

# Canada: Parti Québécois convention meets as support for separation wanes

**Guy Leblanc****6 May 2000**

The Parti Québécois, the secessionist party that forms Quebec's provincial government, is holding its quadrennial policy convention May 5 through May 7. Although the PQ was re-elected only 18 months ago, Premier Lucien Bouchard and his ministers have been hard-pressed in recent months to dispel a *fin de régime* aroma.

For most of the past year, opinion polls have indicated that a majority of Quebecers are "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with the PQ government. And support for the PQ's "sovereignist" project—its proposal for a capitalist République du Québec tied to Canada in a new economic and political "partnership"—remains stagnant at around 40 percent.

The PQ's last policy convention was held in November 1996, one year after the PQ came within a whisker of winning majority support for Quebec's separation from Canada in a province-wide referendum. Buoyed by the 49.4 percent support they had won in the 1995 referendum, PQ leaders spoke confidently of being able to assemble the "winning conditions" for a successful referendum on secession by the dawn of the twenty-first century. But this weekend's convention will hear no proposal for a referendum.

Albeit for radically different reasons, the PQ has lost support both amongst working people and Quebec's economic elite.

During the 1995 referendum campaign, Bouchard, Jacques Parizeau, the then PQ leader and Quebec Premier, and the PQ's supporters in the trade union bureaucracy demagogically appealed for working class support, by claiming that an independent Quebec would be a bulwark against the right-wing wave sweeping North America. But on assuming the leadership of the PQ in January 1996, Bouchard insisted that the most important way to prepare Quebec for independence was to eliminate the province's \$6 billion per year provincial budget deficit through sweeping public spending cuts.

In the name of "national solidarity," Quebec's union leaders joined big business representatives at an economic

summit where they formally sanctioned Bouchard's proposal to make the elimination of the deficit by the year 2000 the PQ government's central policy objective. Thus in practice, assembling the "winning conditions" for a pro-independence vote proved to mean providing big business with a demonstration that the PQ is the most adept protagonist of capital's class war agenda.

Undoubtedly, it is the PQ's role in implementing massive cuts in social and public services that is the principal reason for the drop in the PQ's popular support. When nurses struck for three weeks last summer in defiance of anti-strike legislation, the government found itself politically isolated and dependent on its allies in the trade union bureaucracy to bring the opposition movement to heel. In per capita terms, the PQ has reduced government expenditure even more than the avowedly right-wing Ontario Tory government. Recently the PQ government admitted that more than 100,000 people in a province of 7.5 million are waiting for surgery.

There is a definite parallel between big business' attitudes to the PQ provincial and federal Liberal governments. It appreciates that these governments imposed massive spending cuts in their first terms in office, but views the "anti-deficit fight" as yesterday's battle. It now demands these governments move far more aggressively to slash corporate and personal income taxes, cut environmental, labor and other regulations, and open the provision of health care, education and other public services to greater private sector investment.

According to Gilles Taillon, the president of the *Conseil du patronat*, the main business lobby in Quebec, a fundamental reorientation of the PQ government's socioeconomic priorities is urgently required.

"We cannot remain a social-democratic state ... in an [international] environment that allows market forces to play a greater role," Taillon told the *Globe and Mail*. "I believe in Quebec there is too much state and not enough market."

Taillon urged the PQ government to allow the private sector to compete in providing health care. He also demanded further cuts to education. "We will tell the

government that if you refuse to adopt this agenda ... we will have to say that we must support a party that represents our program."

According to Taillon, PQ ministers concede in private "what we are proposing makes a lot of sense — but they are a bit afraid to squarely confront the big unions."

This points to another factor in the growing estrangement between big business and the PQ. The PQ's close relations with the union bureaucracy have been pivotal to the Bouchard government's ability to impose drastic public service cuts. Business, however, is becoming increasingly apprehensive about the ability of the unions to control the rank-and-file, while looking with envy at the restrictions on union rights imposed by Ontario's Tory government. Following last summer's nurses' strike, which ended in disarray after the nurses repudiated a sellout negotiated by their union, a spate of articles appeared in the press questioning the continued efficacy of the "Quebec model" of corporatist relations between the unions, government and big business.

As with the dissatisfaction with the PQ government, the waning support for the PQ's sovereignist option has different causes among different social classes.

The PQ's role in implementing massive spending cuts undoubtedly came as a shock to many who believed it was, if not an anti-capitalist party, at least a party of social reform.

The concerns of Quebec's industrial, commercial and financial elite, needless to say, lie elsewhere.

There is great skepticism in business circles about the PQ's claims that a Quebec state would better able than the current federal regime to support Quebec business in capturing world markets. The government of an independent Quebec would not have to balance, as Ottawa does, the divergent and often conflicting concerns of Quebec capital with those of its rivals elsewhere in Canada. But a Quebec state would be a bit player on the world stage and certainly would not have a seat, as Canada presently does, in the G-7.

Another factor that weighs heavily is the Clinton administration's aggressive support for Canadian unity. James Blanchard, an ex-US Ambassador to Canada and key Clinton advisor on Canadian affairs, recently vowed that an independent Quebec would not be granted automatic admission to the North America Free Trade Agreement.

The federal Liberal government has taken advantage of the weakening popular support for Quebec sovereignty to table legislation that lays the juridical and political ground for Ottawa to refuse to recognize a majority vote in favor of Quebec's secession. Under the Clarity Bill, secession, even if granted, would be conditional on the re-negotiation of Quebec's borders, thus threatening Quebec with partition.

In answer to this, the PQ government has put forward a counter-law which states that only the Quebec government can determine the rules of a referendum and asserts Quebec's "right to self-determination." But to the PQ's chagrin, there has been very little public outcry against the federal government's attempt to rewrite the rules on secession. Apart from the PQ's traditional supporters and organizations of the ex-radical middle class like Gauche Socialiste no one answered Premier Bouchard's call for a "holy union of all Québécois" against the Clarity Bill.

By declaring themselves the defenders of "the right to self-determination of Quebec," the PQ and above all its "left" allies in the union bureaucracy want to turn public attention away from the PQ's right wing policies and nourish illusions that, because Quebec independence is opposed by the most powerful sections of Canadian capital and challenges the existing constitutional order, it is a progressive, even radical, demand. But these claims are increasingly falling on deaf ears, for working people have seen in practice that the PQ upholds the interests of big business no less ardently than its federalist opponents.

Under pressure from big business to move still further right, the PQ government and especially its petty-bourgeois cadre are turning more and more to rank chauvinist appeals to try to breathe life into the separatist movement. The "radical"—i.e., extreme chauvinist wing of the PQ—has sponsored a whole series of convention resolutions calling for further restrictions on the rights of Quebec's immigrant and English-speaking minorities. These include barring immigrants access to English-language junior colleges (CEGEPs) and banning the use of languages other than French on commercial signs. Bouchard, for his part, has announced the convening of an Estates-General (a Quebec summit) in the fall to discuss the status of the French-language in Quebec.



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