

Canadian Elections:

The Bloc Québécois a political instrument of the québécois elite

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The fraudulent character of the 2004 Canadian elections—in which the establishment parties accuse one another of having a hidden agenda while each prepares, behind the backs of the population, to intensify the assault of big business on the social conditions of workers—has not spared Quebec. The party that leads the opinion polls in Quebec, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), is an *indépendantiste* party that articulates the interests of an important section of the province's elite by pressing for a reconfiguration of the nation-state system in North America to the advantage of the Quebec bourgeoisie. But in an assiduous campaign, mounted in concert with the mass media and the trade union bureaucracy, the BQ has attempted to pass itself off as a “progressive” party that represents “all Québécois.”

The Bloc's rise in the polls is not because of any genuine popular enthusiasm for its program. At the beginning of the year, the polling companies were predicting that the BQ would suffer a fate similar to that of its sister party, the Parti Québécois, which was routed in the April 2003 provincial election, and that the federal Liberals would win the vast majority of Quebec's 75 seats. But support for the Liberals collapsed in a matter of only a few weeks. This was in part because of the sponsorship scandal. In February, the auditor-general reported that possibly tens of millions of dollars were doled out by Ottawa to Liberal-friendly advertising agencies in exchange for little or no actual work, under a program ostensibly intended to promote the image of the federal government in Quebec after the near victory of the separatists in the October 1995 Quebec referendum.

But from a more fundamental standpoint, the popular swing against the federal Liberals is a reaction against years of deteriorating public services and increasing economic insecurity and hardship. Also, thanks to the support of the unions, the BQ has been able to politically profit from the massive popular opposition to the provincial Liberal government's socially destructive plans to “re-engineer” the state through privatization and deregulation and to promote corporate competitiveness through outsourcing. The sponsorship scandal “broke” within weeks of a series of mass and largely spontaneous protests against the Charest Liberal government that threatened to become a general strike.

The central slogan of the BQ, “A party belonging to Quebec” [un parti propre au Québec], is a pun that plays on the two senses of the word *propre*—“belonging to” and “clean” or uncorrupt. It concentrates into a brief formula the twin themes of the BQ's electoral campaign. While making vapid nationalist appeals like “we will defend the interests of Quebec,” the BQ, to turn attention away from the contradictions and right-wing substance of its own program, rails

against the corruption of the Liberals.

By claiming to “defend the interests of Quebec,” the Bloc's leader, the former union official and Maoist Gilles Duceppe, seeks to obscure the fact that there are two Quebecs: that of the elite, which subordinates all society to its quest for profits; and that of the masses, who took to the streets by the hundreds of thousands to protest against the war in Iraq and, more recently, against the right-wing program of the provincial Liberal government.

Duceppe seeks to perpetuate the myth that the “Québécois” have common interests that transcend the profound disparities in their socioeconomic status and that Quebec workers have more in common with the Péladeaus, Lamarres, and other Quebec capitalists than they do with workers in English Canada. But the harsh reality of contemporary life—an economy more than ever globally integrated on the one hand, a coordinated assault of the transnational companies on the standard of living of workers of all countries on the other—demonstrates on a daily basis that the pivotal differences in society are differences of class and not language, race or ethnic origin.

A regional party born out of the constitutional crises of the late 1980s, the BQ doesn't aspire to take federal office. As it has in every federal election since 1993, the BQ is standing candidates only in Quebec, which accounts for about a quarter of all the seats in the House of Commons. Because it doesn't seek to form the government, the BQ has the luxury of being able to promise certain limited social reforms, the better to cultivate the “progressive” image that the union bureaucracy has helped fashion for it.

The BQ was founded by renegade Liberal and Tory politicians, led by Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's Quebec lieutenant, Luçien Bouchard. Yet unlike the PQ—the older and more politically important of the two separatist parties—it today counts on its front bench a number of former trade union officials, including Duceppe, Francine Lalonde and Pierre Paquette.

That the BQ's claim to be “progressive” can at all be taken seriously is a measure of the extent to which the official politics of the bourgeoisie has moved to the right. The BQ supports tax cuts for the rich, the anti-democratic laws created in the name of the war against terrorism, and economic protectionism, and has adopted the rhetoric of law and order. Vying with the Canadian government for Washington's favor, the BQ supported Canada's participation in the NATO war on Yugoslavia, the US invasion of Afghanistan, and the current NATO mission that is propping up the US-installed regime in Kabul. Like the federal Liberal government, the BQ was prepared to support the participation of the Canadian Armed Forces in the

invasion of Iraq if only the UN Security Council had authorized it; and the BQ supports the current occupation of Iraq, with the sole reservation that this colonial enterprise should be covered by a U.N. fig leaf.

Entirely indifferent to the fate of the workers in the rest of Canada, the BQ looks kindly upon the possibility of a Conservative minority government, to which it could offer its support in exchange for concessions to the Quebec elite, including a massive decentralization of powers in favor of the provinces. The Conservatives, led by the neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, see decentralization as a means of demolishing what remains of Canada's social programs.

Other sections of the separatists see that the bringing of the Conservatives to power—a party that has little support in Quebec, will in all likelihood hold not a single Quebec seat, and contains a good number of Anglo-chauvinists and Protestant social-conservatives—will help create the “winning conditions” for a referendum on Quebec secession. Thus, the most recent edition of the separatist journal *Le Québécois* declares that with a Conservative government it would be “evident to all that Canada has a completely different and irreconcilable personality from that of Quebec.” It must be recalled that at the time of the 1995 referendum, the argument advanced by these same forces for Quebec's secession from Canada was that the new country “would be a rampart against the right-wing wave sweeping across North America.” Then, no sooner was the referendum over, than the PQ government, like right-wing governments across North America, declared that public and social services must be massively scaled back to balance the budget.

The true class nature of the BQ becomes clear if one looks at the balance sheet of the Parti Québécois (PQ), with which it shares not only a common cause, but virtually the same leadership and electoral organisations. BQ founder Lucien Bouchard headed the PQ provincial government from 1995 to 2001, and Duceppe is already being touted by some as a possible candidate for the PQ leadership.

The Bloc Québécois gave its unconditional support to the zero-deficit program implemented by the PQ government of Bouchard under which billions were cut from health care, education and social services; it likewise backed every other major initiative taken by the PQ during the years it most recently formed Quebec's government (1994-2003).

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If the PQ was routed in the April 2003 provincial election, that was because it was the Québécois version of the right-wing governments seen across Canada over the last 10 years: the Conservative government led by Mike Harris in Ontario, the Liberal government led by Gordon Campbell in British Columbia and the federal Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin. Already, by its second term, the PQ government had introduced a barrage of anti-union laws, imposed savage budget cuts in the name of “zero-deficit” politics, closed some dozen hospitals, thrown the mentally ill into the street in the name of a phony social reinsertion plan, mounted frontal attacks on welfare recipients and eliminated tens of thousands of jobs in the public sector.

In this electoral campaign, the union leaders are supporting the BQ even more strongly than ever. The two largest trade union federations in Quebec, together accounting for almost a million of Quebec's 4 million workers, have called upon their members to vote for the Bloc.

Henri Massé, president of the Fédération des travailleurs du Québec (FTQ), invited Gilles Duceppe to address the workers at the Montreal

plant of aircraft manufacturer Bombardier. The two issued a resounding call for the federal government to consider giving another half-billion dollars to Bombardier in order to “save the aeronautical industry” in Quebec.

Massé openly called for a Bloc vote: “I will say it and say it again: it is clear that among our members there is much sympathy for the Bloc and there are many who are working for the Bloc.” Massé justified his support for the BQ by adding that the Liberals and the Conservatives are more right wing and the New Democrats are too committed to a “strong central government.”

The union leaders fear that the immense opposition to the Charest Liberals' program of privatization, budget cuts, and elimination of public services will escape from their control and that of the discredited PQ. They have redoubled their support for the BQ, hoping by this means to engineer a political revival of the PQ. At the same time, a phalanx of former leading union bureaucrats has organized a new faction inside the PQ, *Les syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre* [Unionists and progressives for an independent Quebec] so as to once more politically subordinate the working class to the PQ and its reactionary project to carve out a new capitalist nation-state in North America.

However, the political situation has evolved greatly since the 1960s and 1970s, when the union leaders succeeded in containing the militancy of the Quebec working class—a part of a worldwide worker radicalization—within a capitalist framework by channeling it into the blind alley of Quebec nationalism. In that period, the PQ associated the idea of independence with an expansion of the welfare state. Today, the Quebec sovereignty project put forward by the PQ and BQ is explicitly right wing, a means for providing Quebec business with a state more attuned to its struggle for overseas markets and profits. As the PQ and BQ have spelled out, a “sovereign” Quebec would be entirely committed to NATO and NAFTA. Indeed, many in the separatist camp argue that Quebec should adopt the US dollar to further cement its relations with Washington and Wall Street.

Quebec nationalism, like the Canadian nationalism of the social-democratic NDP and trade union bureaucracy in English Canada, has left workers politically disarmed in the face of the demands of the financial markets for reduced wages, poorer working conditions and job cuts. According to the logic of nationalism, one must ally with “our” businesses for them to remain viable in face of global competition. The only progressive option, including in the struggle against discrimination and for the democratic rights of all Québécois, is for Quebec workers to unite with those in the rest of North America in a common struggle to reorganize the economy towards the end of satisfying human needs, not multiplying the profits of a tiny minority.



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