

Charest takes cue from Mulroney [CA-QC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Premier Jean Charest of Quebec once said he considered former prime minister Brian Mulroney as a political father figure. Almost 100 days into his first mandate, it is obvious the apple has not fallen very far from the tree.

Like Mulroney, Charest is exhibiting a strong penchant for pushing through an activist agenda, even at the cost of ruffling the feathers of most of his own natural allies.

Like the former prime minister, he is apparently not averse to running an in-your-face, polarizing kind of government.

Within months of assuming power, the Tory prime minister had senior citizens up in arms on Parliament Hill over pension reform. A fortnight ago, thousands of Quebec parents- many of whom voted Liberal on April 14- took to the streets of Montreal to protest Charest's plan to tinker with the province's universal \$5-a-day child-care system.

Mulroney backed off; Charest is giving himself until the fall to ponder where the government day-care program should go from here. But he insists Quebecers cannot afford to sustain the status quo. (Nor can they afford much of anything else it seems. Even as Charest continues to promise he will soon start cutting Quebec taxes, he has been accusing the PQ of fudging the books to hide a multi-billion dollar deficit.)

Last week, the usually soft-spoken mayor of Montreal, Gerald Tremblay, himself a former Quebec Liberal minister, used words like irresponsible and reckless to describe Charest's municipal policies. The Montreal Chamber of Commerce, hardly a hotbed of nationalist left wingers, has come out swinging against the first Liberal budget.

In his first mandate, Mulroney took many Canadians by surprise by setting out to fundamentally reshape Canada's relationship with the United States. He had not breathed a word of his free-trade agreement plans on the campaign trail.

Last month, many Quebecers were taken aback when Charest set out his plans to re-engineer Quebec along neo-liberal lines. A main theme of his failed first campaign as Quebec leader in 1998, Charest's determination to replace the social democrat Quebec government model with a smaller, more conservative state engine was hardly front-and-centre in his successful 2003 bid.

So far, Charest's response has been that those who are surprised should have read the fine print of his platform. As any customer-relations agent knows, that is not the kind of reply that is conducive to building strong clientele loyalty.

Almost from day one, Mulroney tended to use the often visceral reactions his policies elicited as a measure of the dynamism of his government rather than as a sign he might just have misread Canadians. Some of that rationale was on display in Toronto last month when he spoke to delegates at the federal Tory leadership convention. The notion that one could not make an omelette without breaking eggs might as well have been his mantra.

In less than three months, Charest has antagonized more constituencies, including some of his own, than any other Quebec premier over the same short period.

His inaugural speech and the ensuing provincial budget triggered more uneasy questions than they provided reassuring answers. It is hard to think of a Quebec government policy that has taken as many hits from so many usually contrary quarters as Charest's latest bill to allow for the undoing of the PQ's municipal mergers. All French-language commentators, regardless of their political persuasion, have roundly denounced it.

On this particular front, as on many others, mixed, sometimes contradictory, messages have been the order of the day. Indeed, not since the immediate post-referendum period has Quebec endured so much uncertainty over the shape of things to come.

In less than three months, the Charest government has managed to shed doubt on the fate of Quebec's major cities, the shape of the province's most popular social program and the future of most of the government's long-term commitments.

By the end of Mulroney's tenure, the world, as seen through the eyes of the federal Tories, was very much an us-vs.-them affair, with no one seeming to notice the ranks of the latter were growing much faster than those of the former. Some of that same thinking is already in

evidence in Premier Charest's Quebec city bunker, where critics are often summarily dismissed as hostile to the Liberals or ostracized for speaking out.

In this fashion, Mulroney just about ran a party, whose history went back to Confederation, into the ground in the course of two mandates.

At the current rate, Charest is set to outdo his federal mentor on at least one score. Where Mulroney needed two terms to sink his government, the Liberal premier may end up using just one.

-Reprinted from The Toronto Star.

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