

The Gaspé Spec

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Commentary

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François Legault can recognize mistakes

Quebec Premier François Legault can be destabilizing if we compare him to the other Quebec premiers of the last 30 years. He can change his mind, sometimes while admitting it, sometimes while doing it so fast that people around wonder. "Did he really say what I heard?"

Robert Bourassa, Jacques Parizeau, Bernard Landry and Philippe Couillard were all university teachers at one point. They would rarely admit a mistake. A lawyer by trade, Lucien Bouchard is recognized as one stubborn man, although he made a political switch once at the federal level, opting for the Bloc Québécois after getting disappointed following several years at the Progressive Conservative Party, as it was called at the beginning of the 1990s.

François Legault, an accountant, does not have the same flamboyance. He looks and sounds like the average Quebecer. It probably explains his political success in 2018, when he won a strong majority to run Quebec.

However, he has not shown a particular thoroughness in some of his stands since that 2018 election. His immigration policies lacked inspiration and cleverness; they were also highly based on a certain form of prejudice or were in a position to perpetuate prejudice.

His environmental positions also lack in reflection. They could be mistaken for 1990 policies sometimes. There is always a lag between what his government proposes and the reality, or where the society should go.

His stand on wind energy has also lacked sub-

stance repeatedly. Since the creation of the Coalition avenir Quebec party in 2012, François Legault has been a stern opponent to the development of wind energy. He criticized that economic file profusely over six years for political purposes, expressing loudly the alleged high cost of that type of power. He sacrificed votes in the Gaspé Peninsula, where his chances of winning a seat were null, for thousands of suburb votes.

He used those arguments during televised debates, just like he denounced the Port Daniel cement plant.

Using images that seemed to come right from the so-called "garbage radio stations" of Quebec City, where opinions without substance are the norm, Mr. Legault voiced, until a few months ago, that there would be no addition of wind energy to Quebec's portfolio until Hydro-Québec's energy surpluses are dealt with and until he receives proof that windmills are competitive, cost-wise, compared to power dams.

Without raising the white flag, most wind energy stakeholders reverted to a low-profile approach over the last two years, preferring to rely on ventures geared towards exports of components and discussions with Hydro-Québec rather than with Premier Legault.

During his three mid-July stops in the Lower Saint Lawrence, Gaspé Peninsula-Magdalen Islands and North Shore regions, Mr. Legault surprised many stakeholders by finally stating that wind energy offers the most competitive cost of all forms of energy, at 6 cents per kilowatt now. We could have told him the same four years ago but he was not ready to listen then.

He added having recently talked to the new president and chief executive officer of Hydro-Québec, Sophie Brochu, and they agreed on opting for wind farms when the public utility will need new energy supplies, after selling the current electricity surpluses!

There was a lot of "did he just say that?" during the three-day tour. Nobody asked him what had happened since the beginning of the year. Everybody is just hoping that he and his government will deliver.

The same phenomenon seems to mark François

Legault's position about the railway. In April 2019, when asked to say how many years would be needed to restore complete rail services to Gaspé, he was proud to say that it would be done by 2026. That year did not appear on any press releases. The Transports Québec civil servants, who had probably answered "2026" when they were asked backstage by the premier, were scratching their heads and seemed completely overwhelmed by Mr. Legault's admission. It was obviously not supposed to be released publicly.

In the audience, the premier's joy was far from shared. It was a disaster for some of the regional leaders who were hoping for a 2022 service resumption, considering that it was feasible under another model than the one adopted by the previous government.

Instead of being angry in front of the Gaspesian reaction, Mr. Legault tried to show comprehension. In August, he cut a year from the schedule to bring it down to 2025.

He admits now that it must go faster. Will he be able to make things move faster in the current model adopted by the *Bureau Québécois des infrastructures*, which seems inflexible? It remains to be seen.

Wind energy and the railway file prove one thing: putting pressure on François Legault when the file is relevant and worth fighting for looks like a pretty good strategy so far.

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