Duceppe on last blitz against resurgent Tories

Bloc Leader vows to protect language laws

Bloc Québécois

BY DANIEL LEBLANC, QUEBEC

Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe is criss-crossing Quebec in a final bid to take Liberal ridings in federalist areas and halt the Conservative rise in more nationalist regions.

Mr. Duceppe dubbed his final blitz an assault on "former Liberal strongholds," but his main enemy is the Conservative renaissance in the Quebec City area.

"We have to acknowledge that the party that is leading the federalist forces these days is more the Conservative Party," he said.

As he tries to improve on his tally of winning 54 of Quebec's 75 seats, Mr. Duceppe is vowing to fight racism when he addresses immigrants on Montreal Island, and promising to defend Quebec's language law Bill 101 in francophone ridings.

He had events in Montreal, Gatineau and Quebec City yesterday, and today is scheduled to be in the Saguenay region, and then fly to the Eastern Townships.

He will finish the campaign in Montreal on Sunday.

Mr. Duceppe started the blitz yesterday with a speech to a multiethnic crowd in a restaurant in the riding of Papineau, which is held by Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew.

'We have to acknowledge that the party that is leading the federalist forces these days is more the Conservative Party.'

Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe

The Bloc's candidate, feminist leader Vivian Barbot, is an immigrant from Haiti.

In his speech, Mr. Duceppe said it is inconceivable that Quebec Haitians have a far higher unemployment rate than average Quebeckers but higher levels of education.

He said he will continue working to ensure that immigrants are integrated into the province's work force.

"People who don't have the same skin colour do not have an equality of chances. We have to recognize the problem if we want to find a solution," he said.

With many people of Arab origin in the crowd, Mr. Duceppe also vowed to keep fighting controversial elements of Canada's anti-terrorism laws.

In particular, the Bloc is calling for an end to the security certificates the government uses to jail people suspected of having terrorist links.

"When you come under attack, we all come under attack," Mr. Duceppe told members of the Arab and Muslim communities.

Luck Mervil, a popular singer of Haitian origin in Quebec, introduced Mr. Duceppe at the rally. Afterward, Mr. Mervil said the Bloc Leader's message is unique among Quebec politicians.

"He says it loud and clear that racism exists and he will do all he can to stop it," Mr. Mervil said.

On Montreal Island and in the surrounding suburbs, the Bloc is confident of holding on to its seats, and hopes to steal those of Liberal ministers Liza Frulla, Jean Lapierre, Jacques Saada and Mr. Pettigrew.

Around Quebec City, the Bloc is in a more defensive mode.

An independent candidate, controversial radio host André Arthur, is leading in the rural riding of Portneuf.

The Conservative Party is expected to win in the urban riding of Louis-St-Laurent, where party worker Josée Verner is running. The Conservatives are also strong in the Liberal riding of Beauce, where their candidate is businessman Maxime Bernier, the son of a former MP in the riding. Mr. Bernier recently blamed environmentalists for the rising gas prices, a position that Mr. Duceppe condemned yesterday.

Mr. Duceppe said that Quebeckers cannot count on the Conservatives to protect the environment, and also said Tory Leader Stephen Harper has criticized Bill 101 in the past. Mr. Duceppe raised concerns that a Conservative government could finance anglophone groups in Quebec that challenge the language law.

"The best safeguard against a Conservative government is the Bloc," Mr. Duceppe said. "The best warranty, the surest value, is the Bloc."

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Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe responds to radio show host Gilles Parent yesterday in Quebec City.

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Advance voting up 25 per cent from 2004

Early Ballots

BY STEVEN CHASE, OTTAWA

A record number of Canadians cast advance ballots for Monday's federal election — a jump of 25 per cent from last time that experts say likely reflects concerns the winter weather might be bad on election day.

Election watchers caution against reading too much into the increase, including speculation that overall voter participation will be higher Jan. 23 than in previous elections.

Preliminary estimates from Elections Canada show 1.56 million Canadians voted in advance polls. That's up from 1.25 million before the election of June, 2004, and sets a record, the agency's staff said.

Joan O'Neill, a field liaison officer with Elections Canada, said she thinks advance turnout reflects early voting by Canadians going on winter vacation and "people trying to hedge their bets against the weather."

Political parties have been strongly encouraging supporters to vote in advance polls in case winter conditions Jan. 23 discourage them from travelling to their local polling station.

Carleton University political scientist Jon Pammett said it's too early to say if the heavier advance polling is a signal of a greater overall voter turnout on Monday.

"These are probably people who are very keen to vote in the first place," he said of advance voters.

"I don't think you can read anything in it about an increase in turnout, which would mean people who are marginal voters coming into the electorate," he said. "They are not really the kind of people who would be going out to the advance polls."

Advance poll voting in the June, 2004, election also set a record, but that didn't translate into higher overall turnout at the ballot box.

Overall voter turnout fell to 60.9 per cent in the 2004 election, down from 61.2 per cent in 2000 and 67 per cent in 1997.

Advance polling stations were open Jan. 13, 14 and 16.

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