

The
Economist

Corruption in Quebec

Digging deeper

At last, an inquiry into the Mafia

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DESPITE mounting evidence of unsavoury links between the Mafia, construction companies and politicians in Quebec, for more than two years Jean Charest, the Liberal premier of the province, resisted calls for a judicial inquiry. Instead, he ordered a police probe and created a permanent anti-corruption unit. But after the leaking in September of an explosive report from this unit detailing cost overruns totalling hundreds of millions of dollars, kickbacks and illegal donations to political parties, Mr Charest relented.

On October 19th he said that he had asked France Charbonneau, a superior-court judge, to probe financial ties between construction firms and political parties dating back 15 years. Judge Charbonneau is a tough former prosecutor. She will report to the premier; if she needs to, she can subpoena witnesses, a power Mr Charest initially denied her.

Media claims of corruption have coincided with the crumbling of Quebec's roads. The collapse of a highway flyover in 2006 crushed five people. A 15-metre-long slab of concrete fell from the roof of a road tunnel in July 2011; miraculously, no commuters were hurt. Engineering reports suggest a bridge carrying 60m cars a year between the island of Montreal and suburbs on the south shore is in danger of collapsing. There may be other factors: much building was done hastily to prepare Montreal for the 1976 Olympic games, and delaying road repairs is a favourite way to cut budget deficits. But pollsters say the public tends to connect failing infrastructure with reports of corruption.

Mr Charest's hesitation in calling an inquiry has helped to make him unpopular. In a poll released just before his announcement, support for the Liberals had fallen to 26%, down five points since September, and barely ahead of the separatist Parti Québécois (PQ). The premier does not have to call an election until 2013. By then he will probably face a new opposition force headed by François Legault, a former PQ cabinet minister whose pledge to focus on economic problems and leave the question of Quebec independence aside has put his still-unformed party ahead of all the others in the polls.

Calling a public inquiry when the stories first began to surface might have saved Mr Charest a lot of grief. But he was doubtless mindful of the fate that befell the federal Liberals after their former leader, Paul Martin, convened a judicial inquiry when prime minister into claims that the party siphoned off

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public funds. The Liberals have yet to recover from the bad publicity the inquiry generated. Mr Charest, in office since 2003, is the great survivor of Canadian politics. But he may be tempted to call an early election before Judge Charbonneau completes her work.

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