

# Canada: Parti Québécois thrown into unexpected leadership race

Guy Charron  
23 September 2005

Last June's surprise resignation of Bernard Landry as leader of the Parti Québécois (PQ) has forced the PQ—the big business, pro-*indépendantiste* party that has alternated with the Liberal Party of Québec in forming Quebec's provincial government for the past three decades—into an unexpected leadership race whose outcome is highly uncertain.

The election of the new PQ leader will take place November 15. Out of the dozen or so people who initially announced their intention to run, nine fulfilled the requirements to become official candidates. The best known are Pauline Marois and André Boisclair.

Marois has been a member of the National Assembly (the provincial legislature) for almost 25 years and was a candidate for the PQ leadership in 1985. At one point or another, she has held all the most important ministries and for a time served as vice-premier. Boisclair, meanwhile, plays the card of youth and rejuvenation. Younger than Marois by 15 years, he was among the first Quebec politicians to openly declare his homosexuality.

Despite his youth, Boisclair is associated with the party establishment. First elected to the National Assembly at the age of 23, Boisclair has almost as long a parliamentary career as Marois and has held several ministries, albeit not as important as the ministries Marois ran between 1994 and 2003.

Another highly significant candidacy, even if it has been largely ignored by the major media outlets, is that of Pierre Dubuc, the secretary of the "Trade Unionists and Progressives for an Independent Quebec" [Syndicalistes et Progressistes pour un Québec Libre] or "SPQ libre."

The union bureaucracy has been one of the principal pillars of the PQ since the early 1970s, when it embraced the PQ and Quebec nationalism as a means of politically derailing a radical working-class upsurge. With the foundation of the SPQ libre in 2004, an important section of Quebec's union officialdom has intensified its involvement in the PQ with the aim of refurbishing that party's badly-tattered "left" credentials.

Both the leadership race itself and the circumstances surrounding the resignation of Bernard Landry are manifestations of a deep malaise eating away at the PQ.

Landry stunned last June's PQ congress by announcing he was quitting politics effective immediately, only minutes after it was announced that a quarter of the 1,600 congress delegates had voted "No" when asked if they had confidence in his leadership.

Landry's resignation—which brought many delegates to tears—was surprising, because in the months before the congress, he had appeared to consolidate his position within the party. He had faced considerable dissension within the PQ parliamentary caucus following

the party's fall from power in the April 2003 elections and was forced to make concessions to those in the party ranks who felt he was not promoting the PQ's vision of an independent Quebec with sufficient vigor. But in the months prior to the congress, the principal pretenders to the PQ leadership—Marois and another former minister, François Legault—had declared their support for Landry. Landry had also won the official backing of the leadership of the SPQ libre, in exchange for the party presidency being given to the president of the SPQ libre, the former head of the CSQ (Confederation of Quebec Unions), Monique Richard.

Whilst there was no public campaign to defeat Landry at the congress, it would appear that the bulk of the opposition to his leadership came from the *purs et durs* or hard-line pro-independence faction. In any event, Landry calculated that with such a feeble endorsement of his leadership, he had the choice of resigning or facing the prospect of the death of a thousand cuts, as calls for him to step down would inevitably have escalated in the ensuing months.

The PQ claims to be a progressive party dedicated to "social solidarity," yet under its rule, Quebec workers have faced some of the severest attacks.

During its most recent spell as the government (1994-2003), the PQ mounted an all-out assault on social and public services. Under the premiership of Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard and then Bernard Landry, the PQ government closed dozens of hospitals, threw thousands of mental patients out onto the streets, eliminated 30,000 jobs in the public sector and promoted workfare.

While the PQ succeeded in implementing its "zero deficit" program, thanks to the unshakable support of the union bureaucracy, the resulting massive erosion in the quality of public health care, education and other service caused popular support for the PQ to hemorrhage.

In the 2003 elections, the PQ lost 500,000 votes, or almost a third of its support relative to the 1998 elections. With just 1.2 million votes (33 percent of votes cast, or 23 percent of registered voters), the PQ had its worst electoral result since 1973, when the party had yet to form a government.

Even now, support for the PQ is remarkably weak when one considers the intensity of the opposition to the Liberal government of Jean Charest, which just seven months after winning office confronted mass protests against its program of privatization, contracting-out, and social spending and tax cuts. According to the opinion polls, the PQ enjoys the support of barely 40 percent of voters. Whereas the party had 300,000 members at the beginning of the 1980s, today it has no more than 70,000.

Despite the large numbers of candidates, the leadership race has had

no significant impact on the party's membership rolls.

Although the vast majority of workers and youth have yet to consciously reject the *indépendantiste* program, the PQ is more and more widely perceived to be an establishment party. And in the context of globalization—where in every nation-state, workers are confronted by an offensive on the part of big business, organized in transnational companies, on jobs, wages and public services—the call for a Quebec nation-state sounds hollow to increasing numbers.

The PQ has also lost much of its luster in the eyes of big business.

In business circles, Landry was considered the most reliable person to lead the PQ. From their point of view, he had proven himself. In the 1980s, he played a major role in mobilizing the PQ in favour of free trade between Canada and the United States, which he viewed as a way of freeing Quebec capital from its traditional dependence on the Toronto-based banks and investment houses. As finance minister during the middle and late 1990s, Landry was the principal architect of the PQ's program of public and social spending cuts, and, as premier from 2001 to 2003, he cut taxes and increased subsidies to big business.

Landry and the PQ leadership had hoped that their aggressive pursuit of the demands of big business would convince the most powerful sections of Quebec capital to embrace their scheme for an independent *République du Québec*. But even as the Québécois elite was applauding the PQ government's anti-working class assault, profound political and economic changes were reinforcing its traditional skepticism about the wisdom of Quebec's secession.

The Quebec bourgeoisie now considers obsolete the strategy that it followed since the 1960s, the so-called Quebec model. This strategy involved the use of the state and, within certain limits, state ownership, to promote the development of a powerful Québécois bourgeoisie. It also involved the creation of a whole series of tripartite bodies in which, in the name of government-union-business cooperation, the union bureaucracy was given a modest share of power and influence in return for its role in policing the working class.

With the bourgeoisie having swung sharply over to deregulation, privatization, and a ratcheting back of both the social gains won by the working class and the crumbs accorded the union bureaucracy, the Parti Québécois has been forced to elaborate a new vision. In an independent Quebec, the PQ now argues, business will have the support of a state that no longer has to take into account the divergent interests of other sections of Canadian capital, will be able to benefit from more advantageous financial incentives and, with the elimination of one level of government, a more streamlined and therefore less-costly state sector, while still having trade access under NAFTA to the US, already far and away Québec's main export market.

The greater part of big business fears, however, that its position would be weakened if Quebec seceded due to the loss of various advantages flowing from Canada's size and participation in the G-7 and other international alliances.

Nor has big business failed to note the hardening of the positions of both Washington and Ottawa towards Quebec's separation.

Following the 1995 Quebec referendum, Washington abandoned its traditional stance of "non-interference" to make clear its support for a united Canada, including its declaration that the accession of an independent Quebec to NAFTA would not be automatic.

The Canadian government, meanwhile, has adopted the Clarity Act, which gives the federal parliament the right to decide, after the fact, what constitutes a popular mandate for secession and which threatens a seceding Quebec with partition, a scenario that raises the prospect of

civil war.

The present leadership race will do nothing to resolve the PQ's internal contradictions. The tensions between the different factions that led to Landry's resignation will be exacerbated as the various factions confront each other over who should assume the post of party leader.

So divided is the PQ, that there was a weeks-long effort during the summer, mounted by party veterans, to convince Landry to enter the race to succeed himself.

The two main candidates, Pauline Marois and André Boisclair, are both very close to Landry politically. Their politics, like his, are a direct expression of the interests of big business. For that reason, they are equivocal over when, and under what conditions, a new referendum on Quebec sovereignty should be held, and even more importantly, over what relations an independent Quebec will have with the rest of Canada.

Clearly, the victory of either would disappoint the *purs et durs*. This faction, which includes a large section of the most active PQ members, comprises elements of the petty bourgeoisie that are more chauvinist, impatient and reckless than the traditional party leadership.

Most of the leadership candidates disagree with the new program adopted at the PQ congress where Landry tendered his resignation. This program commits a future PQ government to organize a winning referendum on sovereignty as quickly as possible and, in the meantime, to use its control of the state apparatus to promote independence, without, however, going so far as to defy the constitution of Canada. The new program also says that in the event a majority of Quebecers vote yes in a referendum, the PQ will proceed to effect Quebec independence without any offer to the rest of Canada to negotiate a new political or even economic partnership. While many of the more moderate *Péquistes* continue to favor such a partnership offer, many of the *purs et durs* object that the program further stipulates Quebec will only become independent once Quebec voters endorse the constitution of a sovereign Quebec in a second referendum.

One leadership candidate, Jean-Claude St-André, declared at the beginning of his campaign, "It must be clear that, during the next election, a vote for the Parti Québécois is a vote for sovereignty. As soon as it is elected, the Parti Québécois must put in motion the process that will lead to the independence of Québec."

Another candidate, Ghislain Lebel, has criticized his opponents for downplaying traditional, nationalist rhetoric that identifies Quebec nationalism with the descendants of the French-Catholic colonists of New France. They have made "a blank slate of our history," complained Lebel. "In order to seek the support of the cultural communities [i.e., immigrants and those whose mother tongue isn't French], they make no [mention] of ethnicity, religion is nothing. Weakening our identity is the wrong road."



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**