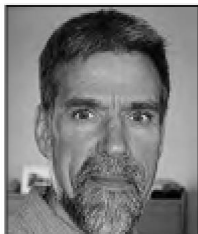


Editorial page



Commentary Gilles Gagné

Too many forgotten stakes; no party deserves a majority

As the electoral campaign is nearing the end there comes a time when voters must proceed summarizing the situation and deciding how they are going to vote. In the Gaspé Peninsula, it looks as if a lot of important stakes were forgotten by party leaders.

François Legault, the Coalition avenir Québec leader who seemed to have an edge a week from voting day, hadn't come to the Gaspé Peninsula, the North Shore and Lower Saint Lawrence since the beginning of August 2017. That doesn't sound very serious for someone who wants to be considered a statesman.

Liberal Party's Philippe Couillard fared better with a short stint in Gaspé mid-campaign. The Parti Québécois leader, Jean-François Lisée, made a two day visit at the beginning of September, but his commitment to improving access to wildlife was short-lived, media-wise, because despite the popularity of hunting and sports fishing in the area, people expect more overall substance from a party. Mr. Lisée often seems pretentious but he also possesses a tremendous knowledge of Quebec and he could have fared better. His position on how to improve aerial services in regions was quite evasive.

One of Québec solidaire's two spokespersons, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, scored some points with the younger generation by ruling out oil and gas exploration and exploitation but he erred on the matter of train services when he said that his party would put emphasis on buses for passengers. He either ig-

nored advice from regional supporters of his party, or failed to consult them.

With all the hills and curves characterizing the region's roads, and considering the distance between the Gaspé Peninsula and the main destinations of our people and origins of our visitors, failing to recognize that the return of VIA Rail as a priority was not Mr. Nadeau-Dubois' most inspired moment. Our people, young, middle-aged or old, need their train service back.

Considering all those factors, chances are that Gaspésians, like most people based in Quebec's other rural areas, will once again revert to regional considerations and opt for the candidate showing the best capacity to defend their interests.

In Quebec right now, this consideration could mean a minority government. Given the likely narrow margin between Coalition avenir Québec and the Liberal Party, citizens of the Gaspé Peninsula, the North Shore, Lower Saint-Lawrence, Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Mauricie and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean could well opt for parties that displayed more interest in their regional stakes.

It could provide the so-called rural regions with the balance of power, considering the CAQ's lack of inspiration for those stakes, and the Liberal Party's concentration of budgetary cuts in those regions since 2014.

During the TVA network's September 20 debate, François Legault just about killed the chances of any of Eastern Quebec's nine CAQ candidates by criticizing wind energy once again. He falsely affirmed that Gaspesian based wind energy supply contracts have cost Quebecers \$2.5 billion.

In reality, that energy comes from many locations throughout Quebec and the figure is grossly exagger-

ated. It is contained in the Auditor General's report and it neglects one huge cost component, the fact that any source of energy, renewable or not, would have led to a sizeable increase in taxpayers' Hydro-Québec bill since 1990. It also waves one huge element: Quebecers still pay some of the lowest electricity costs in the world, if not the lowest.

Premier Philippe Couillard is, on the other hand, trying to make people forget about all the budgetary cuts his government imposed since 2014. His candidates in the Gaspé Peninsula suffer from the traces left by those slashes.

Couillard hates the word "austerity" but what else can we call a cut of 41.6% in the Gaspesian road budget between 2014 and 2017?

Demographics and transport have been considered priorities for a decade in the region. That didn't prevent Couillard's government from axing 95% the Gaspé Peninsula budget earmarked to recruit newcomers between 2014 and 2017, a program that had received rave reviews for its record between 2006 and 2011. A 95% slash in a vital sector is not expenditure control; it is budgetary massacre.

Couillard's government also cut railway infrastructure expenditures between 2014 and 2017 despite constant rises in traffic, before announcing \$100M, 17 months ago, without any realization schedule. Is that sound management?

There is no such thing as an organized voting strategy to get a minority government. Province-wide voting doesn't work that way. However, the best scenario for Quebec's rural world could well be a minority government on October 1, with a possible balance of power detained by Eastern Quebec ridings. It would force the next Quebec government to walk straight regarding regional issues.