

Tory banks on the echo effect in the Beauce

Harper rise may be boon for riding

Party gaining momentum in province

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Ste-Marie-de-Beauce, Que.— It's called the echo effect, and Maxime Bernier believes in it.

The theory is that how a party leader does in Quebec reflects on how he does in Ontario — and how he is doing in Ontario has an impact in Quebec.

Since 1993, the echo has helped the Liberals and hurt the Conservatives. Now the Tories are benefiting from it.

"If we don't win a riding in Quebec, it looks bad," said Bernier, the Conservative candidate in Beauce. "And we are going to have one. We are going to have two. We are going to have three — I am sure we are going to have some more."

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper is coming to Beauce tomorrow to campaign for Bernier — and he was in Ontario over the weekend — a classic case of using the echo effect. But while Harper is pushing for new gains, Liberal Leader Paul Martin was scrambling to keep Liberal seats in Montreal that used to be taken for granted.

Last night, EKOS Research found while the Bloc was leading in Quebec with 46.6 per cent, the Conservatives were ahead of the Liberals with 21.6 per cent to 18.1 per cent. The NDP had 9.8 per cent support.

Bernier says the Conservative campaign strategy objective was to increase support in Quebec.

"At the beginning of the campaign, we were at 7 per cent, behind the NDP," he said. "People in Ontario look at that and say, 'Fine, but this is not a party that will be able to represent Quebec and unite the country.' So our objective was to get to at least 15 per cent in the polls in Quebec."

The next stage, Bernier said, is to get 10 or 15 ridings in Quebec on Jan. 23.

"At the beginning of the campaign, the goal was pretty limited — one, two or three ridings," he said. "But when people saw we were rising, they said 'That's good' — and it helped Ontario."

'If we don't win a riding in Quebec, it looks bad'

Maxime Bernier, Tory candidate, Beauce

Harper's rise in the polls in the rest of the country has had a big impact in his riding, Bernier said, adding "the two factors together create a momentum."

Bernier, 42, is a lawyer who has worked in insurance for the very federalist Claude Garcia and as a legislative adviser for the very sovereignist Bernard Landry when he was finance minister. In both cases, he said, it was for his competence, not for partisan considerations.

More important for his campaign, his father Gilles Bernier was MP for Beauce from 1984 to 1997 — two terms as a Tory, and one as an Independent.

"At the beginning of the campaign, my adversaries called me a daddy's boy," he said. "That suited me fine — they were doing my advertising for me. I wanted people to know."

And voters remember.

"Bernier has been here for 50 years. He's gone to everything, and he represented us well in Ottawa," said Neil Mathieu of St-Georges-de-Beauce, blurring the distinction between father and son. "It will be between Mr. Bernier and Mr. Lussier — this has always been a federalist riding."

The Liberal candidate, Jacques Lussier, a professor of administration at Laval University for 35 years, and dean of the faculty, has been mayor of Ste-Clotilde-de-Beauce for seven years. Bloc candidate Patrice Moore was a local radio host for five years, but the Beauce (now held by the Liberals) has never voted for a sovereignist.

The region prides itself in being different from the rest of Quebec: more independent, more entrepreneurial, more individualist. For years, business magazines have written about "le miracle de la Beauce" — and wondered how the region, which stretches south from the St. Lawrence across from Quebec City to the U.S. border, could be so successful. Its towns are full of small companies ... or big ones like Canam Manac that started small: trucking firms, auto-parts firms and manufacturing operations that produce everything from sinks and bathtubs to doors and shirts.

Overwhelmingly French-speaking, the region is also unusual in its federalism: 60 per cent of francophones voted Yes in the 1995 referendum, while 58 per cent of Beaucerons voted No. Now, Bernier thinks he is "a little bit ahead," and may go to Ottawa as a Tory next week, as his father did for the first time 22 years ago.

But while he hopes to be part of a wave, he admits the Beauce has never been a weathervane for political trends in Quebec.

The Beaucerons have a long tradition of marching to their own drum.

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