

COMMENT

On the road again

Bouchard's celebrated political instincts desert him away from Quebec

Premier Bouchard is in the throes of a losing streak on the road. His last two trips abroad, to France and then to China and Vietnam, have been political flops.

While in France, Bouchard talked too much about sovereignty and another referendum, neither of which is a priority for anybody back home except the hard-liners in the Parti Québécois.

He was unanimously panned by Quebec editorialists for begging French politicians for promises of a speedy recognition of a sovereign Quebec.

And the best he had to show for his efforts was a rather vague assurance from French President Jacques Chirac that France would "accompany" Quebec.

Bouchard was apparently determined not to make the same mistake in Asia that he had made in France. Instead, he committed some different ones.

He managed to stay off the subjects of sovereignty and a referendum, in spite of his vow in France to use the francophone summit in Hanoi to try to line up diplomatic support for a sovereign Quebec.

On his trade mission to China, at the head of a sort of "Team Quebec" delegation of officials and businesspeople, he stuck to business. The results were



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modest. While Quebec officials claimed \$1.19 billion worth of deals were concluded during the trip, only \$88 million worth was in firm contracts, while the rest was in letters of intent. But Bouchard said contacts made during the trip would pay off in the future.

Politically, Bouchard was on his best behaviour in China. This was partly because most Quebecers have little patience with overseas "flag wars" between Quebec City and Ottawa and partly because he was forced to rely on the kindness of the federal government to facilitate his travels in China. It may also have had something to do with a report that the Chinese had warned him beforehand that they would tolerate no talk of Quebec independence on his part during the trip.

Still, separatist hard-liners must have been dismayed to see the extent to

which their leader used the Canadian flag as a calling card during his trip. And what's left of the left wing of the Parti Québécois couldn't have been proud of Bouchard's silence on human rights, the price of doing business in Tienanmen Square.

Once he was safely out of China, Bouchard tried to make up for that silence with a grandstand play at the francophone summit in Hanoi by showing a new interest in human rights.

On the eve of the meeting, he suddenly announced his intention to get the Francophonie to adopt sanctions for member countries that violate human rights, as the British Commonwealth has done.

Bouchard's proposal seemed half-baked, since it apparently would have punished only countries that "set back" democracy or human rights on their territories. This implies that countries with worse human-rights situations, as long as they were stable, would have escaped sanctions.

So conceivably, Quebec itself might have been liable to penalties if it invoked the "notwithstanding" clause to restore its referendum campaign spending rules. But an established dictatorship with a long-standing practice of holding political prisoners would not.

Also, Bouchard, who as Canadian ambassador to France was instrumental in laying the diplomatic groundwork for the first francophone summit in Paris in 1986, apparently forgot that it takes lengthy advance lobbying to get the summit to do anything, and that the summit does not like surprises.

The most surprised delegates of all at Bouchard's announcement were the ones representing the federal government, since the summit rules negotiated by former ambassador Bouchard himself allow only Ottawa to speak on such political matters.

So Bouchard was forced to water down his original proposal by removing the word "sanction," which he had used in a pre-summit press release. In any event, the summit did not adopt the idea. And at the summit's closing press conference, after Prime Minister Chrétien did Bouchard a favour by raising sanctions, Chirac immediately shot it down.

After Bouchard's trip to China, he was hardly a credible human-rights advocate anyway. And in Hanoi, the impression he created was of amateurish improvisation.

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