

PM heralds 'national reconciliation'; says Canada most unified in 40 years

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OTTAWA (CP) - Prime Minister Stephen Harper is taking credit for what he says is a country that's more united than it has been since the 1960s.

In an interview Wednesday with The Canadian Press for this weekend's Canada Day celebrations, Harper called Canada "one of the world's great success stories."

The Conservative prime minister said a national reconciliation has taken root since his government decided to recognize the Quebecois as a nation late last year.

"I believe we are more united than at any point, than we have been, in four decades," said Harper, speaking in French.

"I believe the recognition of the Quebecois nation within a united Canada was an important step in our national reconciliation."

The Conservative government shocked the country - and lost its surprised intergovernmental affairs minister, who resigned - when it suddenly offered last November to recognize the "the Quebecois" as a nation within Canada.

The term has never been fully explained, allowing Canadians to read into it an all-inclusive Quebec nationalism or an ethnically and linguistically specific variety.

Regardless, the resolution was supported by all four parties in the House of Commons and - whether related or not - support for Quebec sovereignty has been on the wane in the ensuing months.

Harper has won plaudits from Quebec's punditocracy and political elites for drafting the resolution and wrong-footing Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe's attempt to force a vote on a similar resolution that dropped the words "within a united Canada."

Duceppe was forced to vote in favour of a resolution that recognized Canada's integrity.

Federalists emerged with a tissue-thin victory after a wrenching referendum on Quebec independence in 1995. The last dozen years has seen separatist fortunes wane as polls suggested Quebecers had grown weary of the debate that had seized the province for two generations.

That fatigue is now rocking the foundations of Quebec's politics. The Parti Quebecois came third in a provincial election held three months ago. Mario Dumont's "autonomist" Action Democratique emerged from also-ran status to become the official opposition in the provincial legislature.

Dumont and many of his 42 ADQ members have a myriad of ties to Harper's Conservatives and could become the kind of organization the Conservatives have been without in Quebec for almost 20 years.

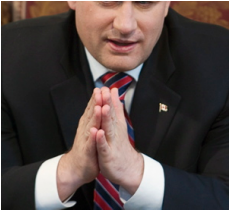
A new poll published Wednesday suggested that 68 per cent of Quebecers would like to see the Parti Quebecois drop its independence option and instead seek more powers for the province within Confederation.

The CROP poll of more 1,000 Quebecers also found that 72 per cent believe that sovereignty is highly or totally improbable.



Harper said the newfound absence of national unity angst allows Canada to play a more vigorous role internationally.

"As our national unity becomes firmer - as I think it has over the



past couple of years - I think Canadians look for themselves to be an important voice in the world," said the prime minister.

Story from Macleans.ca:
<http://www.macleans.ca/article.jsp?content=n0627120A>

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Photo caption: Prime Minister Stephen Harper is taking credit for what he says is a country that's more united than it has been since the 1960s. (CP PHOTO/Fred Chartrand)