

Canadian big business rallies behind the Action démocratique du Québec

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Political discussion in Quebec's corporate media has focussed in recent weeks on the program of the *Action démocratique du Québec* or ADQ. The third party in the Quebec National Assembly, the ADQ poses as anti-establishment party that speaks for the beleaguered middle class. In reality it advocates policies tailored to serve the interests of big business and the rich, including massive tax and social spending cuts and the establishment of a parallel private health care system for those with the means to pay for speedier and more comprehensive treatment.

Prior to this year the ADQ had only ever elected its 32-year-old leader, Mario Dumont, a former head of the youth wing of the Quebec Liberal Party. The ADQ's string of four by-election victories in the spring and its surge to first place in the opinion polls came as a shock to Quebec's political and business establishment. It is widely conceded that most of those who voted for the ADQ in the by-elections knew little if anything of the party's right-wing program. They merely wanted to express their discontent with the two parties that have dominated Quebec politics for the last three decades—the Parti Québécois (PQ), the *pro-indépendantiste* party which presently forms the provincial government, and the federalist Liberals.

Whilst taken unawares by the sudden rise in support for the ADQ, big business in Quebec and English Canada have been quick to seize on it as a means of pressing for an intensification of the assault on the working class.

The media splash for the ADQ and the telegenic Dumont is itself an indication of this shift. But some of Quebec's most prominent business leaders have also moved to demonstratively take the ADQ and Dumont under their wing. Marcel Dutil, the head of the Quebec steelmaker Canam Manac, has taken charge of the party's fundraising. He is promising to raise \$4 million for the party's campaign in the next provincial election, which must be held before the end of 2003. The ADQ spent just \$147,000 in the 1998 election.

Dutil and two other prominent business leaders, former Banque Nationale head Léon Courville, and Pierre Michaud

of the supermarket giant Provigo, accompanied Dumont on a recent visit to Toronto, where they introduced him to key movers and shakers in Canada's financial capital. Dumont was given repeated ovations when he addressed Toronto's blue chip Canadian Club. The *National Post*, the leading daily of Canada's right, reproduced most of Dumont's speech and gave the ADQ leader its blessing, proclaiming him to be "to the right of [Alberta Premier Ralph] Klein and [former Ontario Premier Mike] Harris."

The Quebec media, meanwhile, has applauded Dumont for having the "courage" to advance a bold and clear alternative. In fact, the ADQ has done little more than put a *fleur de lis* on the policy prescriptions of any number of Canadian and US "free market" think tanks.

Although not ready to endorse an ADQ election victory, the newspaper editorialists view it, at minimum, as a vehicle for placing on the political agenda right-wing initiatives like two-tier health care that previously were deemed too socially explosive. Insofar as they have had advice for Dumont it has been that he must beware not to bite off more than he can chew. Thus after the ADQ leader made a series of rabid antiunion statements in which he suggested the PQ government was beholden to the trade unions, *La Presse's* André Pratte cautioned Dumont that he may yet need the services of the labor bureaucracy. "We applaud this firm stand with one important proviso: it can be dangerous to play at being tough to enhance one's image. The unions are legitimate and necessary partners. When necessary the government must not be afraid to confront them. But one must be certain to be on solid ground and to be pursuing clear, though-out and limited objectives.... This is something one learns ... with experience."

The ADQ program is a veritable wish-list of the most rapacious sections of big business. Not only is the ADQ demanding massive tax and spending cuts, it is pledged to introducing a 20 percent flat tax, under which all tax payers would ostensibly be taxed at the same rate. The introduction of a flat tax would result in massive tax savings for the rich and super-rich, who already benefit from a capital gains tax

rate far below that charged on employment income.

The 20 percent flat tax would blow a hole in Quebec's fiscal balance sheet. Indeed it is intended to do precisely that. Dumont has made no secret that he would drastically curtail public spending, while devoting a considerable portion of government revenues to paying down Quebec's more than \$100 billion accumulated debt.

While he has avoided detailing the spending cuts the ADQ would make for fear of scaring off voters, Dumont has made clear that despite chronic emergency room overcrowding and lengthy waiting lists for vital medical procedures, an ADQ government would not countenance any increase in the provincial health care budget. Rather the ADQ would promote the development of a parallel private health care in which the rich would be able to get the medical help they wanted, while the rest of the population had to make do with a chronically under-funded and short-staffed public system.

One way the ADQ would reduce state expenditure would be by eliminating tens of thousands of public sector jobs through privatization and the abolition of public sector job security guarantees.

Dumont and the ADQ have also spoken in favor of charter schools, as well as the privatization of the management of most public services. Citizens, the ADQ leader told the Canadian Club, should have the "right to choose which institution will provide them with the services their tax dollars entitle them to." Like other right-wing politicians, Dumont invokes freedom of choice when what he really means is the ending of universal access to quality public services and carte blanche for ever more extreme social inequality.

In contradistinction to both the PQ and the Liberals, the ADQ is calling for a moratorium on the Quebec elite's attempts to modify Quebec's constitutional status, whether within or without Canada. Formed as the result of a Quebec nationalist split-off from the Liberals, the ADQ remains programmatically committed to a vast decentralization of power from Canada's federal government to the provinces. In the 1995 referendum on Quebec's secession from Canada, it was aligned with the Parti Québécois and its sister party in Canada's federal parliament, the Bloc Québécois.

By calling for a moratorium in the federalist/separatist debate the ADQ is able to appeal to the mass of voters—French, English and immigrant—who are tired of the wrangling over the constitution, which they view as little connected to the more pressing issues of increasing poverty and economic insecurity and deteriorating public services. At the same time, Dumont is hoping to rally big business, which believes that the constitutional issue has become an impediment to forging the elite political ruling class consensus needed to press forward with the gutting of labor

and environmental standards and the dismantling of public services.

Dumont has not discarded all nationalist appeals. He simply is trying to make them conform more transparently with the current needs of big business. In his Canadian Club speech, Dumont called for a "new patriotism" which would serve both as a smokescreen for the state shunting aside its responsibilities to those in need and a means of rallying all Quebecers behind big business in the struggle for market share and profits. "You will find us a fierce competitor," Dumont told Toronto's financial and political elite, "when it comes to attracting investment with a hospitable regulatory and fiscal environment and world-class infrastructures. We made it too easy for Ontario for too long."

The labor bureaucracy bears the principal responsibility for the ADQ's emergence as a contender for provincial power. For decades the unions have split the working class on national-ethnic lines, subordinating it to the Canadian nationalist New Democratic Party in English Canada and the Parti Québécois in Canada's only majority French-language province. In the 1995 referendum, the Quebec unions endorsed the PQ, Bloc Québécois and ADQ plan for an independent capitalist Quebec, claiming that secession would constitute a bulwark against the right-wing wave sweeping North America. No sooner was the referendum over than the unions joined hands with the PQ government to impose massive social spending cuts in the name of eliminating the province's annual budget deficit. During the past seven years there have been repeated indications of mass public disaffection with the corporate agenda being implemented by both Quebec's traditional parties—most notably during the 1999 nurses' strike—but the unions have worked systematically to suppress the class struggle.

Predictably the leaders of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), and the Quebec Union Federation (CSQ) have responded to the rise of the ADQ by clutching still tighter to the apron strings of the PQ and the Liberals. At the same time they have signalled that in the event the ADQ comes to power, they are ready to work with it. "We are not going to declare war on the ADQ," affirmed FTQ President Henri Massé, in response to Dumont's pledge to abolish public sector workers' contractual guarantees of job security.



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