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Social Credit scents power in Quebec

OTTAWA Nothing could have been more predictable than Real Caouette's prediction, at his party's Quebec convention last weekend, that Social Credit will be in power in Quebec after the next provincial election.

But it was something else to hear the same forecast put forward, at least tentatively, over dinner in a Quebec restaurant a few days earlier by a Liberal MP from rural Quebec.

"I'm not saying it's going to happen," he murmured across the table. "All I'm saying is that it's no longer beyond the realm of possibility."

Another Quebec MP came back from an Easter holiday in Florida this week with a worried expression beneath the healthy tan.

"Miami Beach is the place to meet Quebec businessmen at this time of year," he said, "and as far as I could tell, they're all going to vote Social Credit in the next Quebec election."

"The Union Nationale has had it. They can't vote for the separatists. So

a vote for Social Credit is the only way to express opposition to the Bourassa Liberals."

"The pilot fish are falling into formation alongside Yvon Dupuis," said a veteran Conservative organizer at the party's recent Quebec convention in Montreal, referring to the new Quebec Social Credit leader.

"One or two of them were with Johnson when he was premier. They're the types who seem to be able to smell power before anyone else, and attach themselves to it. And they're all swimming around Dupuis right now."

"In my riding last October," said a Quebec MP, "they ran an old farmer who didn't even bother to come out to the all-party meetings with the other candidates, and they increased their vote by six times over 1968."

"It's frightening to think what could happen if they really got organized."

Organization was the theme of the federal party's Quebec convention last

weekend in the small industrial city of Drummondville, about an hour's drive from Montreal on the highway to Quebec. Delegates agreed to broaden support for the party by trying to sell 100,000 "participating memberships" at \$1 apiece in addition to the party's regular \$5 membership. They also listened to provincial leader Dupuis explain his plans to carry Social Credit fund-raising in Quebec into the business world for the first time.

As it senses the possibility of real power in Quebec, the party is moving closer to orthodox methods of fund-raising and organization. But it still retains a strong evangelical community spirit that sets it apart from the other parties in the province.

There is a family closeness about the movement in Quebec that is reminiscent of the group feeling within NDP provincial parties in the West or the "clubbiness" of Ontario Conservatives. Political conventions like the one in Drummondville are for drink-

ing beer with old friends rather than formulating new policies, and, of course, for listening to Caouette.

He was in fine form last Sunday, boasting that he had arrived in Drummondville at breakfast time after an all-night drive through bad weather from a meeting in the Gaspé. Which-ever election comes first, Quebec or federal, he promised that the other parties would find him "dangerously healthy" despite the journalists' attempts to portray him as an invalid.

Caouette is still the best political orator in the country. He can entertain and devastate in the same sentence. No issue is too difficult or delicate for him to handle, provided he can jot down a few notes on the back of an envelope while he is being introduced.

Has the leadership of the provincial party been riddled with dissension and charges of internal corruption?

"We're not all Brother Andre," he said, referring to the religious brother

whose shrine to St. Joseph dominates the Montreal skyline.

Are people still talking about Yvon Dupuis' career as a Liberal cabinet minister in Ottawa?

"In those days," smiled Caouette, "I used to call him the big insignificant."

But the most characteristic moment of the convention occurred when a delegate from the floor challenged the membership credentials of a candidate for party president. When Renaud Paris couldn't produce his membership card and pandemonium threatened, there was a proposal that Paris should swear to his membership.

The chairman asked if any of the delegates had a Bible. Moment of suspense. Then an old man at the back of the hall rose with a battered Bible in his hand and brought it to the stage. The candidate raised one hand, placed the other on the book and swore that he had always been a loyal Socred.

He won the election by a landslide.