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RESIGNATION OF FEDERAL MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

SUMMARY

1. BOUCHARD'S RESIGNATION A SETBACK FOR THE MEECH LAKE ACCORD. POTENTIALLY SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE GOVERNMENT.

DETAIL

2. FEDERAL MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT (AND THE MINISTER WITH POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR QUEBEC), LUCIEN BOUCHARD, RESIGNED FROM THE CABINET ON THE EVENING OF 21 MAY AMIDST CONTROVERSY ABOUT HIS POSITION ON RECENT EFFORTS TO SECURE THE PASSAGE OF THE MEECH LAKE ACCORD. HE ANNOUNCED HIS RESIGNATION FROM THE FEDERAL PC CAUCUS ON 22 MAY.
3. HAVING SENT (FROM PARIS) A TELEGRAM OF GREETINGS TO A PARTI QUEBECOIS MEETING HELD IN HIS CONSTITUENCY ON 20 MAY TO COMMEMORATE THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE QUEBEC REFERENDUM ON INDEPENDENCE, BOUCHARD RETURNED TO OTTAWA TO AN ATMOSPHERE WHICH WAS ALREADY HIGHLY CHARGED FOLLOWING THE DECISION BY A FELLOW MEMBER OF THE RULING PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE QUEBEC CAUCUS TO RESIGN FROM THE CAUCUS ON 18 MAY AS A RESULT, HE SAID, OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S REACTION TO THE CHAREST COMMITTEE'S REPORT ON A COMPANION RESOLUTION (MY TELNO 320: NOT TO ALL). BOUCHARD MET THE PRIME MINISTER ON THE EVENING OF 21 MAY, AND SUBSEQUENTLY ANNOUNCED HIS DECISION TO RESIGN FROM THE CABINET. HE HAS SINCE DENOUNCED THE CHAREST RECOMMENDATIONS AS REMOVING THE SUBSTANCE FROM THE MEECH LAKE AGREEMENT.
4. BOUCHARD WAS A MAJOR FIGURE IN THE MULRONEY GOVERNMENT. HIS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE POLITICALLY IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENT PORTFOLIO GAVE HIM A HIGH PUBLIC PROFILE. A LONG-TIME FRIEND OF THE PRIME MINISTER, TO WHOM HE OWED HIS POLITICAL ADVANCEMENT, HE WAS MULRONEY'S TRUSTED LIEUTENANT IN QUEBEC. A SEPARATIST TURNED FEDERALIST, HE IS WELL RESPECTED IN QUEBEC, AND APPEARS TO HAVE CONCLUDED THAT HIS POLITICAL FUTURE LIES THERE. THE EFFECT OF THE RESIGNATION COULD BE SUBSTANTIAL. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF OTHER QUOTE

NATIONALIST UNQUOTE MEMBERS OF THE QUEBEC PC CAUCUS WHO MAY FOLLOW HIS LEAD OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS (ONE DID SO THIS MORNING) SEMICOLON EVEN SOME MEMBERS OF THAT CAUCUS WHO ARE NOT INSTINCTIVELY NATIONALIST MAY FIND THEMSELVES INCREASINGLY UNCOMFORTABLE SITTING AS CONSERVATIVES IN THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENT.

5. THE RESIGNATION IS A SETBACK TO THE MEECH LAKE PROCESS WHICH WAS NOT IN VERY GOOD HEALTH ANYWAY SEMICOLON PREMIER BOURASSA, THOUGH SCEPTICAL, HAD TAKEN NO IRREVOCABLE PUBLIC POSITION TO THE CHAREST COMMITTEE REPORT, AND THERE HAD BEEN INDICATIONS OF WILLINGNESS ON HIS PART TO SHOW AT LEAST SOME FLEXIBILITY. BOUCHARD'S DECISION WILL REMOVE MUCH OF BOURASSA'S ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE SEMICOLON WITHOUT SOME MOVEMENT FROM QUEBEC, IT IS DIFFICULT TO SEE HOW THE MEECH LAKE ACCORD COULD SUCCEED. FAILURE TO FIND A COMPROMISE ON MEECH LAKE WOULD INCREASE THE PRESSURE ON BOURASSA TO MOVE FURTHER AWAY FROM THE FEDERALIST POSITION. CONVERSELY THOUGH PERHAPS UNLIKELY, THE PROSPECT OF THE RE-EMERGENCE OF BOUCHARD ON TO THE QUEBEC PROVINCIAL POLITICAL SCENE (PROBABLY IN PQ COLOURS) MIGHT JUST PROVIDE AN INCENTIVE TO BOURASSA (AND OTHERS) TO TRY TO FIND A WAY OF SALVAGING MEECH LAKE (IN A WAY ACCEPTABLE TO THE PEOPLE OF QUEBEC), THUS CUTTING SOME OF THE GROUND FROM UNDER THE NATIONALISTS' FEET.

6. THE DEPARTURE FROM THE QUEBEC CAUCUS OF BOUCHARD AND OTHERS IS THE FIRST VISIBLE SIGN OF A CRACK IN THE HITHERTO SOLID SUPPORT THAT MULRONEY HAS HAD FROM HIS SUPPORTERS IN PARLIAMENT. IT WILL WEAKEN HIS AUTHORITY AT A TIME WHEN HE IS BELOW 20 PER CENT IN THE OPINION POLLS. HE BUILT HIS POLITICAL POSITION ON HIS ABILITY TO WIN QUEBEC FOR HIS PARTY, AND A SIGNIFICANT HAEMORRHAGE OF SUPPORT FROM WITHIN QUEBEC WOULD INEVITABLY RAISE QUESTIONS, NOT LEAST FROM REPRESENTATIVES OF WESTERN CONSTITUENCIES, WHOSE OWN ELECTORAL PROSPECTS APPEAR UNCERTAIN AT PRESENT.

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