelihood of holding another referendum in the event that the PQ wins the provincial election. The *Toronto Star's* Chantal Hébert highlighted this, "It is no coincidence that the New Democrats took their biggest leap in the polls on the heels of last weekend's Parti québécois convention and Duceppe's fiery call to arms to his fellow sovereignists" (2011, A6; see also Radwanski, 2011, A14). The NDP has managed to convince the "soft nationalists" to support its party, which, for the most part, addresses the progressive social concerns of Bloc voters (Kheiriddin, 2011b, A4; Simpson, 2011b, A21). The voters' disaffection thus marks a return to the traditional left/right axis at the expense of the divide on constitutional issues (Watson, 2011, A13). This links the two

main arguments that remain that of participating in federal politics because the NDP adopted positions close to the concerns of Quebec voters. This way of thinking is well illustrated by Johnson: "Layton's pitch, fundamentally, is that Quebeckers are wasting their vote on the Bloc when they can get exactly the same policies from a Canada-wide party that can hope someday to form the government or be part of a governing coalition" (2011, A15). In short, during the last two weeks of the campaign, the press celebrated the BQ's fall in support. For commentators, this reflected Quebec voters' fatigue vis-à-vis Gilles Duceppe's uncreative campaign, a decreased sovereigntist fervor and a renewed interest in being part of the Canadian political system.

It is not surprising that many commentators first cheered for the election results, with the BQ's representation being reduced to four seats, 45 fewer seats than it held in the October 2008 election. The evidence was clear: it is possible to win a majority government without Quebec, "with the Bloc sweeping up votes in Quebec, English Canada elected only minority governments in the last three elections. Now, the rest of Canada won't be party to the whims of Quebec voters, where issues like Quebec separatism and multiculturalism have long fragmented the electorate" (*National Post*, 4 May 2011, A3). *The Globe and Mail's* May 3 editorial set the tone that would be shared almost unanimously:

The Bloc Québécois is effectively extinct, its leader defeated, its approach to federal politics rebuked. Three in four Quebeckers cast a vote for federalist parties. It may be a protest vote, a vote for the charisma and the nationalist-friendly promises of Jack Layton. But still, after years of Bloc obstructionism, Quebeckers are expressing a desire to participate in the affairs of their nation – of Canada. (*Globe and Mail*, 2011)

Other commentators have used equally celebratory terms to reflect the BQ's performance, declaring it dead (Harper, 2011, A4), destroyed (*Victoria Times Colonist*, 2011, A16; Ibbitson, 2011, A17), annihilated (Elliott, 2011, A10), close to extinction (*Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, 2011, A8), having suffered a mortal blow (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 2011). In this respect, Jack Layton should get Canadians' gratitude for bringing stability to Parliament and strengthening national unity (Mandryk, 2011, B10). Along with the expectations expressed during the election campaign, one looks forward to the support of an overwhelming majority of Quebec voters for federalist parties, bringing to light the fact that the BQ cannot be considered the only legitimate voice for Quebeckers in Ottawa: "It does mean that Quebeckers, weary of the tired sovereigntist games, are once again prepared to explore a federalist route to Ottawa. This is very good news for Canada and for Quebec" (Stevens, 2011, A12). While some consider the strong vote in favor of the NDP as an expression of the will of Quebeckers to work with other Canadians (Sallot, 2011, A15), starting a new national conversation that ensures that once again Quebec has an influence on Canadian politics (Panetta, 2011, A4), others point out that Quebeckers have overwhelmingly chosen to find themselves outside government (Braid, 2011, A5).

The BQ's poor performance is considered good news because it not only eliminates an embarrassing political player from federal politics, but also because it represents "a setback for the PQ" (Hamilton, 2011, A8). However, the *Toronto Star's* Andrew Chung

believes that it would be a mistake to think that Quebec voters have become infatuated with the NDP. This shift should rather be interpreted as a protest vote (Chung, 2011, A12) and a refusal to participate. This perception of Quebec voters is shared by Don Macpherson: "In switching from the Bloc to the New Democrats, it has exchanged representation in one opposition party for another, from one that demands everything to another that promises everything" (Macpherson, 2011, A23). In short, leading up to the surprising election results, the celebration was tempered by skepticism towards interpretations tinged with optimism.

Even in Quebec, it was tempting to see in last May's scrutinized results a reinvestment by Quebecers in Canadian politics. For example, a few days before the election, Professor Denis Saint-Martin of the University of Montreal and former adviser to Paul Martin, interpreted the rise in support for the NDP in the polls as Quebecers renewed interest in federalism. He wrote in *Le Devoir*: "One hypothesis is that current support for the NDP is a sign of a possible thawing in Quebec for Canadian federalism. Quebec federalists are not necessarily disappointed with federalism per se. Rather, they are disappointed with the Liberals and Conservatives having nothing to say on the identity issues that concern citizens" (translation) (Saint-Martin, 2011). Saint-Martin also predicted that a strong NDP deputation could affect the dynamics of party politics in Ottawa and, inevitably, federal-provincial relations that depend on them. Michel Seymour, a philosopher at the University of Montreal and former chair of the BQ's citizenship committee, also juggled with the idea of 'winning back' Canada. Indeed, two days after the election, he wrote that by "supporting the NDP, Quebecers are saying that they would once again like to reach an agreement within Canada" (translation) (Seymour, 2011). Finally, in a public statement, the Quebec Premier, Mr. Jean Charest argued that this change represented Quebecers' desire to reinvest in the country's affairs (Gouvernement du Québec, 2011).

## **A MOST PECULIAR CAMPAIGN**

What's it all about? It is important to interpret the May 2 election with caution before concluding that an overwhelmingly large number of Quebecers decided overnight to fully participate in the Canadian federation. We are reminded of the particular dynamic that has characterized these results. In this respect, it seems appropriate to recall five elements that contextualize the "orange wave".

First, nothing justified the general election apart from strategic considerations. The campaign did not focus on any major societal issue, whether it be foreign policy, economic policies, health or culture. It was primarily a way to end constant conflicts that arose in the House of Commons between the minority Conservative government and the other parties, who constantly threatened to defeat the government. Consequently, the election's goal was to form a majority government, which appealed to Conservatives because of the danger of a possible coalition of opposition parties, or to re-elect a minority government. In early 2011, the BQ's performance found favour with francophone voters, who showed more confidence in Gilles Duceppe (37%) than in Jack

Layton (27%) (Léger Marketing, 2011a). There was no reason to believe it would be any different this time.

Second, the federal government and the Conservative Party did not attempt to feed Quebec voters' dissatisfaction. Unlike the 2004 election, and less so than in the 2006 election, there has not been a similar sponsorship scandal (the Quebec Liberal Party lost 10 percentage points of votes casted in 2004) or cuts to spending on culture or central issues like healthcare financing, as in 2008 (Gidengil et al., 2011, 161-164). In short, nothing existed to fuel the resentment vis-à-vis the Canadian federal government.

Third, the BQ was not able to come up with any new material. Instead, they seemed content to simply repeat the same arguments used since its creation: they exclusively defend Quebec's interests and they promote sovereignty. However, one cannot blame the BQ for not taking specific and comprehensive positions on the major political, social, cultural and economic challenges facing Quebec (and Canada). The platform, a 195-page document with 23 chapters, covers the BQ's vision across the board, on official languages, economic development, public finance, indigenous nations, environmental policies, Canadian foreign policy, globalization and international trade. The policies of the Harper government are under attack in the document: the Conservative Party is mentioned 180 times and the Canadian Prime Minister's name appears 36 times. The BQ seeks to distinguish itself from Michael Ignatieff whose name appears 12 times, the Liberal Party 3 times and Liberal actions approximately 30 times. Surprisingly, the NDP and its leader aren't mentioned once (Bloc Québécois, 2011). One theme that emerged during the campaign focused on the need to prevent the formation of a Conservative majority government. As support declined for the PQ, Gilles Duceppe sympathized with the PQ's cause during the campaign, saying that the election of a strong contingent of Bloc members would be followed by the election of a PQ government that had wind in its sails—thus destroying the idea that the Bloc formed an umbrella coalition of federalist and sovereignist nationalists who are dissatisfied with other parties. In this election, the BQ campaign brought little of anything new to the partisan landscape.

Fourth, one must rely on the strong sense of disillusionment that accompanies politics. Indeed, the vast majority of Quebecers (87% according to a survey conducted in late May 2010) expressed their disappointment, weariness and impatience with all political leaders (Gagnon, 2010). This feeling was significantly more pronounced in Quebec than in the rest of Canada. Although only one-third of Canadians are truly connecting with the federal parties, while large proportions of respondents hold feelings of mistrust, skepticism and even cynicism towards politics, "only" a third of voters are part of the group of disillusioned or cynical citizens. Another third are rather skeptical, while being satisfied with the political options offered (Angus Reid, 2011b). Since this survey included Quebec respondents, we can reasonably assume that the level of disappointment and cynicism was lower in the rest of Canada than in Quebec. These negative feelings towards politics provide a fertile ground for a protest vote. This helped to rediscover Jack Layton, who led a less aggressive and more positive campaign than his opponents.



Fifth, we must not forget that a vast number of voters had grown weary of the BQ. This weariness began even though, one week before the elections, 52% of Quebecers said that they felt the BQ was useful to Ottawa, compared to one-third who considered it useless (Turbide, 2011). A post-election survey conducted by Léger Marketing on behalf of *Le Devoir*, showed that although there are several reasons voters chose the NDP, the three main ones were the desire for change (45%), the desire to prevent the formation of a majority Conservative government (34%) and the desire to end the BQ's power (33%). The same reasons were identified among former Bloc voters who supported the NDP, half of them saying they primarily wanted to prevent a Conservative majority (50%), followed by the fact that they were tired of the other parties and wanted a change (41%) and that it was time to support a party other than the BQ (33%) (Léger Marketing, 2011b, 7-8).

In short, it seems unfair to argue that Quebecers have chosen to participate in Canadian governance by opting for a pan-Canadian party. Instead, they jumped on the bandwagon of another political party that had no chance of forming a government. Moreover, 83.5% of voters supported a party other than the Conservative Party, thus voluntarily and knowingly endowing to exclude them from majority power. Indeed, nobody ever doubted the re-election of a Conservative government. The question was, until the very end, if the government would win a majority of seats in the House of Commons. Quebec voters wanted to prevent the election of a majority government and a good portion of them chose to transfer their support to the NDP in order to get there. The result was that the NDP even managed to elect more members than during the historic breakthrough of the Bloc in 1993. However, the NDP's influence on federal-provincial dynamics is almost nonexistent. Quebec's vote, for the most part, stands for their disenchantment with existing parties, change, protest, and exclusion from federal policies.

## **A CANADIAN CHOICE?**

Quebec has not been at the heart of this election's political debates. It would be premature to conclude that the quasi-extinction of the BQ reflects that Quebec nationalism is running out of steam, replaced by a greater commitment to Canada. Instead, Quebec nationalism, for those who do not deny their participation in Canada, manifests itself differently, in particular through specific expectations regarding Canadian federalism, a certain notion of the role that Quebec should play, an opposition that is perceived only as centralist, and sensitivities surrounding its distinctive character. Nationalism, which should not be confused with the ups and downs of the sovereignist movement, is present throughout Quebec's history and is characterized by a stronger identification with Quebec and stronger support for the Quebec government's role in respect to the Canadian State. As for the sovereignists, a good number of them continued to support the BQ. Moreover, a post-election survey showed that 55% of BQ voters believed that it was the best party to defend the interest of Quebec, while 36% did so because it was in favor of the independence of Quebec (Léger Marketing, 2011b, 10).

The BQ still remained the second choice of voters, significantly ahead of the Conservatives and Liberals, and won nearly a quarter of the vote. The BQ's presence in Ottawa was not only used to prepare the way for sovereignty and facilitate negotiations after winning a referendum. It also sought to provide a showcase for Quebec's national aspirations, under the recurring term of "the will to defend Quebec's interests", and to serve as a bulwark against the federal government's centralized interests, real or imagined.

One must not underestimate the symbolic and structural consequences on the Quebec electorate after 20 years of the Bloc being in Ottawa. One could make the assumption that it helped reinforce two ideas that have now become mantras of Quebec politics and performance measurement indicators for other political parties.

The first idea suggests that there is a rift between the aspirations, values and interests of Quebec and those of the rest of Canada, the latter being presented as an undifferentiated whole. Thus, all federal policies are analyzed through an oversimplified and distorted lens, foreword on Quebec's interests. However, federal principles refer to two complementary dimensions: namely, the recognition of and respect for the autonomy of the federated entities, but also the need for federal solidarity in respect to common political objectives (Rocher, 2009). The BQ, like all provincial political actors (not to mention much of the intelligentsia), paid particular attention to the first factor and completely ignored the second. While these views have traditionally been shared by provincial political parties – in fact, they have been consistently shared in Quebec politics since the end of World War II – they were transferred to Ottawa two decades ago.

The second idea, a result of the first, is the need for pan-Canadian federal parties to potentially enter valid conflict over the wishes of the provincial political forces and, in an emblematic manner, of the National Assembly. During the patriation of the Constitution in 1981–1982, 74 of the 75 Quebec Liberal MPs had supported Pierre Elliott Trudeau's project, even though all the parties represented at the National Assembly voted unanimously against the exclusion of Quebec from the constitutional agreement. This led to the assertion that the legitimately elected federal representatives of Quebec approved of the initiative and, at the same time, Quebec was not and has never been excluded. This equation was no longer possible with the arrival of the BQ. The "Quebec voice" could be coherent—by imposing a single view and valuing a single school of thought. In addition, the Bloc's presence has ensured that the provincial political agenda has been echoed in the House of Commons, be it federalist (Quebec Liberal Party) or sovereigntist (PQ). The "sounding-board" effect is now anchored in the imagination of Quebecers and expected from Quebec representatives in all political parties.

It is too early to conclude that a "re-Canadianisation" of the Quebec electorate has occurred, at least as an important variable that could explain the NDP victory, or even predict with certainty the complete disappearance of the Bloc. We have known for a long time that francophone Quebecers are less committed to Canada than other Canadians, including anglophone Quebecers and allophones. A 2009 survey conducted by the Association for Canadian Studies showed that Quebec residents relate the most to their

province (at 44%) and the least to Canada (20%). This ability to identify with the rest of Canada is only slightly higher than that with the rest of the world (17%) (see Table 1) (Association for Canadian Studies, 2009).

**Table 1**

Identification – percentage / Region

	The World	Canada	Your province	Your city	Your Linguistic Community	Your ethnic group or visible minority	none	I don't know
Atlantic	7	64	13	2	2	1	7	5
QC	16.9	20.0	43.9	8.9	3.9		4.7	1.7
ON	13.7	61.1	6.7	9.1	1.2	1.0	3.9	3.3
MB/SK	9	64	19	1	-	1	2	4
AB	16.0	53.8	17.3	5.1	.6	.6	5.8	.6
BC	16.8	44.1	15.3	5.0	.0	1.0	10.4	7.4
Total	14.3	48.6	19.1	7.0	1.6	.7	5.4	3.2

Q: With which of these groups do you identify the most?

Source: Association for Canadian Studies, 2009

In addition, the ability to identify with Canada is two to three times stronger in other regions of Canada than it is in Québec. This is why it is not surprising that the Quebec identity is most pronounced within Quebec. Table 2 illustrates this reality.

**Table 2**

Identity Identification / Quebec

	Francophones	Anglophones	Other	Total
Québécois only	31.3%	2.0%	5.9%	25.7%
Québécois first, but also Canadian	39.2%	12.0%	19.1%	34.4%
Both Québécois and Canadian	19.5%	21.0%	25.7%	20.4%
Canadian first, but also Québécois	7.2%	45.0%	20.4%	12.1%
Canadian only	1.3%	18.0%	12.5%	4.1%
None of the above	1.1%	2.0%	15.1%	2.9%
I prefer to not respond	.3%	.0%	1.3%	.4%

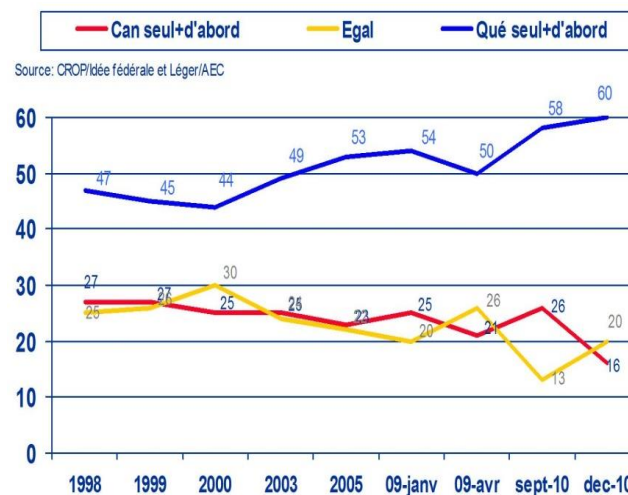
Q: There are different ways to describe yourself. Are you:

Source: Association for Canadian Studies, 2010.

A survey conducted in 2010 indicated that 60% of Quebecers have a predominantly Quebec identity (25.7% define themselves as "Québécois only" and 34.4% as "Québécois first"). This identity is even more pronounced among Francophones (70%), while it is much less pronounced among Anglophones (14%) and allophones (25%) (Association for Canadian Studies, 2010). This fact reflects a deepening trend that shows no sign of disappearing. Indeed, a compilation of surveys conducted since 1998, which asked Quebecers how they define themselves, witnessed a growing paramountcy of the Quebec identity while the Canadian identity lost 10 percentage points and competing identities 5 points (see Figure 2) (Lisée, 2011).

**Figure 2**

Quebec Identity – 1998–2010



In a context increasingly characterized by a sense of disconnected identity in Canada, one may wonder how it is possible to interpret the May 2011 election's scrutinized results as a dramatic reversal of such a strong trend.

Quebeckers' relative disconnect with Canada is also reflected by Quebec's strong loyalty to their provincial government. Thus, in times of conflict between the federal government and the provinces, Quebeckers differ from other Canadians in the sense that they are twice as likely (62% to 32%) to support their provincial government (see Table 3) TABLE 3 (Association for Canadian Studies, 2009).

**Table 3**  
Loyalty over federal-provincial conflict / Regions

	Canada	My province	I can't decide	I prefer to not respond
Atlantic	40.0	32	25	3
QC	22.5	61.9	13.1	2.5
ON	51.1	20.6	25.4	2.9
MB/SK	40	26	23	11
AB	43.9	29	26.5	0.6
BC	44.6	19.3	31.7	4.5
Total	41.1	32.4	23.1	3.4

Q: When there is a conflict of interests between the federal government and the provinces, would you support your province, Canada or neither?

Source: Association for Canadian Studies, 2009

In short, francophone Quebecers not only identify less with Canada, but in times of conflict between the two orders of government, they also tend to be more supportive of their provincial government, a role played by the BQ in Ottawa. Now it is up to the NDP to take on that role. Quebecers expect their voice to be strong and meaningful in Ottawa. Following their unwillingness to participate in governing, the fact that it comes from the Opposition indicates that Quebecers' interest in Canada is tinged with weary cynicism, if not self-exclusion from power.

### **THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CONSERVATIVES AND THE NDP**

On May 2, 2011, Quebecers did not vote for the BQ, but they rejected even more strongly the Liberals and did not support the Conservatives. However, the latter still managed to get their majority. It is clear that, for the Conservatives, it is no longer necessary to rely on the Quebec vote to govern Canada. As noted by *The Globe and Mail's* Margaret Wente a few days after the elections, "Mr. Harper has forged a historic new alliance between the West and Ontario, and he didn't need Quebec to win. Quebecers' mass infatuation with the NDP may not last longer than snow in April, but their ability to hold federal governments to ransom may be gone for good" (Wente, 2011, A21). The addition of seats in the House of Commons can only help to strengthen this reality in the next elections. Only the Liberals and the NDP, given the distribution of their supporters across Canada, need significant parliamentary representation from Quebec to be in a position to form a government.

All federal parties will now have to take on the perilous profession of a tightrope walker and learn how to walk the rope if they want to preserve national unity.

Across Canada, the Conservatives increased their support by only 2% from the 2008 elections. They stayed afloat in British Columbia and the Prairies, made some progress in the Atlantic Provinces, but most importantly, they won 22 additional seats in Ontario (with an increase of 5% of votes) and lost 5 ridings in Quebec (with a 5% loss of their support). It is very tempting to govern while excluding Quebec to strengthen their base, particularly in Ontario, and guarantee another majority. In doing so, however, the Conservatives would further alienate Quebec voters and deepen the traditional divide between Quebec and the federal government. They risk reinforcing the disconnect between Quebecers and Canada. They must therefore demonstrate a certain openness. But for the time being, they seem to be moving in the opposite direction. Although some decisions have been well received, such as the decision to settle the dispute with Quebec involving compensation for the sales tax harmonization and the project to build a new Champlain Bridge, other decisions have raised strong opposition, such as abolishing the long-gun registry, Bill C-10, the appointment of a unilingual auditor, the stop and go surrounding the fight against greenhouse gas emissions, and rebuilding Canada's identity around monarchical and military symbols. The growing number of policies opposed by Quebec political actors will only alienate a significant portion of Quebec voters from this party. More importantly, they would strengthen the feeling of many that there is little to expect from Canadian federalism and that the Quebec Government is the only credible spokesperson for Quebec's interests. The federal-provincial tensions, although normal in any federation, would only become more pronounced. In short, this all suggests that the current government continues to ignore Quebec's interests, which then get pushed aside with absolutely no consequences. Prime Minister Harper would be well advised to avoid crises, restrict confrontations with Quebec, and at least give the impression of governing on behalf of all Canadians.

Challenges facing New Democrats seem even more important. In terms of percentage, they were able to make gains in all regions, except in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Elsewhere in Canada, these gains have been made, for the most part, at the expense of the Liberals. In Quebec, the NDP may fall victim to its own success. They must overcome three obstacles while working towards one goal.

The first obstacle involves Jack Layton's successor. Thomas Mulcair will need to demonstrate the talent necessary to win the support of Quebecers. He will also need to bridge the gap between the New Democrats who historically built the party and those who have only just converted.

The second obstacle, equally as significant, will be to translate in Parliament the commitments made in the September 2006 Sherbrooke Declaration, which recognizes Quebec's national character, endorses the principle of asymmetrical federalism and insists on respecting the jurisdiction recognized by the Constitution. To maintain newly acquired support, the NDP will need to show greater sensitivity towards the needs of Quebec without alienating its traditional electorate that tends to value a more assertive

federal government. In other words, they will have to find the philosopher's stone that turns lead into gold.

The third obstacle, equally as difficult to overcome, will be to unite the left and centre-left and to stand as a credible alternative to the Liberal Party of Canada and eventually become an alternative to the Conservative Party. The NDP is the official Opposition and is uniquely positioned to face the Conservative Party, who monopolizes the centre-right. The NDP's positions, which are more in line with Quebec's many progressive policies, can help solidify the support obtained.

Finally, the federal election that resulted in an unprecedented orange wave could provide a unique opportunity to reconcile, if possible, the two axes of Canadian politics, the one that separates the left and the right, and the other that often places back-to-back national projects in Canada and Quebec. In order to maintain the support of its newly acquired electorate, in a context where the official opposition can only marginally influence the Conservative government, the NDP will have to find a creative way to square the circle.

## CONCLUSION

New Democrats have been able to channel the protest vote towards Stephen Harper's Conservative government by focusing on the weariness expressed towards the BQ. In addition, we cannot conclude that the 43% vote for the NDP illustrates a support for the Party's more "progressive" positions. Rather, a post-election survey shows that the support for this political party comes from all ideological backgrounds: 35% of NDP voters consider themselves as centre, centre-right or right, a significantly higher proportion than Bloc voters (23%). Moreover, the Bloc voters perceive themselves as being more centre-left or left (48%) than those who supported the NDP (29%) (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

### Left/Right Ideological Spectrum / Political Parties

Canada	Total	LPC	PC	NDP	Bloc
Right	5	5	14	3	2
Centre-right	14	12	33	11	4
Centre	22	37	18	21	17
Centre-left	20	22	2	21	31
Left	8	2	0	8	17
I don't know	26	14	27	29	25
I prefer to not respond	6	9	6	6	5

Q: From an ideological standpoint, do you consider yourself to be ...?

Source: Léger Marketing, 2011c, 10.

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The same survey showed that 60% of Quebeckers (and 67% of Francophones) did not believe that the election results had helped Quebeckers to connect with other Canadians (Léger Marketing, 2011c, 12). In short, the NDP's electoral base is, for the moment, fragile.

The May 2011 Canadian election illustrates the large divide that exists between Quebec voters and Conservative policies: it was Quebec, with only 16.5% of the vote, which most clearly rejected the Harper Government, far short of the 39.6% achieved across Canada. As soon as the Conservative government meets the expectations of its voters, establishes the policies announced in its election platform, consolidates its support in the areas where its presence is strong or is likely to become strong, as is the case in Ontario, the divide between Quebec voters and the federal government is likely to widen. And with it, the sense of powerlessness and marginalization felt in Quebec will further increase. The question is whether Canada isolates Quebec, or whether the latter, which does not feel at home in Stephen Harper's "new Canada", distances itself.

Finally, the federal issues (intergovernmental agreements, joint-program funding, fiscal transfers, etc.) involve the federal government and the provinces more than the opposition parties who sit in the House of Commons. However, when these issues are discussed in Ottawa, a significant number of Quebec voters will expect the NDP to play the role filled by the BQ between 1993 and 2011. Quebeckers' strong loyalty to their provincial government, combined with their weak identification with Canada, cannot help but pose a challenge to the NDP who must also be the spokesperson for the preferences and interests of its supporters outside Quebec. Their failure to reflect provincial priorities would have serious consequences with many Quebeckers, while zeal in doing so could generate distrust in Canada. The NDP election results in Quebec could turn into a Pyrrhic victory not only for the party but also for political stability in Canada. For this reason, it is too early to sing the eulogy of the Bloc Québécois.



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