

## Quebec elections reveal popular disaffection with major parties

# Separatist PQ returned to power

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The Parti Québécois, which advocates the secession of Canada's only majority French-speaking province, was reelected in Monday's Quebec election, winning 75 of the 125 seats in the provincial legislature.

The PQ's comfortable majority in the National Assembly, however, belies the true extent of its electoral support--let alone the anger and anxiety over mounting social inequality and economic insecurity that seethes beneath the surface of Quebec society.

The PQ won 42.7 percent of the popular vote, 1 percent *less* than its federalist rival, the Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ). While the Liberals garnered about 40,000 more votes than the PQ, they captured just 48 seats. (This is because Liberal support is concentrated in Montreal and Western Quebec where English-speakers and immigrants, who generally are estranged from the PQ's goal of a French-speaking state, comprise a significant part of the electorate.)

The PQ's failure to win a plurality of the popular vote came as a rude shock to the PQ's top brass. A number of opinion polls in the final days of the campaign had shown the separatist PQ to have a wide lead over the Liberals of at least 5, and possibly as much as 10, percentage points.

The apparent sudden reversal in the PQ's fortunes has been interpreted by the capitalist media as reflecting widespread popular apprehension that the PQ would have perceived an electoral landslide as a green light for holding another referendum on Quebec independence. (In October 1995, the PQ fell just 50,000 votes short of securing majority support, in a provincial referendum, for declaring Quebec a 'sovereign state' after offering a 'new partnership' to the rest of Canada modeled on the European Union.)

For his part, Quebec premier and PQ leader Lucien Bouchard responded to the election results by renouncing any intention to hold a referendum in the short-term. He told a post-election press conference, 'Has it [a referendum] been shelved? Yes, I believe Quebecers have told us the time is not favourable for holding a referendum.' Nevertheless, Bouchard vowed to work to create conditions for a 'winning referendum' in the latter part of his government's new, five-year term.

Monday's ambiguous election result means Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien can rest easier. For months the press has been full of speculation that should the PQ appear to be about to launch another independence bid, Chretien would be prevailed upon to resign. Although a Quebecer and a French-Canadian, Chretien is the *bête-noire* of the Quebec nationalists for his role in imposing, over the united opposition of the separatist PQ and federalist PLQ, the 1982 Canadian constitution and his refusal to transfer a spate of powers and jurisdictions from the federal to the Quebec government.

### Two parties of big business

The post-election accepted wisdom--that Quebecers are generally satisfied with the record of the Bouchard PQ government, but apprehensive about the PQ's separatist agenda--reflects far more the views of Canadian big business and the predominant sections of the Quebec bourgeoisie than its does any serious analysis of the election results.

Certainly, there is little popular enthusiasm for separation. The same polls that predicted a PQ landslide on Monday indicated that a large majority of Quebecers do not want a reelected PQ government to hold a referendum, and that if a referendum were held on the same question as in 1995 it would garner the support of little more than 40 percent of all Quebecers.

But what the capitalist media chooses to ignore is that these polls also show that Quebec's constitutional status ranks near the bottom of a list of voters' priorities and that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the PQ government's savage cuts to healthcare, education and other public services.

When the bourgeois pundits declare the public satisfied with the PQ's record they are voicing *their* approval of the PQ's drive to eliminate Quebec's annual budget deficit by the year 2000 through a wholesale assault on public services and on the working conditions of the workers who administer them. Because of the PQ's close ties to the trade union bureaucracy, the Bouchard government has been able to push through social spending cuts far greater than those even muted by its Liberal predecessor. This is well recognized in ruling circles in Quebec, where the corporatist ties that exist between the union bureaucracy, big business and the state, particularly when the PQ is in power, are referred to as part of the 'Quebec advantage.' But in the days prior to the Quebec elections, right-wing representatives of Anglo-Canadian capital who have supported threats to partition Quebec in the event of separation, like media mogul Conrad Black and Alberta Premier Ralph Klein, also lauded the PQ's socioeconomic record.

At the best of times, bourgeois elections provide only a distorted picture of popular sentiment, let alone class relations. In the case of the Quebec elections, working people had a choice between the big business PQ and PLQ, between two parties pledged to create a more favorable climate for investors by slashing social spending and taxes.

The common right-wing orientation of the rival federalist and separatist parties was personified by their leaders. A decade ago, Lucien Bouchard and PLQ leader Jean Charest sat together in the cabinet of former Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, whose

government initiated the bourgeoisie's drive to claw back the gains made by the working class in the post-Second World War period.

In the just completed election campaign, both the PQ and PLQ tried to lay claim to the mantle of defender of public services. Neither was credible. Charest coupled demagogic denunciations of the PQ's cuts to healthcare with calls for sweeping cuts to corporate taxes, more privatizations and spending cuts in virtually all areas other than health. The PQ contrasted its record of 'fiscal responsibility' to that of the 'spendthrift' Liberals, while simultaneously accusing Charest of wanting to emulate the right-wing Tory government in Ontario. In fact, the PQ under Bouchard has implemented steeper budget cuts than even Harris's Tories.

Apart from the Liberals and PQ, the only party given exposure by the media was the Action-Démocratique du Québec (ADQ). The ADQ, which emerged out a split-off from the PLQ in the early 1990s, calls, like the Western-based Reform Party, for a massive decentralization of powers from Ottawa to the provinces, so as to facilitate the dismantling of the welfare state, and for sweeping tax cuts.

Primary responsibility for the fact that the working class was completely disenfranchised in the Quebec election lies with the trade union bureaucracy. For decades, the bureaucrats have worked to tie the working class to the big business PQ. In the 1970s, they hailed the PQ's program to boost Québécois capital through increased government intervention in the economy and public spending as 'socialist.' In subsequent decades, as the PQ has moved ever further to the right, they have touted it as 'the lesser evil' to the Liberals.

Rank-and-file opposition to the PQ prevented the leaders of Quebec's three main labor federations from publicly endorsing the PQ's reelection. But on the eve of Bouchard setting November 30 as election day, they struck a 'truce' with the premier, agreeing not to stage strikes and protests to press the contract demands of 350,000 public sector workers during the election campaign.

#### Popular disaffection

Nevertheless, popular disaffection with the PQ, their Liberal adversaries, and with the class-war program of big business did find distorted reflection in the elections. The percentage of the electorate that voted was down almost 4 percent from the 1994 provincial election and some 15 percent from the 1995 referendum. Both the PQ and PLQ saw their share of the total popular vote decline, as almost 500,000 Quebecers gave their votes to the ADQ.

Favorable press coverage certainly played an important role in the sharp increase in support for the ADQ, from 4.4 percent in 1994 to 11.8 percent in last Monday's vote. Because of its right-wing program, the ADQ was a more than acceptable third party for big business. But most of those who voted for the ADQ had little, if any, knowledge of the ADQ's program. Rather they bought into the claims of Mario Dumont, the ADQ's 28-year-old leader, that his youthfulness was indicative of a party that represents a break with a past, that practices a new type of politics.

The bourgeoisie is acutely aware that beneath the apparent political stagnation Quebec society is fraying. Since the 1970s, Canada's second most populous province has been plagued by chronic mass unemployment. In October Quebec's official jobless rate fell below 10 percent for the first time this decade. At more than 17 percent, Quebec's poverty rate is surpassed only by that of the tiny, predominantly rural province of Newfoundland

Charest's denunciations of the PQ's healthcare cuts were utterly hollow. So too were the promises that first he, and then Bouchard, made of increased social spending. But big business, as reflected in the editorial pages of Quebec's main newspapers, took a dim view of such promises. Such are the social tensions, the ruling class fears any appeal on social issues could provoke an unwanted popular response.

Significantly, Charest all but dropped the healthcare issue after protests against the PQ's health cuts erupted in several parts of the province and public school teachers staged a one-day, illegal strike to press their claim for a wage adjustment under Quebec's 'pay equity' legislation.

Bouchard also got the message. No sooner did the polls indicate the PQ's reelection was in the bag, than he announced that any promises of increased social spending he had made were conditional: 'The priority is the zero deficit.... Everything is subordinated to the achievement and maintenance and the protection of the zero deficit.'

While the PQ has a secure majority in the National Assembly, Bouchard and his ministers recognize that their principal prop--the trade union bureaucracy--is finding it increasingly difficult to contain and constrain the rank and file. In a newspaper interview, an unnamed senior PQ minister deplored the failure of Quebec Teachers Federation President Lorraine Pagé to prevent last month's one-day teachers' strike. 'She has lost control of her members.... We may be facing a strike not only by teachers but by hospital workers as well.... And I'm still fearful of a recession which could curtail revenues.'

The conflict between the federalists and separatists is a dispute between rival sections of the Canadian and Quebec bourgeoisie. It is a struggle for perks and privileges and over how best to secure the interests of various bourgeois factions. Moreover the constitutional dispute, as the Quebec elections have again underscored, has been used by big business to divert social tensions into the sterile and utter reactionary framework of ethnic-linguistic confrontation.

Workers in Quebec will come into headlong conflict with the PQ government. But they will be able to find a way forward only insofar as their struggles become animated by a socialist and internationalist perspective. Workers must oppose the subordination of public services and social needs to the exigencies of the capitalist market, reject Canadian and Quebec nationalism, and consciously seek to fuse their struggles with workers in the rest of Canada, the US and Mexico.

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