

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO RUN AGAINST MAROIS? A PARTY RECRUITER ASKED

IN THE ADQ CORNER ... A ROOKIE

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

ST. FERRÉOL LES NEIGES – LET’S GET ONE THING STRAIGHT.

As an anglophone from Ontario and a Toronto Maple Leafs fan, I knew I didn’t have a chance of unseating sitting MNA and Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois here in the 99.9-per-cent francophone riding of Charlevoix in Monday’s provincial general election.

But I never said that publicly before now. And I’m glad I didn’t because it would have spoiled one of the most fun and exhilarating personal experiences of my life.

The adventure began just six weeks ago, when I bought a membership card online to the Action démocratique du Québec.

A freelance journalist and writer who has lived in Quebec for the past 25 years – always in this same rural village that is best known for the Mont Ste. Anne ski centre – I’d never participated actively in party politics before. And I’d never even voted for the ADQ in past elections, choosing instead Liberal candidates in always futile efforts to stop the PQ from getting elected in my riding.

Since the election of a minority Liberal government in the spring of 2007, however, two things changed for me. First, I became frustrated and angry with the Liberal government for its foot-dragging and/or flip-flopping on almost every major issue it faced. Worse, it completely ignored its most devoted electorate – Quebec anglophones. You could actually count the number of anglophones in cabinet on one finger. Talk about being taken for granted!

At the same time, I was pleasantly surprised by the energy and ideas of ADQ and official opposition leader Mario Dumont and his 40 deputies in the National Assembly. As a 49-year-old, self-employed husband and father of two young boys, I was particularly impressed with their focus and realistic approaches to family, education and health care. Like-wise their common sense take on Quebec’s place in confederation: let’s sign the damn constitution and focus our energies on building our province. Hey, count me in!

That’s why in late October, with a possible election in the air and the ADQ hovering perilously low at around 15 per cent in the polls, I decided to climb down off the fence and buy a membership card. I followed that up a few days later with a call to ADQ headquarters in Montreal, offering to help any way I could in my riding.

I soon got a call from the office of Hubert Benoit, the ADQ MNA in the neighbouring riding of Montmorency, inviting me to a meeting. From the get-go, Hubert and I got along famously. A fast-talking 45-year-old live wire who went to St. Patrick’s High School in Quebec City and became wealthy (or so I heard later from a mutual friend) as a financial advisor, he asked me what I thought I could do for the ADQ. I told him I could answer phones in an election office or help the local candidate with media relations, a job I’d done years ago as a public affairs officer in the Canadian military.

Hubert informed me that the ADQ candidate in Charlevoix in the last two elections – including a by-election loss against Marois, who parachuted into my riding in the fall of 2007 – had decided to step aside. Then he asked me, “How would you like to run against Marois?”

I remember laughing out loud and saying, “You guys are in more trouble than I thought.” But Hubert responded that having an anglophone candidate – particularly a journalist who wrote for The Gazette – would be “a great stunt” that would both generate headlines and throw English-challenged Marois off her game.

He wasn’t alone. The idea of my running was the subject of the subsequent meetings I had at the National Assembly with party officials, who were scrambling to build a slate of candidates for the election, which was just days away.

In addition to flattering my oversized ego, they assured me – correctly, it turned out – that the campaign would cost me next to nothing, as there was enough money in the riding’s coffers to cover most major expenses like billboards, flyers and mileage.

By the time Mario Dumont called me to make a final pitch for me to run on the

Friday before the election, I had managed to overcome the final obstacle: my wife’s reluctance. I only got her approval by making my first electoral promise – and one that, despite the best of intentions, I didn’t even come close to keeping – that I would only campaign between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., Mondays through Fridays.

After clearing a background check, for which I paid \$300 out of my own pocket, and making a six-hour, roundtrip dash to Montreal for a 10-minute photo session that produced my official campaign picture, I showed up for the official launch of our campaign on Nov. 5.

Like my 10 fellow ADQ candidates from the Quebec City region, seven of whom were running for re-election, I boarded one of two yellow school buses for the half-hour drive north of the provincial capital to a lodge in a provincial park where former Premier Jean Lesage and his Liberal Équipe du tonnerre had met in the 1960s to map out the future of modern Quebec.

When Dumont finally arrived more than an hour later in his newly-painted bus, an ADQ organizer hastily cut back overhanging pine branches to save the paint job. (Our buses had been hidden in the forest so the journalists accompanying Dumont wouldn’t see them “and think we were cheap,” one organizer told me.)

Dumont used the lodge (which was locked, leaving only the woods for people in need of a washroom) as a backdrop for a campaign-opening speech based on the theme of the ADQ’s election platform – the need to rebuild Quebec’s institutions using the ADQ “autonomist” approach.

In one of the half-dozen truly inspirational speeches I would see and hear him deliver over the next 33 days, Dumont also delivered the first of a series of daily announcements: a plan to privatize part of Hydro-Québec through the public sale of 7.5 per cent of its shares. On the way out, Dumont’s bus came this close to getting stuck in the mud on the narrow dirt lanes around the lodge.

The next day the headlines centred on Dumont’s “controversial” Hydro proposal, and most political commentators trashed the idea. Some journalists took a devilish delight in linking that reaction – and the ADQ being mired so low in the polls – with the trouble Dumont’s bus had in the muck.

It was a conspicuous start to the campaign, and a harbinger of things to come.

Although I sometimes write about politics and politicians and have helped to cover elections and referendums in Quebec, I quickly realized that I knew nothing about playing party politics or the art of campaigning.

Unsure about where to start or what to do, I spent the first few days in my home office writing stories, responding to emails and trying to absorb the brick-like ADQ program with help over the phone from my new man Friday – Cédric Lavoie, an ADQ research assistant in his early 20s who’d been named regional coordinator for the Quebec City candidates.

It was my new-found friend and frère d’arme Hubert Benoit, however, who finally got me out of the house and on the campaign trail. He picked me up at home on a Thursday night in his new luxury car that party organizers asked him to avoid bringing to official events (“bad optics,” he was told) and brought me to an annual gala for the local business community that was held a mile from my house at the foot of Mont Ste. Anne, but which I’d never even heard about. “Watch and do like me,” he told me as we entered a banquet room where more than 100 local politicians, business development types and small business owners, most of whom I knew



FRANCIS VACHON THE GAZETTE

Freelance writer Mark Cardwell (left), who ran for the Action démocratique du Québec in Pauline Marois’s riding of Charlevoix, poses with ADQ MNA for La Peltrie, Éric Caire, on election night at a Boston Pizza restaurant in Quebec City.

socially, were standing around in small groups, enjoying cocktails before a five-course, \$100-a-plate supper.

Elected to office only 18 months ago in the ADQ’s historic electoral surge, Hubert weaved through the crowd like a seasoned pro, shaking hands, bussing women and exchanging pleasantries at lightning speed. I tried to keep up but, being both a chatterbox by nature and not wanting to be rude, I constantly got bogged down in long conversations. Whenever I made eye contact with Hubert from across the room, he would slowly shake his head like a disapproving big brother and mouth the words, “Plus vite, plus vite,” but to no avail.

When I finally made it home around 10 o’clock – my campaign promise to my wife already blown out of the water – I realized that I was going to have to acquire a whole new set of skills.

My first panic attack of the campaign came when I realized just how out-gunned I was by my opponents here in Charlevoix.

Within hours of the writ being dropped, both Marois and the Liberal candidate, Jean-Luc Simard, who is mayor of La Malbaie, where about half of the 33,000 eligible voters here live, had their election posters up on hydro poles across our massive riding, which covers some 6,000 square kilometres of some of the most scenic countryside in

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Canada. So much for Premier Jean Charest’s not wanting to call a general election this fall.

Days later, the two candidates also opened riding offices in all three key urban areas of our riding: La Malbaie, Baie St. Paul, and Ste. Anne de Beauport, the town my wife is from and home to the basilica where we were married and our kids baptized. Those offices were staffed by a mix of volunteers and paid staff whose jobs were to both identify and organize activities for the candidates (everything from visiting seniors’ residences and dropping in on local bingo night to holding partisan rallies and party fundraisers) and, more importantly, to call hundreds of voters every day in an effort to identify, on a street-by-street, house-by-house basis, who their voters were so they could get them to the polls on voting day.

Because the former ADQ candidate, Conrad Harvey, who was also party president, resigned at the last minute – as did all of the local riding association officials, most of whom were his family members and friends – there was only me and two devoted part-time volunteers, Denys Gauthier and Philippe Thivierge.

Conrad did, however, leave enough money in the party coffers to pay for several hundred campaign posters, half with huge pictures of Mario and the others with ridiculously small pictures of me, as was the case for all the ADQ candidate posters across Quebec. The

small pictures were a source of much behind-the-scenes grumbling.

Delivered two weeks into the campaign – the time it took me to get the 100-plus signatures of registered voters in the riding that all candidates need to have to finalize their candidature (a process that was news to me and required a substantial effort over many days) – the posters were put up over two days by Denys, who was helped by an employee in his landscaping business and by one of my brothers-in-law.

I decided, however, to forget renting an electoral office, which seemed like a silly expense since there’d be nobody to man it. I also took a pass on renting a cell phone, which I continue to stubbornly resist owning despite being a journalist. I also stopped looking for a campaign manager and decided to do it on my own.

My second panic attack came from an unexpected source. Having conducted literally thousands of interviews over the past 25 years, I was amazed to find myself sweating profusely and babbling like an idiot when asked even the most basic questions by journalists from the half-dozen community media outlets in my riding.

It took several interviews and a local TV debate between the candidates of four of the five parties on the ballot here in Charlevoix – it was held the

morning after the leaders’ debate and Marois, who was represented by an empty chair, was an expected no-show – for me to loosen up and actually begin to enjoy being interviewed. By the end of the campaign, in fact, I’d become something of a media monster, calling up local journalists to try and get them to interview me, and berating the ones who didn’t.

The same thing occurred with shaking hands of perfect strangers. I’ve never liked it when people shove their hands into my space, and I didn’t want to do it to others. But Hubert and others, including my wife, kept pushing me.

The first time I tried it was in the Tim Hortons in Baie St. Paul on the second of the half-dozen runs I did through the riding during the course of the campaign. There were four old men sitting around a table chatting and, after getting my coffee, I sidled up to them and, in a low voice, said a phrase I said several thousand times over the past month, “Bonjour, je suis Mark Cardwell, le candidat de Mario Dumont dans Charlevoix.”

The first man to lift his hand knocked over his full of cup of coffee, sending it flying all over the table and floor. Horrified, I ran to get napkins and offered him my coffee, which he politely refused. His buddies laughed and blamed it on him – “He’s a klutz,” one said – but I quickly backed out of the place, apologizing profusely.

However, thanks to my spending an

inordinate amount of time in my area of the riding, where I know everybody and got a lot of warm welcomes and heartfelt support, I overcame my handshaking timidity to the point where, in the final days of the campaign, I was striding confidently toward people in malls in areas where it was obvious the ADQ had little support.

Like we had on many occasions during the campaign – for press conferences, the leaders’ debate and partisan rallies and breakfasts at which Mario rolled in like a rock star under the hot glare of camera lights – I joined my fellow ADQ candidates from the Quebec City region at a popular sports bar/restaurant on Monday night.

Accompanied by our spouses, family members and/or friends – as well as party organizers and, for sitting MNAs, parliamentary assistants and staff members, whose jobs were also on the line – we watched as the election results started coming up on the big screen over the bar shortly after 8 p.m., when the polls closed.

It wasn’t a fun night. Within 90 minutes, I and most of my comrades had fallen.

As expected, I got toasted early. In the end, Marois won Charlevoix with 10,532 votes. Simard got 6,252 and I got 2,568, a 12.7 per cent share of the vote. Considering the experience, renown and resources of my adversaries, and the fact that voter turnout across Quebec was so abysmally low (only 57 per cent, down from 71 per cent in 2007, when the ADQ got 700,000 votes more than it did on Monday – the low turnout meant many of their votes simply vanished into thin air), I was pretty happy with the result.

I was saddened, however, by both the stinging defeat of the ADQ and the sudden resignation of Mario Dumont.

Worse, of the seven Quebec City-area MNAs who’d been elected just 18 months ago – people I’d gotten to know and care about over the past month – only Éric Caire and newcomer Gérard Deltell, a well-known Quebec journalist who inherited ADQ MNA Gilles Tailon’s riding, managed to hold on to their seats.

The others and their staff were suddenly out of work.

I thought the cruelest blow fell on my buddy Hubert. After leading all evening, he suddenly fell to second place at the very end of the election broadcast, his Liberal opponent declared the winner by only a few hundred votes.

His staff members, who had been cheering just minutes ago when Hubert’s victory seemed certain, suddenly burst into tears.

Hubert was standing right beside me and my wife, Nicole, when it happened. He stood there staring at the screen with a look of disbelief on his face. Then his cell phone rang and he turned away and talked for a few seconds.

When he turned back toward us, his eyes were full of water. I clasped his hand and told him how sorry I was, not just for him, but for the people in his riding, who’d lost such a great representative.

“That was my (young) daughter on the phone,” he said. “She told me she’s happy I lost because I’ll be home more now. So I guess maybe I won after all.”