

Charest dream may be fading [CA-QC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

One year after fulfilling his dream of taking power, Jean Charest rules under a heavy cloud of doubt: Can Quebec's Liberal premier turn around his deeply unpopular government?

The widespread dissatisfaction with the Charest government will be on display today across Quebec, as thousands of government workers, union members, students and Parti Québécois loyalists take to the streets in protest.

Just a year into power, after defeating the Parti Québécois in a landslide and quickly promising to "reengineer" Quebec, all polls show the Charest government is getting a thumbs down from two of every three Quebecers.

If an election were held today, polls show, it would be the Parti Québécois winning by a landslide. Charest, who's promised to cut taxes and limit the power of unions, stands a very real chance of becoming the first Quebec premier in four decades not to win a second term.

Buoyed by his victory last year, Charest launched an agenda of deep change for Quebec, which, he said repeatedly, is the most highly taxed province in Canada. One of the most cherished programs here has been the PQ's universal day care, where families can get \$5-a-day care for their children.

But Charest, who looks increasingly weary but still vows to balance the provincial budget, cut taxes and stimulate growth by giving Quebec a leaner government, has taken what many here view as a major leap to the right. He hiked the day-care rate to \$7 a day, a small but symbolic action that many believe presaged his intentions. More significantly, he pushed through a series of laws that would reduce union power, mostly by giving companies increased chances to contract out union jobs.

Charest, a former federal Tory party leader before he was enticed to take over the Quebec Liberals, has ended up angering many middle-class voters. He told Quebecers during last year's election he would balance the provincial budget and give a \$1 billion tax break, but reneged.

Instead, to balance a budget they say was billions in the red under the PQ, the Liberals chose last month to direct most of their tax relief to lower-income families with children a major constituency of the PQ.

John Parisella, a former strategist with the Robert Bourassa Liberal government, still believes the Charest government has made some progress in its first year. It has shown it is willing to push through tough policies, he said, and not back down when there's a backlash.

Quebec opinion, however, may be less forgiving.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Quebec^[2]

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