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PQ group wants to drop plebiscite

Young party members suggest declaration of sovereignty if party forms government

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Quebec PQ - A group of young Parti Québécois members is proposing that the party seek a mandate for any future PQ government to declare sovereignty without holding a plebiscite.

The bold proposal to campaign on that platform in a "referendum election" is gaining momentum among rank-and-file members, said Sacha-Alexandre Gauthier, who initiated the idea with the support of influential party members whom he did not name.

"In the last election, the PQ received the support of 33 per cent of voters [the lowest since 1973], while support for sovereignty remained in the range of 42 to 45 per cent," Mr. Gauthier said yesterday.

"Many sovereigntists have concluded that the method of achieving sovereignty through a referendum has failed. And that is why a lot of sovereigntists no longer believe the PQ will hold another referendum and refused to go out and vote for the party."

In an article on the pro-sovereignty Web site Vigile.net, [Mr. Gauthier](#), 27, who is vice-president of a cluster of Montréal-Centre regional PQ riding associations, warned that unless a radical new approach is adopted, the party faces extinction.

"If the party does not react to the popular perception [that plebiscites are doomed to failure] . . . we could witness the collapse of the PQ despite a high level of support for the option," he wrote in the article, signed by seven other PQ youth members.

"In other words, it seems that we are faced with the failure of the means [to achieve sovereignty], which is the same thing as saying that the step-by-step approach has failed."

The step-by-step strategy known as l'étapisme was introduced in 1974 by then PQ strategist Claude Morin, who in 1992 admitted being a paid informant for the RCMP.

He locked horns at the time with Jacques Parizeau, later a PQ premier, who was a strong defender of the British parliamentary system, which Mr. Parizeau said would allow a PQ majority government to proceed with political independence without holding a referendum.

Mr. Parizeau and others believed a plebiscite would be an obstacle to achieving sovereignty and one that played into the federal government's hands. At the time they argued that eventually a PQ majority government would be elected and that introducing the notion of a referendum would delay sovereignty indefinitely.

Today, those arguing for a referendum election conclude that opponents of the strategy of 30 years ago have been proven right. But the referendum has become such a fixture of PQ strategy that few have dared to challenge it.

The end of l'étapisme, according to Mr. Gauthier, also means the end of the PQ's long-standing quest to achieve an "association" or "partnership" or a so-called "European type of confederation" with the rest of Canada.

The group of young party members insists that a simple majority in the National Assembly could declare sovereignty and obtain international recognition, which would then force the rest of Canada to negotiate the legal terms of separation.

They use the former Czechoslovakia, which split into two separate republics, as an example of how Quebec and Canada could negotiate a peaceful settlement.

"Quebec entered the Canadian federation with a slim majority of votes in the legislative assembly of Lower Canada, which was part of the colonial parliament of United Canada. It would then be clearly legitimate to use this means to break away" from Canada, the group argues.

Mr. Gauthier said yesterday he would introduce the idea at a PQ meeting on Saturday where members will call for a complete review of the party program and of the strategy for achieving sovereignty.

The defenders of a referendum election acknowledge they have an uphill fight ahead of them. PQ leader Bernard Landry has promoted strong political ties between a sovereign Quebec and Canada, refusing to "take Canada out of Quebec" as he once noted.