

Acclamation of new Quebec premier underscores crisis in separatist movement

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Bernard Landry was acclaimed president of the Parti Québécois at a meeting of its National Council March 9, thus paving the way for his subsequent swearing in as premier of Quebec, Canada's only majority French-speaking province. Landry succeeds Lucien Bouchard who held the posts of PQ leader and Quebec premier for five years.

Bouchard, who was touted by the media as the best “salesman” of Quebec independence, shocked his party in January by announcing his retirement from politics. In his resignation speech, Bouchard said he saw no means of assembling the conditions for a winning referendum on Quebec independence, at least in the near future. He also expressed frustration with the party's so-called hardline faction, which repeatedly criticized him for not doing enough to promote independence and which is agitating for the Quebec government to place further restrictions on access to English-language education and the use of languages other than French in the workplace.

In the immediate aftermath of Bouchard's resignation, it was widely speculated that the impending PQ leadership race would become the occasion for a debate over the party's *raison d'être*. While the “hardliners” have been pressing for the PQ to use its control of the provincial government to promote independence, some party stalwarts have suggested that the PQ should shelve the demand for independence and instead ally with those forces in English Canada—almost all of them openly identified with the right—that are pressing for a radical redivision of powers in the Canadian federal state in favor of the provinces.

Ultimately, however, there was no contest for the PQ leadership. No sooner had the leadership been thrown open, than the PQ top brass and a large majority of its parliamentary deputies voiced their support for Landry. This came as a rude shock to at least two cabinet ministers who were set to announce their own candidacies, but they were soon prevailed upon to join in Landry's coronation.

The groundswell of support for Landry is no reflection of his public popularity. Rather it underscores that the PQ is in profound crisis. Not only is it divided internally; its popular support has declined sharply. Although the PQ won a majority of National Assembly seats in the 1998 provincial election, it actually won less votes than did the Liberals. And in last November's federal election, the PQ's federal sister party, the Bloc Québécois, was badly mauled.

Since the 1995 referendum, when the PQ fell just 50,000 votes short of securing majority support for transforming Quebec into a

“sovereign” state, its membership has fallen from more than 200,000 to about 50,000.

Landry owes his coronation to the fact that a large majority of the party leadership feared a succession struggle, let alone a debate about the PQ's goal of independence, could seriously destabilize the party.

The deputy premier under both Bouchard and Jacques Parizeau, Bouchard's “hardline” predecessor, Landry is perceived by many as the party veteran best able to reconcile the chauvinist ideologues, who are entrenched in the party cadre, with those who, in response to pressure from big business, argue that the PQ should, at least for now, eschew constitutional confrontation.

An avowed *indépendantiste* since his youth, Landry has impeccable separatist credentials. “We can not have doubts about someone whose party membership card bears the number 53,” declared Jean Garon, a former PQ cabinet minister.

Landry is a longtime friend of Yves Michaud, the PQ hardliner whose chauvinist statements were condemned by the National Assembly and helped precipitate Bouchard's resignation. It was Landry who persuaded Michaud to reenter full-time politics by seeking the PQ nomination for a coming by-election and who, after Michaud's statements caused a crisis in the PQ, then sought to find a means of reconciling Michaud and Bouchard.

No less solid is Landry's record as a defender of the interests of big business. As a member of the Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (RIN), a predecessor of the PQ, Landry once wrote, “Quebec will be independent only if it is socialist.” But thereafter, he moved sharply to the right and emerged as a key proponent of neo-economic liberalism within the PQ. Landry was a vocal supporter of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, which he saw as a means of lessening Québécois capital's traditional dependence on its Anglo-Canadian rivals, especially the Toronto-based capital market.

As Quebec's finance minister, from 1994 to his assumption of the premiership earlier this month, Landry was along with Bouchard the principal architect of the massive social spending cuts that the PQ imposed in the name of eliminating the province's budget deficit. These cuts, which were made with the complicity of the unions, have pushed Quebec's health care and education systems to the brink of collapse.

Last year, Landry proclaimed victory in the deficit war and promised that there would be a fiscal dividend in the form of increased social spending. But he has since changed his tune,

arguing that if Quebec's tax structure is to remain competitive with Ontario and other nearby provinces and US states, Quebec must make tax-cutting its first priority.

The PQ's contortions

In the weeks prior to his March 9 acclamation as PQ leader, Landry toured Quebec. Few of his speeches made any reference to government socioeconomic policy. Instead, he spoke repeatedly about his commitment to Quebec independence and the need to launch a new offensive to transform Quebec into a "normal" nation-state.

Landry's appeals were clearly directed at rallying the party rank and file and countering the growing popular impression that the PQ is a big business party like any other.

He made assorted demagogic denunciations of the existing constitutional order, seeking to appeal to various socioeconomic frustrations and grievances that are the products of capitalism, but which the PQ tries to lay at federalism's door.

However, for all his proclamations about his readiness to lead Quebec to independence, Landry piled ambiguity onto ambiguity as to what in fact is the PQ's real aim. Some days he spoke about a new partnership between Quebec and Canada based on what he called the model of the European Union; other days he suggested this model should be extended to embrace the entire Western hemisphere.

Similar contortions were seen at the PQ's National Council over its stance on the language question. Last May, Bouchard tried to offset pressure from the hardliners for a new campaign to win independence, by establishing an Estates-General on the French language to consider tightening the province's language laws.

The PQ's Bill 101, which forces large and medium-sized companies to use French as the language of work and limits access to English schools to children whose parents were educated in Canada in English, has been very successful in promoting the expansion of a French-speaking managerial elite. But sections of the French-speaking petty bourgeoisie are upset that immigrants who did their primary and secondary schooling in French are opting to attend English colleges, thus potentially giving them a leg up in securing employment. They are campaigning for Bill 101's provisions to be extended to CEGEPs (junior colleges) and, in some cases, even to Quebec's universities.

Big business, for its part, values a bilingual workforce and fears a new language wrangle will discourage investment and divert the government from instituting further tax and public service cuts.

Ceding to this pressure, Landry successfully urged the Council to place the PQ on record as supporting the status quo on language rights for the next three years. But, if press reports are to be believed, just two weeks before the Council meeting the majority of the PQ Executive was opposed to Landry's stance.

Ironically, in urging the PQ not to reopen the language issue now, Landry adopted the exact opposite tack from his predecessor. Whereas last May Bouchard called for an inquiry into the language issue so as to offset pressure for a more aggressive stance on Quebec independence, Landry urged the PQ faithful to put off amending Bill 101 for the next three years so the government could devote its energies to promoting Quebec sovereignty.

At the root of the PQ's crisis is mass public disaffection with its

right-wing, big business program.

At the same time, the PQ has failed to rally the support of, or even neutralize opposition from, the most powerful sections of the bourgeoisie for its goal of creating an independent, capitalist *République du Québec*. Bouchard had hoped to convince big business that an independent Quebec would be a better vehicle for defending its interests by prosecuting the so-called anti-deficit war. But while business hailed the Bouchard government's cuts to social and public services, international economic and political trends have only served to strengthen its scepticism about the wisdom of supporting Quebec's secession.

The PQ has argued that a Quebec state would be better able to champion the interests of Quebec companies overseas, since it would not have to take into account the divergent and often conflicting interests of other sections of Canadian capital. But much of big business argues that this is highly unlikely, since Quebec business would lack the leverage it now enjoys through Canada's participation in the G-7 and other international alliances.

Moreover, the Quebec bourgeoisie has taken the measure of the marked shift in the attitude of its Anglo-Canadian and US rivals. Since the 1995 referendum, Washington has repeatedly affirmed its support for a united Canada, while threatening that Quebec would not automatically accede to NAFTA. Ottawa, meanwhile, has raised the spectre of a civil war, with its repeated threats that Quebec could be partitioned in the event it secedes from Canada.

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