

PROVINCIAL ELECTION: Candidates criticize the Liberal government

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CARLETON: – The participating candidates in the electoral debate organized by CIEU FM on September 19 regularly criticized the record of the Liberal Party government and by extension, that party's representative in Bonaventure, François Whittom.

In that sense, the regional debate took a different form, compared to the province-wide debates, where the leader of Coalition avenir Québec, François Legault, was regularly the main target of his opponents, barring a few exceptions. Mr. Legault was targeted mainly because he was leading in polls during the first part of the campaign.

In Bonaventure, Hélène Desaulniers, of Coalition avenir Québec, often criticized the record of the Liberal Party, especially concerning the railway file. She asked François Whittom why the Couillard government was able to announce a \$6.3 billion investment for the Réseau express métropolitain in Montreal, a commuter train service endowed with a realization plan, "whilst your government is unable to determine a time frame for the upgrading work of the Gaspé Peninsula railroad." She was referring to the \$100M announcement made by Premier Couillard in May 2017.

Ms. Desaulniers also lashed another blow in transportation issues when she told Mr. Whittom that his government did not take action to really lower the cost of flying. In the health sector, she blamed the Liberal Party government for the firing of former hospital, CLSC and other health-related organization board members, and the centralization of power that befell on Minister Gaétan Barrette.

François Whittom's best moment came when he told Hélène Desaulniers that "it is not easy to see your leader. It is sad to see that he is not supporting you." That was a reference to the fact that François Legault has not set a foot in the Gaspé Peninsula since the beginning of August 2017, almost 14 months ago.

Overall though, Mr. Whittom had to admit on a few occasions that the government could have done better over the last four years. He praised Premier Philippe Couillard's decision to allot \$100 million for the railway but he also conceded that in people's mind, the

refection of the line is not going fast enough.

Answering to a question asked by Québec solidaire candidate Catherine Cyr-Wright regarding health matters, Mr. Whittom admitted that there is a shortage of home care and of rooms in the public residences for seniors.

CAQ's Hélène Desaulniers aimed at Mr. Whittom again, this time about cuts in education. He first answered by saying that the budgetary context of 2014 was troubling, and he added that there were no cuts in education during the last term.

Incumbent Member of the National Assembly Sylvain Roy quickly replied that the Liberal Party candidate's statement was wrong. A former Cegep teacher, Mr. Roy also underlined that there is a lot of potential in Cegep studies in the Gaspé Peninsula, and that the region must convince the authorities that more exclusive degrees must be offered here.

At one point, Sylvain Roy cornered François Whittom on health issues when he asked the Liberal candidate what his party intends to do to repair a system much maligned by the reform of the last years. Mr. Whittom admitted that the last term hurt.

Mr. Roy was not physically present at the debate. He is currently being treated for throat cancer in a Quebec City hospital and was appearing on a screen online. His interventions were vigorous, overall.

At one point, François Whittom questioned Sylvain Roy's discretion during the last term. "People don't see you. I have talked to people from the Baie des Chaleurs Chamber of Commerce and they never saw you."

"Maybe you just talked to a clique of Liberal members," replied Mr. Roy. CAQ's Hélène Desaulniers added "you don't even live in the region," to François Whittom, a Chandler native who lives in Quebec City.

Independent candidate Guy



Photo: G. Gagné

Candidates François Whittom, Catherine Cyr-Wright, Hélène Desaulniers and Guy Gallant were invited to participate in the CIEU-FM debate. Daniel Bouchard, on the right, was there to present his platform at the end, before the question period. Sylvain Roy was online from Quebec City and Heather Imhoff was unable to attend.

Gallant was discrete at times during the debate but some of his interventions were quite incisive, especially in transportation and regarding the anglophone community.

As prefect of the Avignon MRC, he sits on the board of the Gaspésie Railway Society and criticized the time spent by the current Quebec government before making a move favourable to the upgrading of the line.

"Poëti (Robert, the former minister of Transport) wanted trains to stop in Caplan and he was ready to have the line dismantled between that point and Gaspé. We (the mayors) only learned about the investment plan 24 hours before the announcement, after a year-and-a-half of work," pointed out Mr. Gallant.

On the shortage of manpower, Mr. Gallant stressed "there would not be a shortage of workers in the health sector if we could bring back all the well-trained anglophones working in that field."

Québec solidaire candidate Catherine Cyr-Wright remarked that in health care, the government approach compares to the automobile industry, "people are processed like auto parts on an assembly line but they are human beings."

After insisting on the im-

portance of increasing the minimum wage to \$15 per hour,

Ms. Cyr-Wright had her best moment when she challenged the other candidates to give their opinion on the fact that Gaspésians pay taxes that go to private schools without being able to attend one. Québec solidaire wants to cut public funding to private schools. "Who wants to comment on that?" she asked.

Only Sylvain Roy replied. "That is a good question. What is the percentage of support that should be given to private schools? Should we abandon that support completely?" He didn't go further.

A sixth candidate in Bonaventure, Daniel Bouchard, 48, an electrician living in Nouvelle and representing Citoyens au pouvoir (the power to citizens), was not invited to participate in the CIEU-FM debate but he was given a few minutes to present the party's platform and he was allowed to answer the ques-

tions of the students. Mr. Bouchard wants the citizens to have better access to the Quebec budget details. "Currently, people are servicing the government and it should be the opposite. Our movement would also fight fiscal havens," he summed up.

Green Party candidate Heather Imhoff was invited to participate in the debate but her teaching duties prevented her from attending it. She nevertheless replied to the SPEC invitation to comment on her campaign.

"I have felt an incredible amount of love over the past few months through social media regarding my decision to run in the upcoming election. I would like to take the time to thank each and every one (...) who supported and encouraged me along the way, from the bottom of my heart," she said.

According to the last census profile of 2016 on Statistics Canada, the English population represents 14.6% of the population in the MRC of Bonaventure. Most of you reading this contribute to that percentage of the population. Although this is a rather significant number considering our area during the elections, anglophones are often taken for granted. I strongly believe it is crucial that we, as politicians, work for that anglophone vote. It is also important that everyone vote for their values and therefore, the political party platform they believe best represents them. This is democracy. It is the plurality of voices, the reflection of the diversity of our society. Otherwise, what good is having a democracy if we can only be heard through the same voice?" added Ms. Imhoff.