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Ex-student leader to run under Parti Quebecois banner in Montreal-area riding

BY SIDHARTHA BANERJEE, THE CANADIAN PRESS JULY 25, 2012

STORY

PHOTOS (1)

Ex-student leader to run under Parti Quebecois banner in Montreal-area riding

Student leader Leo Bureau-Blouin and Parti Quebecois Leader Pauline Marois smile at a news conference in Laval, Que., Wednesday, July 25, 2012. Bureau-Blouin confirmed that he's running for the Parti Quebecois. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Rogério Barbosa

LAVAL, Que. - With or without the tiny felt red square that has come to symbolize student defiance in the province, activist-turned-politician Leo Bureau-Blouin says his views on tuition hikes haven't changed.

The former student leader made his jump to politics official on Wednesday as he was introduced as a Parti Quebecois candidate one week before an expected election call where tuition will likely be a major theme.

Bureau-Blouin's inaugural news conference as a political hopeful was dominated by questions about what he wasn't wearing: the red square worn during several months by thousands of Quebecers opposed to tuition hikes.

"I think everyone knows my position on tuition fees....I think that with or without a red square, we can make Quebec one of the nations where education is the most affordable on the world," said Bureau-Blouin, flanked by PQ Leader Pauline Marois.

Many Quebecers support Premier Jean Charest's decision to increase tuition, and the absence of the red square can be interpreted as an attempt by Bureau-Blouin and the PQ not to alienate those people come election day.

"The objective is to represent all of the voters in the riding but I think everyone knows my views on tuition fees," said Bureau-Blouin, 20.

Marois and the PQ were quick to jump on the bandwagon against the tuition hikes when the student protests began in February. They stuck to their position despite assertions by opponents they were just being opportunistic.

PQ members wore the red square symbol until June when Marois said she was ditching it in favour of the fleur-de-lis for Quebec's Fete nationale.

Critics said she was just trying to distance herself from the students because many Quebecers supported the tuition increases.

Bureau-Blouin was omnipresent in the media during the height of this year's tuition protests and earned kudos in many circles for his moderate, pragmatic approach before he stepped down at the end of May.

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Charest, speaking to reporters in Quebec City, said the pact between Marois and Blouin is proof of just how close her party really is to the movement.

"He (Blouin) is the symbol of what has happened in the spring and Pauline Marois has decided to embrace what has happened, embrace that movement through Mr. Bureau-Blouin," the premier said.

"It'll be an opportunity to make it even clearer than it already is, the choice we will have eventually."

The PQ is hoping Bureau-Blouin's candidacy in the Montreal-area riding of Laval-des-Rapides will help attract even more young people to vote for the sovereigntist party at the next election, which is expected to be called next Wednesday and held Sept. 4.

Blouin says Quebecers in his age range constitute one-tenth of the population but have no representation at the legislature.

While he could have gone back to school and entered politics in a few years time, Blouin said he couldn't pass up on the opportunity to run for the PQ.

"I'm doing this now because I really have a conviction that something new is possible now," Blouin said.

"I really think that my generation has a possibility to show Quebecers and the rest of Canada what we're capable of."

If Bureau-Blouin wins, he will become the youngest-ever member of the national assembly. He turns 21 next December.

Bureau-Blouin, who used social media on Tuesday to first announce his candidacy, said he chose the PQ because he believes it offers a chance for a Quebec that is fairer, stronger and more environmentally friendly.

"It wasn't an easy decision. I made it after a lot of consultation. But I ended up making it because I believe Quebec is at a crossroads.... I'm worried about the consequences of the Liberals being re-elected. I think they govern not to bring Quebecers together but more to divide them."

The PQ, meanwhile, appears to be in full election mode. Marois attacked Charest and Francois Legault, leader of the Coalition for Quebec's Future, during a brief speech.

The PQ leader said the party has confirmed 90 per cent of its candidates and the party platform is set.

She doesn't believe Bureau-Blouin's youth will pose a problem, adding the young politician has proven his mettle during the student crisis.

"You've seen Mr. Blouin during the last student conflict and he has always shown a good attitude; he's wise and he's intelligent and I think he'll be an important member of our team during this election," Marois said.

She said Blouin will also be able to continue his studies part-time even if elected. While he is dubbed as a star candidate, Marois was evasive when asked if she had bigger plans for Blouin — perhaps as a future education minister.

"When we will be elected, I'll take my decision," she said.

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