

INSIDE POLITICS

Duceppe has been largely off his game

From the Quebec nation resolution to the last budget, Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe has routinely been outmanoeuvred by Harper.

By CHANTAL HÉBERT



As anyone who has had dealings with Gilles Duceppe can testify, the Bloc Québécois leader is a man of his word. When he says he will oppose the upcoming Speech from the Throne unless Prime Minister Stephen Harper meets five rather improbable conditions, he can be expected to do so.

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In public and in private, Duceppe has made it clear that despite increasing odds that the Bloc would lose seats in an election held this year, he is psychologically ready to go into a campaign.

Those mental preparations may well have been facilitated by the prospect that a fall campaign would bring the veteran Bloc leader to closure. For months, the word inside and outside the Bloc has been that the next campaign will likely be Duceppe's last. But for losing his nerve last May, he would have already left the federal arena. For a bit more than 24 hours back then, Duceppe had his hat in the Parti Québécois leadership ring.

The episode has taken a toll on his image. As of the moment he publicly reversed himself, Duceppe became a political figure whose future was behind him. There is no telling what part that played

in the Bloc's lacklustre performance in recent federal byelections, but it certainly did not help.

In a front-page story last week, *La Presse* put the Bloc leader on the spot. Quoting anonymous sources in his entourage, the Montreal newspaper put the widespread notion that he was preparing a swift post-election exit from the federal scene on the public record.

In a fiery rebuttal, Duceppe stressed that he was totally focused on a possible fall campaign. But

while he maintained that he would lead the party in the election, that assurance was framed within the tight context of a vote later this year. The statement ultimately raised more questions than it answered.

The Bloc has been losing ground for months, a decline that was likely delayed by

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the advent of the sponsorship scandal in 2004. Sovereignist strategists had hoped that the Afghan deployment would similarly keep the party afloat. So far, that has not been the case.

Since the last election, Duceppe has been largely off his game. From the Quebec nation resolution to the last budget, he has routinely been outmanoeuvred by Harper.

After 17 years, the Bloc leader has outlived most of the MPs who originally joined party founder Lucien Bouchard on Parliament Hill.

While there is never a shortage of candidates to run for a party that leads the pack in Quebec, the recent byelections have shown that star recruits are becoming the exception.

Just last weekend, comedian Guy Richer—a candidate whose high profile was expected to raise Bloc fortunes in Québec City—resigned the nomination in the riding of Louis-Hébert.

With every passing month, the notion that Duceppe is coasting to retirement feeds the perception that the Bloc is a spent force.

If he had wanted to send the signal that one should not bank on his being around for a campaign beyond the fall, it is hard to think of a better way to do it than the ambiguous statement his office put out in response.

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OPINION

Federal, provincial governments' new measures to improve Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program fall short

By LEIGH LAMPERT

TORONTO—The governments of Canada and British Columbia recently announced new measures intended to improve Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program. In short, these new measures are supposed to make it faster for employers in British Columbia and Alberta to hire foreign workers when there are no Canadian citizens or permanent residents available to fill the positions.

By way of background, there is a severe shortage of workers in many fields throughout Canada. Much has been written about the acute situation in Alberta, for example. In fact, Alberta's labour shortage is so great that fast food restaurants are often compelled to pay very high wages or to close during peak periods for lack of workers.

In British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, the federal government has gone so far as to formally recognize these shortages with lists of "Regional Occupations Under Pressure." One stated purpose of these lists is to "reduce the amount of time for an employer to hire a foreign worker."

The lists vary depending on the region

and the shortages, and include highly skilled workers—engineers, physicists, architects, and physicians—lower-skilled workers—chefs/cooks, janitors and truck drivers—and other occupations such as fumigators, fur cutters, glaziers, and embalmers.

The government established these lists to expedite the processing of the paperwork required to hire foreign workers. Such would increase productivity and efficiency and enable Canadian businesses to grow and thrive, while at the same time, protecting Canadian citizens and permanent residents from having to compete with foreign workers for jobs.

In practice, however, these lists do not work and the system is flawed.

This is illustrated by a recent case in which a client, a large multinational corporation with worldwide operations, wanted to hire an engineer to work in British Columbia. The potential employee was in Canada as a visitor and required a work permit in order to engage in employment here. Before applying for a work permit, she was required to apply for a "Labour Market Opinion" ("LMO") from Service Canada. At the time of application, pro-

cessing time for LMOs in British Columbia was running at five to seven weeks.

Fifteen weeks after filing the application with Service Canada's regional office in Vancouver, this case is still pending. This, despite the fact that the applicant is a qualified engineer—a *bona fide* "Occupation Under Pressure" in British Columbia—she is presently in Canada and wants to work, and the hiring company is very anxious to have its new employee begin immediately.

Several weeks ago, rumours of a pending government announcement to address the backlogs in British Columbia and Alberta were encouraging. HRSDC's headline on the announcement was equally encouraging: "Temporary Foreign Worker Program Improved for Employers in B.C. and Alberta."

However, the changes that were announced recently will only allow eligible employers needing workers in 12 specific occupations to receive expedited LMOs. These 12 occupations are carpenters; crane operators; hotel and hospitality room attendants; hotel front desk clerks; food and beverage servers; food counter attendants; tour and travel guides; registered nurses; dental technicians; pharmacists; snowboard and ski instructors; and retail salespersons and sales clerks.

While these occupations are all important and relevant—some more than others, perhaps—this does very little to help the engineer who remains unemployed in Vancouver. More than 15 weeks after having submitted her application, she continues to wait for an answer from Service Canada, and her prospective employer continues to wait patiently for an employee that it desperately needs to fill a labour shortage.

Allowing this situation to occur—or, alternatively, not moving more quickly

to fix it—is short-sighted on the government's part. All levels of government, regardless of political stripe, should take very seriously the importance of encouraging investment in Canada.

Investment helps the country grow and helps the economy prosper. To encourage investment, we need to facilitate the entry of foreign workers, especially those seeking to work in areas where there is a recognized shortage.

Forcing potential investors—many of whom would create more employment opportunities for Canadians—to wait many months before employing someone who is qualified, highly-skilled, willing and able to begin work reflects very poorly on Canada. It also sends the wrong message. Rather than saying "we are open for business," we are saying "we are open for business, but only if you are willing to first endure lengthy delays and processing times before establishing operations here."

While last week's announcement is a very small first step—and may be very beneficial to those seeking to employ carpenters, food counter attendants, and snowboard instructors, the various levels of government must do a lot more in a very short period of time if they expect to be able to attract more investment to Canada and to be taken seriously by potential investors on the world stage.

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