

PM's agenda 'good for a sovereign Quebec'

Priorities match, Duceppe says

BY ALLAN WOODS

OTTAWA • Prime Minister Stephen Harper's overtures to Quebec, including promises to fix the fiscal imbalance and to give the province a voice on the international stage, are laying the groundwork for the day it becomes a sovereign nation, according to Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe.

The sovereigntist leader laid out his priorities yesterday for the coming parliamentary session — ones that closely reflect those of Mr. Harper's Conservative government.

High on both leaders' lists is finding a solution to the funding shortfalls between Ottawa and the provinces and giving Quebec more power at world cultural forums such as UNESCO and La Francophonie.

Mr. Duceppe said he has doubts that the Tory Prime Minister will deliver on his promises, but he remains hopeful because he sees it as the first step on the road to his goal of an independent Quebec.

"It's preparing us for the day we'll be a sovereign country and present everywhere," Mr. Duceppe said following the

party's first caucus meeting since the January election. "The more we're present, the better it is."

Last week, Mr. Harper and Jean Charest, Quebec's Liberal Premier, agreed to intensify talks to give Quebec a greater role at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

"If he delivers ... that would be good for a sovereign Quebec in the future," Mr. Duceppe said.

Quebec already has a "participating government" status, as does New Brunswick, at La Francophonie — an organization of French-speaking nations.

"All the sovereigntists support the fact that Quebec would have an international presence at the francophone summit," Mr. Duceppe said.

Since winning a surprising 10 Quebec seats in the Jan. 23 election, Mr. Harper has been working hard to build Conservative support in the province. In addition to his promises on the fiscal imbalance and an international role for the province, the Prime Minister has met three times with Mr. Charest, opened all of his public statements and speeches in French before speaking in his native English, and appointed Montreal financier Michael Fortier to the Senate and to his Cabinet.

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