

Tories edge up in Bloc bastion

Slightly ahead of Liberals in poll But move 'fragile,'

EKOS head says

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[GRAHAM FRASER](#)

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MONTREAL—Suddenly, it seems that Quebec is listening to what Stephen Harper has to say.

An EKOS Research Ltd. poll for the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse* shows that, for the first time since 1988, the Conservatives have a slim lead over the Liberals in Quebec.

The survey puts Conservative support in the province at 19.1 per cent, while the Liberals have dropped to 17.4 per cent. The Bloc Québécois still holds a commanding lead at 52.4 per cent support.

"What we've seen is the doubling and tripling of Tory support in Quebec in the last week or two," EKOS president Frank Graves told the *Star*.

However, he warned the movement towards the Tories is "fragile" and their lead in Quebec is within the survey's margin of error of 5.4 percentage points, meaning the Liberals and Conservatives are "statistically tied."

Still, the result is a psychological boost for the Tories on the eve of tonight's French-language debate — and a testament to the resilience of the hope that lingers in Quebec of some kind of reconciliation with the rest of Canada.

It also speaks to the disappointment with Liberal Leader Paul Martin, who once represented that hope. Martin, after all, supported the Meech Lake accord that would have recognized Quebec as a distinct society.

Author Gil Courtemanche expressed some of that disappointment in an analysis published in *Le Devoir* on Saturday.

"His refusal to consider any kind of reform of federalism and to even give lip service to the idea that just maybe there is a problem which could be called 'fiscal imbalance' comes from ... incomprehensible stubbornness (or) visceral misunderstanding," he wrote.

"What Mr. Martin doesn't understand is that reason and statistics have never motivated votes or a sense of attachment."

Some of Martin's latest election commitments, such as offering to pay half the cost of university tuition in a student's first and last year, have struck a false note in Quebec.

In Quebec, tuition is the lowest in Canada — and it is universities, not students, that need an injection of cash. And Quebecers are resentful rather than being impressed when the Liberals wade into areas of provincial jurisdiction like education.

Harper, on the other hand, has stimulated the hope that, on the basis of his more decentralist positions and a speech in Quebec City last month on "open federalism," he would be more sympathetic to Quebec's desire for recognition.

This contrast — between a more centralist approach and a more decentralist attitude — has distinguished the Liberals and the Conservatives for years.

Harper has hired a significant number of Quebecers to work on his staff and has reached out to several people who worked with former prime minister Brian Mulroney.

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