

Quebec: government funding of private schools provokes public outcry

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The Quebec nationalist daily *Le Devoir* revealed January 13 that the province's Liberal government was going to give \$10 million to five private Jewish schools in the Montreal region. The additional funding would have increased the province's per student funding of the Jewish private schools from 60 percent of the funding given public schools to 100 percent, or from \$3,120 per student per year to \$5,200.

This planned increase in state funding for private schools provoked an outcry, both from the general population and from within Quebec's political elite. Wide layers of the population correctly saw the funding announcement—which was dressed up by the government as a means of promoting inter-community understanding—as the latest step in the Liberal government's assault on public services. For their part, the corporate media and the two opposition parties attacked Jean Charest and his government for having made the funding decision without any prior consultation, and then failing to explain it to the public.

Following their election in April 2003, the Liberals launched a major drive to “reengineer the state,” by which they mean drastically scaling back the scope and reach of public services, so that personal income and corporate taxes can be reduced by an additional \$1 billion per year or \$15 billion over a five-year period. Toward that end the Liberals have set about privatizing the construction of public infrastructure and the management and the delivery of services in all sectors of government activity—from water, highways and hydroelectricity to public transport, ambulance services and health care. At the end of last year, the Liberals adopted legislation creating a new Agency for Public-Private Partnerships, which is charged with promoting PPPs in Quebec's public and para-public sectors and reviewing any significant new government infrastructure project to determine whether it would be possible to involve the private sector.

A week after the January 13 announcement, the Charest Liberal government retracted its decision to provide 100 percent per capita financing to some private schools. “It's clear that we haven't met the support that we expected,”

conceded the premier.

The official reaction, both on the part of the opposition parties and the union bureaucracy, had been limited almost entirely to reproaching the government for having acted in secret. And some Quebec nationalists made veiled appeals to anti-Semitic sentiment, with accusations that the funding announcement was tied to contributions from wealthy Jews to the Liberal Party.

Rare were those among the elite who spoke out against the deterioration of public schools and the government's privatization drive. But the popular reaction clearly was fuelled by these concerns. A poll by *Léger Marketing* found that 89 percent of people were against the government financing private Jewish schools and 85 percent were against the idea of state financing for private schools irrespective of religious orientation.

Over the last decade, especially since the Parti Québécois government of Lucien Bouchard massively cut public and social spending beginning in 1996, students have shifted in ever-increasing numbers from public to private schools. During the last four years, attendance at Quebec public schools has risen by 0.65 percent, while that in private schools attendance has increased by 12 percent. Of Canada's 10 provinces, Quebec has the highest percentage of its youth attending private schools: 10.6 percent of Quebec students attend the province's 220 private schools, for the most part at the secondary level.

The increase in private schooling has been fuelled both by the decline in state support for public schools and by the generous support that the Quebec government gives to private schooling. The total state support for private schools—as opposed to the per capita grant—has risen in the past five years from 40 percent of the support given the province's public schools to 44 percent. During fiscal year 2004-2005, Quebec will give some \$375 million to private schools.

The popular outcry over public funding for private schools is only the most recent manifestation of deep-rooted working class opposition to the Liberal government—an opposition

that has repeatedly exploded to the surface but which has then fallen latent not finding a conscious political expression.

In the last two months of 2003, there was a sudden groundswell of demonstrations and strikes against a battery of reactionary bills, including abolition of Article 45 of the province's labor code that restricted employers' ability to contract out work. In order to regain control over the opposition to the Charest government, union leaders had to threaten to organize a general strike. The union bureaucrats then used the Christmas period to demobilize the opposition and since then have sought to suppress any serious mobilization of working people against the Charest government, while intensifying their efforts to boost the big business Parti Québécois.

A poll by *CROP-La Presse*, carried out January 15-24, found that 63 percent of Quebecers consider themselves "somewhat or very dissatisfied" with the Charest government, an increase of 3 percentage points over the month before.

Because the working class opposition to Charest has not found an independent and conscious political expression, Quebec's elite have been able to contain and defect it, even manipulate it to their profit. This phenomenon has again been witnessed in the mini-crisis provoked by the Charest government's plan to increase state funding for Jewish private schools. The corporate media used the school funding issue to give a lesson to Charest, whom it perceives as wasting the little political capital he has remaining on questions that, in their eyes, are secondary, while wavering before popular opposition to the government's plans to slash public spending and redistribute income to the well-to-do and big business.

An article by long-time columnist Alain Dubuc, appearing in the Montréal newspaper *La Presse* and other dailies, is very revealing in this regard. For Dubuc, the Charest government has not been "up to the reforms that it promised." Noting that an opposition movement has "crystallized" against the government's plans, Dubuc says he is prepared to give the Liberals a second chance. But he warns them that they "find themselves under the uncomfortable obligation of carrying out their reforms at the end of their mandate rather than the beginning. But the challenge is not impossible if the Charest government succeeds in that at which it has long failed: explaining its plans, targeting its objectives and not retreating."

Others make more explicit the objectives to which the Charest government should devote itself. Quebec's most powerful business lobby group, the Conseil du patronat du Québec (CPQ), calls for personal and corporate income tax cuts to be sharply reduced and the capital tax eliminated,

while the Institut économique de Montréal (IEDM) is pressing for a flat income tax rate—all measures that would undermine the financial basis for vital public and social services.

It is worth noting, that the IEDM, a right-wing think tank, has been pushing for some time for the expansion of private schools. Each year it publishes a report on the performance of Quebec's schools—ranking every school, public and private. It goes without saying that generally the private schools—which can select their students according to economic and scholastic criteria, systematically weeding out students in difficulty—come out ahead.

Four weeks after his reversal on the private schools question—weeks in which the media continued to criticize the Liberals for their lack of direction—Premier Charest tried to demonstrate he had gotten big business's message by announcing a major cabinet shuffle and associating it with a new drive to push through spending and tax cuts.

With his new cabinet, Charest has shifted his government sharply to the right. Finance Minister Yves Séguin was returned to the Liberal backbench, because he had warned that cutting taxes by a billion dollars per year will have a massive adverse impact on the most vulnerable sections of society. He has been replaced by one of the most right-wing members of the Liberal caucus, former Quebec Chamber of Commerce president Michel Audet.

In introducing his cabinet to the press, Charest said a key part of his ministers' mandate is to "persist in the clear explanation" of the "difficult choices that lie ahead." Speaking before the Montreal Board of Trade three days later, Charest paraphrased a recent *La Presse* editorial declaring, "If we had to have a theme-song the title would be, 'Free us from the status quo!'"



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