

Canada-EU trade deal could prove awkward for Mulcair

By [Chantal Hebert](#)

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Federal NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair has so far navigated skilfully between a volatile Quebec electorate; a party establishment that partly shunned his leadership bid last spring and a Canadian public that has yet to be sold on the New Democrats' economic competence.

But the task of juggling three constituencies whose respective support Mulcair cannot take for granted may be about to become a lot more challenging.

Inasmuch as last month's Parti Québécois victory could breathe new life into the Bloc Québécois, the result was an unwelcome development for the New Democrats.

The risk to the NDP in Quebec could be compounded by the election of a more competitive Liberal leader early next year.

As the Sept. 4 provincial election just demonstrated, a split in the federalist vote in Quebec is a winning sovereigntist condition.

A probability in the case of British Columbia and a possibility in Ontario, the advent of more NDP provincial governments between now and the 2015 federal election would also be a mixed blessing for their federal cousins.

It is not uncommon for candidates running for a party at one level to pay for the perceived failings of those of the same party who happen to be in power at the other level. And then, it is not because they cohabit in the same party tent that federal opposition leaders and premiers of major provinces necessarily turn out to be harmonious bedfellows.

Former Liberal leader John Turner was pulled in opposite directions by the Liberal premiers of Ontario and Quebec at the time of the 1988 free-trade debate, at a cost to the cohesion of his federal party.

As it happens, Mulcair could soon find himself in a similar predicament. As part of his bid to cast the NDP as a government-in-waiting, he has signalled a willingness to adopt a more pro-trade narrative.

The wide-ranging free-trade deal that is in the making between Canada and the European Union could put that resolve to a strenuous test.

By comparison, the recent NDP decision to oppose the takeover of Alberta-based oil-and-gas producer Nexen by a Chinese state-owned firm was a political no-brainer.

In that instance, the party's traditional instincts were matched by the inclination of majority in public opinion. As a bonus, unease about the China National Offshore Oil Corp./Nexen deal extends to at least some of the boardrooms of corporate Canada and to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's own caucus.

The proposed Canada-EU agreement falls into a more problematic category.

If it is successfully negotiated (and that is still a big if), Mulcair could be forced to make a choice between pro-free-trade Quebec and some of the most vocal constituencies within the Canadian left.

On the surface, the Canada/EU bid is an ecumenical undertaking in the sense that premiers of all stripes, including the ruling Manitoba and Nova Scotia New Democrats, are party to the process.

But below that surface is a fast-expanding magma of opposition made up of constituencies that often boast long-standing ties to the NDP.

There are significant pockets of opponents to the deal within the ranks of British Columbia's New Democrats and, despite the support in principle of Ontario's Liberal government, the issue could become embroiled in Queen's Park's minority dynamics.

Quebec is a completely different kettle of fish.

Under its previous federalist government, the province was a prime mover of the Canada/EU initiative.

If International Relations minister Jean-François Lisée is to be believed, that will not change under the PQ.

"I would never pass up an opportunity to speak ill of the Liberal party but in this instance, the progress report we have been given respects what we consider to be Quebec's interests," Lisée said on Friday.

Should it materialize, the Canada-EU deal could potentially become a defining piece in a more business-friendly NDP puzzle.

But given the New Democrats' and Quebec's conflicting histories on free trade, it could just as easily set Mulcair up for a major post-honeymoon hangover.

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