

Railway issues dominate debate in Gaspé

NELSON SERGERIE

GASPÉ – As the only media debate held in the Gaspé riding ahead of the October 5 election, the issue of railway rehabilitation sparked the most heated exchanges among the four candidates participating in the event organized by CHNC and Télé-Gaspé.

The incumbent Member of the National Assembly (MNA) was targeted by his opponents, while Stéphane Sainte-Croix had to defend his record during part of the open discussion and during the segment where candidates asked each other questions.

Parti Québécois (PQ) candidate Méganne Perry Mélançon launched the first attack on Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) candidate Stéphane Sainte-Croix.

“We’ve experienced unacceptable delays in bringing the train back to Gaspé. As early as 2018, it was announced that a complete overhaul would be undertaken. We were still working on it in 2022. Unlike the CAQ, we won’t carry out the overhaul solely because a company has a project that requires it. We need to focus on the population’s mobility,” suggests the PQ candidate, who wants to carry out this project responsibly, while denouncing the removal of the project from the Quebec Infrastructure Plan (PQI) in March 2025. Liberal candidate Michel Marin made the same remark.

“Since then, we haven’t heard a thing,” she says, prompting a strong reaction from the incumbent MNA.

“I don’t just advocate. We’re taking action,” he said, pointing to the \$54 million in investments between Matapédia and Caplan and nearly \$300 million all the way to Port-Daniel-Gascons.

“There’s still the last stretch. We’re hard at work. We’ve allocated \$130 million in recent months to move forward with major infrastructure projects that were abandoned by the federal government and also by the PQ during its brief time in office. Construction worth \$10 million had been halted for a tourist train project that was already in operation,” replies Mr. Sainte-Croix.

In reality, then premier Pauline Marois, whose term started in September 2012 and ended in April 2014, earmarked \$10 million for bridge repairs. The work was carried out and interrupted when the Liberal Party government of Philippe Couillard was elected



Photo: Nelson Sergerie

The candidates from left: Emmanuelle Babin, Michel Marin, Méganne Perry Mélançon and Stéphane Sainte-Croix.

in April 2014. Three years later, on May 5, 2017, Mr. Couillard announced \$100 million for the rehabilitation of the line to Gaspé but work only started in the summer of 2018.

“I actually got the impression that this train is moving backward—or isn’t a high-speed train at all,” said Quebec Solidaire candidate Emmanuelle Babin, who pointed out that this infrastructure has been neglected.

Michel Marin emphasized the importance of rehabilitating it, even adding that Quebec must develop a comprehensive rail system for its growth, noting that the project had regressed under the CAQ.

He even mentioned an old project from the 1950s in Haute-Gaspésie.

“If we’re talking about expanding rail service in the Gaspé Peninsula, my goal is to extend the rail line from Matane to the Haute-Gaspésie region. Going all the way around might be complicated,” the Liberal suggested.

Wind power

On several occasions in recent years, critics have spoken out against the use of wind turbine components sourced from outside Quebec to equip wind farms in the province.

“Yes, we need to have criteria, but we should develop a mechanism to compare prices with those on available markets to see if there’s any exaggeration,” says Michel Marin.

“We’re still focused on the lowest bidder. I always have this question because there’s an environmental cost to sourcing components from ever-greater distances. We need to reevaluate local procurement models. Why can’t the CAQ ensure a certain level of Quebec content?” asks Méganne Perry Mélançon, noting that the global market is changing.

“Energy is governed by a

free trade agreement. In an ideal world, we’d all like our wind farms to use components made in Quebec. With geopolitical changes and the trade war, we have decisions to make to stay within the bounds of our agreements. We hope our companies will be able to bid on our upcoming contracts,” says Stéphane Sainte-Croix.

Health and social services

The labour shortage remains a major challenge for providing health care in the Gaspé Peninsula.

Stéphane Sainte-Croix points out that measures implemented by the CAQ have helped reduce the number of patients without a primary care physician, for example, and that additional funding for home care will help.

Several self-employed workers have joined Santé Québec Gaspésie.

“Emergency department wait times at our facilities are among the best in Quebec. I think that’s a concrete indicator of improvement,” says the CAQ candidate.

“We’ve neglected to take care of these people. With Québec solidaire, we want to offer attractive working conditions that make it easier to balance work and family life,” says Ms. Babin.

“There’s a lot of rhetoric in what Mr. Sainte-Croix is saying. I know people who still haven’t seen a doctor. We’re constantly understaffed, and we’re lucky to have immigrant workers stepping in to help,” notes Mr. Marin.

The Parti Québécois candidate says better results cannot be expected through putting more money in the health system’s management.

“We will no longer invest in the Santé Québec structure. These funds will be allocated directly to patient care, prevention, mental health—particu-

larly among young people—and promoting physical activity among the population,” says Ms. Perry Mélançon.

Murdochville

As Osisko increasingly raises the possibility of relocating the municipality of Murdochville in order to fully implement a potential restart of Mines Gaspé, the candidates are emphasizing social acceptability without taking a direct stance on the relocation.

“We mustn’t do this without taking the people of Murdochville into account. We need to consult with them. It

must be done responsibly and with respect for the people and the surrounding communities,” suggests Emmanuelle Babin, a Murdochville native.

“It’s an evolving situation. A consultation is underway. There are various scenarios on the table. This needs to be discussed with the citizens. I support the development project. We need to do this collaboratively. I’m looking to the future. I have big ambitions for the Gaspé Peninsula. As for the environment, I’ll tell you this: it takes resources if we want to take care of the environment,” says Michel Marin.

“It must be done with the citizens’ consent, in partnership with the local community. Social acceptability must be maintained to ensure structured and thoughtful development,” argues the CAQ candidate.

“Support will be essential for this project. We must be completely transparent about it. Yes, there are a few possible scenarios, but this is crucial for the development of the Gaspé Peninsula. We can’t just make an entire community disappear without finding out what people want in terms of relocation,” says Méganne Perry Mélançon. *(with notes from Gilles Gagné)*