

Open appeals to chauvinism divide the Parti Québécois

A comment on the Michaud Affair

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The Parti Québécois, the *indépendantiste* party which forms Quebec's provincial government, is going through a crisis that reveals its profound contradictions and portends a turn of the Quebec separatist movement to unabashed chauvinism.

The crisis was set off by xenophobic and anti-Semitic statements made by Yves Michaud, a leading representative of the PQ's "hardline" separatist faction and a prospective PQ candidate, at a public hearing on Quebec's language laws. Significantly, that day's session had already heard a number of other witnesses denounce immigrants and non-francophones for refusing to integrate themselves into "French Quebec."

Michaud's comments and other provocative remarks he made in the days preceding his appearance before the Estates General on the French language were condemned by a unanimous vote of the Quebec National Assembly December 14. All 66 PQ parliamentarians present in the Assembly at the time of the vote supported a Liberal motion of censure that rebuked Michaud for "intolerance" "toward the ethnic communities and in particular the Jewish community."

Later, PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard suggested he would not remain leader of a party which included Michaud in its parliamentary caucus. A former federal Conservative cabinet minister, Bouchard speaks for the faction of the PQ that has the closest ties to big business and is the most ambivalent towards a renewed drive for Quebec independence. With Quebec's economy growing rapidly for the first time in a decade, this faction fears the divisive impact of naked chauvinist appeals.

But the motion of censure has provoked outrage in the ranks of the PQ and its allies, including the trade union bureaucracy. Jacques Parizeau, a former PQ premier, and Fernand Daoust, who was general-secretary of the Quebec Federation of Labor for a quarter of a century, were among more than 30 co-signatories of a letter, reproduced in full-page newspaper ads, that denounced the National Assembly for abusing its power by singling out a citizen's remarks for censure.

Gilles Duceppe, the leader of the Bloc Québécois, the PQ's sister party at the federal level, said he "disagreed with the content" of Michaud's statements, but that the National Assembly "had no business handing out censures." The president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions, Marc Lavolette, has also rallied to Michaud's defence, claiming the provincial legislature's condemnation of Michaud "will represent a wound for future generations."

The hard-line separatists are trying to transform Michaud into a martyr for the cause of Quebec independence and free speech by distorting the import of the National Assembly's action, and, most importantly, by acting as apologists if not open advocates of his chauvinist views. Parizeau has described Michaud's remarks as innocuous. This is not surprising, given that the ex-premier himself attributed the *indépendantistes* failure to win a majority in the October 1995 referendum

to "money and the ethnic vote" (ignoring the fact that the vast majority of those who voted against separation were Quebec-born francophones). Nonetheless, Parizeau's comments underscore how the banner of free speech is being employed to legitimize naked chauvinism.

If the Michaud affair, as it is has been dubbed by the press, has taken on such dimensions it is because a major battle is brewing between Bouchard and the hard-liners, who enjoy the support of much of the party cadre. A leading spokesman for the hard-liners, Michaud recently announced that he would seek the PQ nomination for the Montreal riding of Mercier, a PQ stronghold and a vacant seat for which a by-election must be held in the first half of 2001. Michaud's return to the National Assembly has been widely touted by this section of the party as a means of pressing Bouchard to take a more militant stand in favor of Quebec's independence. As their defence of Michaud demonstrates, for many of these hard-liners there is no point in trying to accommodate Quebec's "ethnic communities" since they will never support independence. Rather, the best means of securing a majority for independence is by making ethnic and chauvinist appeals, if not openly fostering a climate of confrontation with Quebec's minorities.

The PQ's support for the Liberal censure motion against Michaud was conceived by Bouchard as a preemptive strike against Michaud and his supporters. The premier was also anxious to maintain the democratic credentials of his government, especially on the international arena. Referring to federalist charges that the PQ promotes ethnic-nationalism, Bouchard declared, "The day when I have to endorse Mr. Michaud's comments as legitimate under the banner of the Parti Québécois, how will I answer such charges? And what will we tell the world if ... [the PQ] is attacked for being intolerant and being against Quebec ethnic communities?"

Bouchard's *coup-de-main* appears to have backfired. Emboldened by the outcry from within the PQ against the National Assembly motion and Bouchard's statements, Michaud has vowed to persist with his campaign to win the PQ nomination in Mercier. While his supporters denounce the vote of the National Assembly as "infamous" and "anti-democratic," Michaud is demanding a public apology from the premier, accusing him of an "attempt to politically assassinate one of your militants." Such extreme, quasi-hysterical language is typical of ultra-nationalist tendencies and indicative of the nature of the elements who have rallied to Michaud's defence. Michaud has boasted of having received thousands of letters of support, but many of them are simply unpublishable because of their chauvinist contents. On radio and television programs, and in letters to newspapers, supporters of Michaud have recycled anti-Semitic smears, denouncing the National Assembly for being "on all fours before the influence of the Jewish lobby."

On the last day of public hearings called by the government-appointed "Commission on the state and future of the French language in Quebec,"

Michaud presented a brief. During a month and a half of hearings, a large number of nationalist organizations and individuals had presented briefs arguing for a tightening of the province's language laws, which limit access to public education in English and the use of languages other than French in public administration, and the work- and market-place. Among the more popular proposals were limiting access to English-language colleges and day-cares to Canadian-born English speakers; further restricting if not outright banning the use of languages other than French on commercial signs; and new immigration regulations aimed at forcing applicants to demonstrate greater proficiency in the French language.

While these proposals are considered controversial, they have the support of many PQ activists and are deemed as legitimate subjects for public debate. But on the day Michaud presented his brief several other witnesses had made highly inflammatory remarks, to considerable applause from the audience. After one witness spoke of how he would like to spit at Tamil shopkeepers who cannot speak French, Gérald Larose, the former union leader who is presiding over the Commission, called on his fellow nationalists to show some restraint. "There is no future for Quebec," declared Larose "if this Quebec is not built on solidarity. If we are not able to develop inclusive strategies, well, I can tell you that we won't go very far."

It was in this context that Yves Michaud stepped up to the microphone. Michaud's nationalist credentials are impeccable. He was a close friend of former Quebec premier and PQ founder René Lévesque; he was editor of the now-defunct *indépendantiste* daily, *Le Jour*; he served as an earlier PQ government's representative in Paris; and he was expressly invited by Bernard Landry, the current Quebec finance minister, to run as the PQ candidate in Mercier.

Michaud began by quoting from Father Lionel Groulx, the principal Quebec nationalist ideologue from the 1920s to the 1950s, and a notorious anti-Semite. He hailed Groulx as a "mentor for two generations of Quebecers," then cited a passage in which Groulx called on Quebecers to imitate the Jewish people's "strong will to survive." Next Michaud contrasted Quebec's generosity toward immigrants—Quebec "welcomes them with open arms and wallets"—with immigrants' purported refusal "to accompany us on the road leading to mastery over all the tools for our development."

To demonstrate that "the ethnic communities" are opposed to the "Quebec people," Michaud chose as his example the predominantly Jewish Montreal suburb of Côte St. Luc, which voted massively against independence in the 1995 referendum. After the hearing, Michaud continued in the same vein: "If we do not act in a way to integrate our immigrants and to assimilate them, then we will go down the path of the Louisianization, the folklorization of our society."

Michaud's standpoint is that of the crudest ethnic nationalism. Large-scale Jewish immigration to Quebec began over a century ago, but in Michaud's view the Jews of Côte St. Luc are still not true "Quebecers." As to why Quebec's Jewish community is mistrustful of Quebec separatism, Michaud need look no further than his beloved mentor "Lionel Groulx." Not only did Groulx promote anti-Semitism. The Roman Catholic clergy, which controlled Quebec's French-speaking schools until the 1960s, prohibited Jews from attending its educational establishments.

The logic of Michaud arguments is the following: like the Zionists who accuse all those who oppose Israeli government policy of being anti-Semitic, so Michaud claims that all those who oppose the Quebec separatist project are anti-Quebec. When Michaud joins Groulx in lauding the Jews what he is praising is not the cultural heritage of the Jewish people but Zionist nationalism and separation on an ethnic basis. This is a conception that is entirely compatible with anti-Semitism. Employing reactionary anti-Jewish stereotypes, Michaud has trivialized the Holocaust and accused Jews of being concerned only with their own suffering: "It's

always you [the Jewish]. You are the only people on earth who have suffered in the history of humanity."

In an interview aired the day before his appearance before the language commission, Michaud characterized the Jewish social service organization B'nai Brith, which has existed in Quebec since the 1880s, as "an extremist phalanx of world Zionism," a statement in which one can hear echoes of the old anti-Semitic canard of a world Jewish conspiracy.

The PQ leadership's panicky response to Michaud's remarks are an indication of its own fears as to the support they enjoy among the party's rank and file and of how little credibility the PQ retains when it claims to advocate a liberal-democratic nationalism as the purported antithesis of ethnic nationalism. To the surprise of the opposition Liberals, the PQ embraced its motion of censure against Michaud, although such motions are only very rarely passed by the National Assembly.

Whereas in the '60s and '70s it was still possible for the PQ, thanks to the support of the union bureaucracy, to claim a "favorable prejudice toward the workers movement" and even pose as "anti-imperialist," today the *indépendantiste* movement has jettisoned its very timid program of social reforms in favor of "fiscal responsibility" and promoting "international competitiveness." To rally support, it is increasingly compelled to rely on chauvinist appeals. Of the denunciations of Michaud by the PQ leadership, the most important one is almost entirely lacking: For Michaud, the Quebec "we" is French-speaking, white and Quebec-born.

If the PQ leadership hastened to condemn Michaud, it is because it fears he might become a rallying post for the openly chauvinist elements that constitute an important part of the PQ's base. While seeking to contain the nationalist fervor of the hard-liners, which could taint the PQ's carefully constructed image of "openness," the party leadership also recognizes this wing of the party as integral to its electoral success. In fact, the holding of public hearings on the state of the French language was an important concession to the hard-liners.

Commenting on the vote of the National Assembly, Pierre Bourgault, founder of the first important pro- *indépendantiste* party (the RIN) and an ideologue of Quebec separatism for 40 years, wrote that this "measure is all the more humiliating when we know that several of these members of parliament think exactly the same thing as Yves Michaud and it is undoubtedly to avoid the same fate that they lowered themselves to take part in this parody of justice."

A big business party completely hostile to the interests of working people, the PQ has a long tradition of chauvinist legislation, above all Bill 101, which restricts the democratic rights of the English-speaking minority and immigrants.

Michaud and his supporters are misleading the population when they claim that he has been condemned without being heard and "has said nothing illegal." For their own reasons, the Liberal and PQ members of the National Assembly condemned Michaud's statements as "unacceptable," but from a political, not a legal, standpoint.

Michaud's defenders are cultivating confusion and presenting him as the victim of state censorship in an attempt to revive the increasingly moribund Quebec separatist project on the basis of open appeals to xenophobia and ethnic nationalism.



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