

# Canadian Alliance and Bloc Quebecois rubbing shoulders

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Stockwell Day, the new leader of the right-wing Canadian Alliance which forms the official Opposition in Ottawa, created a stir recently when he indicated that he was ready to enter in a coalition with the Quebec-separatist Bloc Quebecois in the event the reigning Liberals should lose their majority in the national elections expected this fall or spring.

On July 28 Day said that his party would link up with anyone, separatists included, provided they shared the conservative outlook of the Alliance. "I'm not big on labels," said Day. "If there are people who embrace the views of the Canadian Alliance—and believe we need a federal government that is limited in size, that respects the provinces and that wants lower taxes—I'm not interested where they may have been in the past politically."

He added: "The Canadian Alliance position is to be open to anybody who's interested in a truly conservative form of government."

Alliance MP Rahim Jaffer, who accompanied Day, admitted that his party had approached Bloc MPs to discuss a coalition. "I think they would be very open to the idea of working together, but I don't necessarily imagine they would jump ranks and join us," said Jaffer, MP for Edmonton-Strathcona. "Our agendas are very different in many areas but in terms of fiscal issues and reshaping the federalist system there would be some common ground."

The following day, Bloc spokesperson Louis Aucoin said under media questioning: "If we're ever in the position to make a choice about forming a government with the Canadian Alliance, we'll consider that question.... It's not an idea we're thinking about right now, but it's obvious we have discussed it within the party."

By the following Monday, however, discretion had proved the better part of valor. The parties were in denial mode.

"Never for any reason, would the Bloc Quebecois form an alliance with Stockwell Day or the Canadian Alliance," said the Bloc's former leader and current MP Michel Gauthier. "It was never considered and will never be."

Quebec deputy premier Bernard Landry, from the Parti Quebecois, the separatist party now in power in Quebec, explained that the two "parties do not have the same philosophy. They have nothing in common. But in politics, the question of alliance is always discussed after an election, where you have the crucial question of power."

If the issue generated so much turbulence, it is because the media consistently present the two political parties as the absolute opposites of Canadian politics: on one side, the Canadian Alliance, based in Western Canada, tainted with Anglo-chauvinism, supporting capital punishment and opposed to abortion; on the other, the Bloc Quebecois, separatist, "social democratic" and the supposed expression of the solidarity, the generosity and the collective rights of

all Quebecers.

Some, pointing to the cynicism prevalent in politics, claim that simple electoral arithmetic explains the maneuvers between the Bloc and the Alliance. There are 301 seats in Parliament, 75 of them in Quebec. The Alliance has no possibility of winning a majority without a single seat in Quebec.

On the other hand, the Liberal majority now stands at only 5 seats, and that was possible only because they won 101 out of 103 seats in Ontario. Some observers estimate that should the right-wing vote not be divided between the Alliance and the Tories, the Liberal Party could lose as many as 20 seats in Ontario, and thus its majority in Parliament. The Bloc Quebecois, with its 44 seats in Quebec, would hold the balance of power, and the recent maneuvers between the Bloc and the Alliance, these commentators assert, have no other cause than simple arithmetic.

While the cynicism of politicians is undeniable, and the arithmetic is exact, this last explanation is incomplete, and does not take into account a fundamental aspect of Canadian and Quebec politics: the traditional links between Quebec nationalists and the Canadian right.

The social-democratic pretense of the Bloc is skin-deep and does not go further than electoral promises. The recent arrival of the Alliance on the federal political scene is not perceived as a threat by the Bloc, since it is already effectively promoting the agenda of big business in Quebec.

Bloc MP Pierre Savoie, who was a delegate to the leadership Convention of the Alliance, declared that he didn't think the Alliance would win any seats in Quebec: "We are already proposing tax cuts. And collective values are too important in the Quebec province for Alliance to be popular here. We are the only alternative to the Liberal Party in Quebec."

Before the recent discussions on a post-electoral coalition, there had been talks between the two parties. Former Parti Quebecois MP and leader of the right-wing Union Nationale, Rodrigue Biron, had taken part, with the blessing of Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard, in a United Alternative steering committee, the first shot at uniting the Tory party and the Reform Party (predecessor of the Alliance) in a single organization of the Canadian right. Biron called Day a "real provincialist."

Eric Duhaime, former senior advisor of Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe and a collaborator in the Fraser Institute, a major rightwing think-tank in Canada, was among the chief organizers of Day's leadership campaign in Quebec. In 1998, he said of the Reform party: "Surprisingly enough, Reformers have made a good impression on the Bloc. We discovered that there are a lot of sensible people in the Reform party. What I've discovered is that many Westerners have the

same concerns as Quebecers, so the solution is not that far away.”

Luc Lavoie, a former communications director in the Mulroney government and Bouchard advisor, organized a private luncheon with Day and representatives of the Quebec business elite. This was set up after Day met last January with former Prime minister Brian Mulroney, before publicly launching his Alliance leadership campaign.

Quebec nationalists have embraced the policy of a weaker federal state put forward by Day, seeing in this a way to have more power for Quebec. They are ready to bargain with regionalist sections of Western Canada's business elite so that each can continue to control its own backyard and do business with United States as it sees fit, instead of having to submit to policies that favor more industrialized Ontario.

This “each in his backyard” policy also expresses itself on the language front. Quebec nationalists are ready to forget about the rights of French-speaking communities outside Quebec in exchange for the ability to carry out any language policies they choose within the province itself.

The possibility of this “unnatural” coalition of separatists and the Alliance will undoubtedly be seized upon by the Liberals. The latter will present themselves as Canadian patriots in an attempt to divert attention away from the fact that they have actually implemented much of the Reform program since they took power in 1993.

Maneuvers between Quebec nationalists and the Canadian right are not new or exceptional. Quebec nationalism has a long tradition of rightwing policies, and nationalists often joined Western regionalists and the Canadian right in past decades.

For example, Alberta Tories have often united with Quebec governments, whether formed by the Parti Quebecois or the provincial Liberal party, on the issue of free-trade or the demand for greater provincial autonomy.

It should also be recalled that Maurice Duplessis, the autocratic Premier who presided over the period referred to as the “black era” in Quebec's history, put the electoral machine of his Union Nationale behind John Diefenbaker in 1958, who then went on to win the biggest Tory federal majority in history.

The same could be said of the “beau risque” (graceful gamble) of René Lévesque, the founder of the Parti Quebecois and then Premier of Quebec, whose support for the federal Tories was crucial in leading them to power in 1984 with 211 out of the 288 seats in the Commons. Quebec nationalists used all their political leverage to push for Brian Mulroney, even lining up “star” candidates like Lucien Bouchard; and the Tories eventually won 58 seats in Quebec.

The existence of a right wing within Quebec nationalism is covered over by the labor bureaucracy and middle-class ex-radicals, Quebecois and Canadian alike. Because Quebec is the supposed victim of “national oppression,” the Quebec bourgeoisie is depicted glowingly and the creation of a Quebec state deemed progressive.

Bureaucrats of the major Quebec union federations (CSQ, CSN and FTQ) form one of the main social layers on which the power of the Parti Quebecois rests. They were the first to answer Bouchard's call for “the sacred unity of all Quebecois,” which was issued after the federal Liberal government passed its so-called “clarity bill,” claiming its right to veto a Yes vote in any future Quebec referendum for secession.

The union bureaucracy has recently put forward the necessity of the Quebec government forming a “common front” with the province's “living forces” to pressure Ottawa to increase its transfer payments to

Quebec.

Quebec nationalist ideology underwent a major change in the 1960s, when the increasing militancy of the working class was channelled by the union bureaucracy behind a nationalist program whose ultimate aim was to improve the economic and social position of the Quebec bourgeoisie. Out of this process, emerged the “Quebec model,” where unions closely collaborate with the state and big business to build a “strong economy” in Quebec.

In the 1995 referendum on Quebec secession, the separatists said that a sovereign Quebec would stop the right-wing wind that was sweeping through North America at its borders. As soon as the referendum was over, the Parti Quebecois embarked, with the support of unions, on a program of massive budget and service cuts as sweeping in scope as those being carried out in Ontario by a Tory government led by arch-reactionary Premier Mike Harris.

The union bureaucrats benefit from the help of “leftists” in covering up the right-wing nature of Quebec nationalism. A typical example is provided in a comment published not long ago by a group called *Gauche socialiste*: “However, the call for independence is the Achilles' heel of the Canadian bourgeoisie. The rule of this bourgeoisie, unfortunately, is threatened neither by workers or popular struggle nor by native, women or other struggles. But it is enraged by the fact that it is not able to break the will of the people of Quebec to put into question the existence of its state, the territorial basis of its power. On this rests the anti-capitalist essence, henceforth anti-neoliberal, of the struggle for the national liberation of the people of Quebec, for its independence.”

Whether promoted by openly reactionary elements such as Father Lionel Groulx or Maurice Duplessis, or by the “progressive” Parti Quebecois (founded in 1968 by a faction of the provincial Liberal party that eventually absorbed the remnants of the Union Nationale), Quebec nationalism has always had a prominent right wing.

A coalition between the Bloc Quebecois and the Canadian Alliance is far from being “unnatural.” Rather, it would reveal the reactionary essence of the nationalist project and represent another stage in the long collaboration between the Canadian right and Quebec nationalists.



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