

# Quebec premier's resignation intensifies crisis within separatist movement

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5 February 2001

Lucien Bouchard's January 11 resignation as Premier of Quebec and President of the *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois (PQ) has shaken the Quebec separatist movement. While Bouchard was oft-criticized by PQ activists for not vigorously promoting Quebec sovereignty, he was also widely perceived as the politician best able to "sell" the idea of independence to the electorate.

The PQ establishment is now anxiously trying to avert a leadership race that could result in a confrontation, or even a split, between the party's "hard-line" separatist faction and elements that, in accordance with the wishes of big business, favor a go-slow approach to secession and couple the demand for sovereignty with a call for a new economic and political partnership with Canada.

Irrespective of whether the top brass succeeds in this endeavour, the circumstances surrounding Bouchard's resignation point to a basic political fact—any revival of Quebec separatism will be in the form of a movement making overt appeals to chauvinism.

In his resignation speech, Bouchard referred explicitly to the controversy provoked by anti-Jewish and anti-immigrant remarks by PQ hard-liner Yves Michaud at public hearings in December on revising the province's language laws.

"I still can't understand," said Bouchard, "how the linguistic debate came to be diverted toward a weighted comparison of the sufferings of the Jewish people and the intolerance supposedly demonstrated by Quebec citizens who chose not to vote for Quebec sovereignty." He then admitted he had been taken aback by the level of support Michaud commanded, not only in the PQ ranks, but also among intellectuals, union leaders and other public figures.

While the Michaud affair was a factor in Bouchard's resignation, more fundamentally, he quit after just five years as PQ leader because he realized that his party's basic political orientation of Quebec independence, however "re-packaged" for popular consumption, was getting nowhere.

For several years, Bouchard tried to mollify the PQ's hardline faction by saying he was working to create the "winning conditions" for a third referendum on Quebec sovereignty. In his farewell address he conceded that he saw no means of achieving Article One of the PQ's constitution. "I have decided to give Parti Québécois members the opportunity to give themselves a leader who better knows how ... to advance the cause of sovereignty..."

Bouchard deplored the losses that the Bloc Québécois, the PQ's alter ego in the federal parliament, suffered in last November's federal election, then lamented, "We have failed to... increase the sovereigntist fervor."

Bouchard continued by criticizing the populace for its lack of nationalist militancy. Quebecers, he said, had failed to respond to federal social spending initiatives that "intrude" on areas of provincial jurisdiction. Even more shockingly, they had remained unmoved by Bouchard's calls for a "holy union" of Quebecers to oppose federal legislation, the so-called Clarity Bill, that asserts the federal government's right to set the

rules of any future referendum on Quebec independence and threatens an independent Quebec with partition.

"Quebecers," said Bouchard, have been "astonishingly impassive in the face of federal offensives like the social union, the millennium bursary program, the creation of university research chairs, the adoption of Law C-20 [the Clarity Bill]."

Bouchard offered no explanation for the public's indifference to the PQ's appeals and the erosion of *indépendantiste* ardor. But in defending his government's right-wing record, he hinted at the chief reason. What Bouchard considers his greatest achievement—the elimination of the province's annual budget deficit through draconian social spending cuts—won him accolades from Quebec's big business, managerial and trade union elite. Among working people, however, it provoked anger and opposition—opposition that in the summer of 1999, when the province's nurses struck in defiance of a battery of antiunion laws, threatened to become a challenge to the very existence of the PQ government. Said Bouchard, "I believed, and I still believe, that one of the best ways of persuading Quebecers of their ability to govern themselves, with all their resources and powers, is through a concrete demonstration of their potential and that of their state".

## Bouchard's Career

Bouchard's political career exemplifies many of the contradictions and ambivalences within the Quebec separatist movement.

Although he had once written speeches for Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and was later associated with the PQ, Bouchard was first elected to office in 1988 as a federal Conservative (Tory). Bouchard was far from the only frustrated Quebec separatist who joined the ranks of the Tories in the 1980s. Indeed, it was the PQ's founder, René Lévesque, who, following the defeat of the PQ's 1980 sovereignty referendum and the adoption of a new Canadian constitution over the objections of the Quebec government, proposed that the *indépendantistes* make common cause with Brian Mulroney's Tories to defeat the Liberals.

Bouchard soon entered the Tory cabinet and became Mulroney's Quebec lieutenant. But in 1990 he quit the government to protest the unravelling of the Meech Lake Constitutional Accord. (Meech Lake was designed to win Quebec's formal adherence to Canada's constitution in exchange for concessions on the Quebec government's traditional demands for more autonomy.) A few weeks later, Bouchard led a group of dissident Tory and Liberal MPs in establishing a new federal party, the Bloc Québécois, to fight for "Quebec's interests." The BQ's founding was supported not only by the PQ, but also by the then Quebec Liberal government, which hoped to use it to pressure its federalist rivals.

The BQ subsequently affirmed its support for Quebec's secession from Canada's federal state, but as part of a process of forging a new political and economic union with the rest of Canada based on "sovereign states." Bouchard made his support for the 1995 referendum conditional on the linking of sovereignty to the call for a new economic and political partnership with Canada.

During the 1995 referendum campaign, Bouchard emerged as the *indépendantistes* chief spokesman, replacing Premier Jacques Parizeau, who, as the scion of one of Quebec's richest francophone families and a participant in numerous right-wing PQ government decisions, lacked populist credentials. Bouchard touted "sovereignty" as a "bulwark" against the right-wing wave sweeping North America. But no sooner had he replaced Parizeau as PQ Premier, at the beginning of 1996, than Bouchard moved to implement social spending cuts on a par with those carried out by the Harris Tories in Ontario and the federal Liberal government. And when Bouchard encountered popular opposition from nurses, independent truckers and others he resorted to state repression.

Bouchard's evolution from federal Tory cabinet minister to budget-cutting PQ Premier underlines the real nature of the PQ and the Quebec separatist project. A split-off from the *Parti Libéral du Québec*, the PQ, from its inception in 1968, has always been a capitalist party that defended the interests of the Quebec bourgeoisie. If the PQ claimed in the early 1970s to have "a favorable prejudice for the workers movement," it was because the PQ was seeking, with the assistance of the union bureaucracy, to exploit an offensive of the working class to bolster the position of Quebec's rising francophone business and managerial elite. Under a "radical", if not "socialist" facade, Quebec nationalism served to quarantine an increasingly rebellious Quebec working class from its class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and channel its struggles away from a challenge to the profit system.

Today, PQ leaders like Deputy Premier Bernard Landry and ex-Premier Parizeau publicly rejoice that the "statist" policies pursued by Quebec governments in the 1960s and 1970s—PQ and Liberal—have created a "strong" French-speaking business class that can challenge for global markets.

Already in the early 1980s, the PQ came into headlong conflict with the working class, slashing public sector workers' wages and imposing a battery of anti-union laws. Under Bouchard, the PQ inscribed "fiscal responsibility" and "international competitiveness" on its banner, shedding all remnants of its past association with social reform. Sovereignty, insisted Bouchard, would be realized by proving to Quebec and international business that separation would be in its interests. Far from threatening the status quo, an independent Quebec would be a partner of NAFTA, NORAD, and NATO, and would use the Canadian, or better still the US dollar as its currency.

But Bouchard's attempts to win capital's support for Quebec independence met with little success. Breaking with tradition, President Bill Clinton repeatedly spoke out strongly in favor of Canadian unity, making crystal clear that the US sees nothing to gain from the break-up of its closest ally and most important trading partner. Meanwhile, the readiness of the Chretien Liberal government and the Anglo-Canadian elite to threaten a seceding Quebec with partition and, by implication, civil war, has caused large sections of the Quebec bourgeoisie to question if their strategy of using separation as a lever to extract concessions from their rivals within Confederation has not become counter-productive.

#### **Whither the PQ?**

In the aftermath of Bouchard's resignation, a number of figures in and around the PQ have called on the party to distance itself from the hard-line separatist wing and cast its struggle to gain more powers from Ottawa and potentially form a separate state in a more "modern" and "inclusive" framework.

Bouchard's failure to carry out precisely such a programme is a reflection of the reliance of the PQ on its "hard-line" separatist wing and on appeals to ethnic and linguistic chauvinism. While Bouchard criticized the anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic remarks of Michaud, his own appeals, especially during the 1995 referendum, were largely to ethnic pride and evoked the traditional themes of French-Canadian/Québécois nationalism. As one journalist has noted, "It's all very well for Bouchard to oppose

ethnic nationalism, but he was never more convincing than when, with his hand on his heart, he evoked the heritage of our ancestors."

More fundamentally, the turmoil in the PQ over its aims and strategy are rooted in profound economic and political processes. The increasingly global character of world economy has removed any objective possibility for a national state to promote domestic growth through regulations and tariff protection, and thus provide an economic basis for an expansion of welfare-state social programs. While in the 1960s and early 1970s, the nation-state could, thanks to the post-war boom, be held up as a vehicle for social and economic progress, increasingly it stands exposed as an instrument of the most powerful sections of big business to wage the struggle for profits and markets.

Long ago the PQ abandoned claims that an independent Quebec would use its new state powers to expand public services and promote greater social equality. Popular demagoguery aside, the PQ, under both Parizeau and Bouchard, has implemented the agenda of big business and spelt out a program for an independent Quebec aimed at proving separation would be a winning strategy for Quebec big business.

This turn to the right has greatly eroded popular support for Quebec separatism, but it has failed to convince Quebec and especially US capital that they should risk upsetting the state structure of North America.

Lacking a viable social basis, either as a movement articulating the interests and progressive aspirations of working people or one marshalling the support of international capital, Quebec separatism inevitably is becoming more and more characterized by its inherent petty bourgeois chauvinist dimension. Calls for new restrictions on English schooling and denunciations of "the contamination" of Quebec by "foreigners" and "foreign" tongues find support among weaker sections of big business and middle class layers that are being squeezed by globalization.

Bouchard's resignation was an admission by the man reputed to be the most popular *indépendantiste* politician that he saw no means of winning majority support for separation. It was also a tacit admission that the influence of the openly chauvinistic elements within the PQ is growing and that the more moderate wing of the Quebec nationalist movement is not willing, or able, to take them on politically.



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