

Le Parti Québécois chooses André Boisclair as its new leader—a further shift to the right

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The election of André Boisclair as Parti Québécois (PQ) leader last month represents a new stage in the rightward evolution of the PQ—the big-business, pro- Québec independence party that has formed Québec’s provincial government for 18 of the past 30 years in alternation with the Liberal Party of Québec.

With the election of Boisclair, whose policies and style are those of a young entrepreneur, the PQ has further distanced itself from the pseudo-socialist, pro-labor rhetoric it espoused in the 1970s. Under the leadership of Boisclair, the PQ will seek to widen its support in the most privileged sections of the middle class, by promising tax cuts that will be financed through cuts to public services and cuts to the social programs upon which the most vulnerable sections of the population depend.

Boisclair is considered to be on the right of the PQ, having been a protégé of former PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard, an ex-federal Conservative cabinet minister, and then of PQ Premier Bernard Landry, who as Bouchard’s finance minister imposed the steepest social spending cuts in Québec history.

Of the nine candidates for the PQ leadership, Boisclair was the only one to publicly support the manifesto *For a clear-eyed vision of Québec* recently published by Lucien Bouchard together with other leading establishment figures, both *indépendantistes* and federalists.

After raising the alarm over a decline in the proportion of young Québécois and the emergence of China and India as economic competitors, *For a clear-eyed vision of Québec* proposes a slew of right-wing policy changes. These include reducing income taxes while raising consumption taxes; making the elimination of government debt a top priority so as to free up money for so-called productive investments (like education and training); more privatizations and public-private partnerships; hiking university tuition fees; significantly raising residential electricity rates; developing a work environment that encourages performance and innovation (i.e., gutting labor standards and work rules); and a host of other measures aimed at encouraging “entrepreneurship” and “economic freedom”.

Boisclair is the response of the PQ establishment to the erosion of support for their party, both among working people and big business. Québec’s governing party for nine years

beginning in 1994, the PQ could by the time of the 2003 elections count on the active support from only the labor bureaucracy and certain layers of the petty bourgeoisie. As a result, the PQ lost more than half a million votes and saw its share of the popular vote fall to its lowest since the 1973 election, which was held only five years after the PQ’s founding.

In seeking the PQ leadership, the 39 year-old Boisclair very much played the youth card, pitching himself as someone who could appeal to younger Québécois and who was more in tune, than the “old guard,” with Québec’s increasing multicultural character.

Yet Boisclair has been associated throughout his long political career—he was first elected to the Québec National Assembly in 1989—with the party establishment, and it was these circles who promoted his leadership bid. Under the protecting wing of Bouchard and then Landry, Boisclair occupied several ministerial posts. As minister of Employment and Social Solidarity, a ministry that, according to the *Globe & Mail*, he ran “with the ruthlessness of an entrepreneur,” Boisclair was an ardent supporter of the PQ’s “zero deficit” program.

He presided over freezes of and cuts to welfare benefits, then developed numerous regulations to justify further reductions to the meager benefits that remained. He also permitted corporations, during the dot-com stock market boom of the late 1990s, to seize control of surpluses in their employee pension funds.

Boisclair’s principal adversary, Pauline Marois, was defeated because she was seen to be too much rooted in the traditional PQ politics that the right wing of the party is determined to jettison. An important figure in the PQ since the 1970s, Marois has held all of the key ministerial posts except that of premier, and consequently was considered too closely tied to the union bureaucracy and too much part of the PQ “old guard” that helped establish the “Québec model” of socio-economic development.

Boisclair, conversely, has never concealed that he considers the PQ too far left. Since he first became a PQ minister in 1996, Boisclair has been among those in the PQ most identified with the call to radically revise the “Québec model.”

The “Québec model” is the name given to the strategy that Québec’s political and business elite developed in the 1960s. It consisted of using the powers of the provincial state to support Québec’s economic development and in particular to strengthen Québec-owned businesses and the francophone bourgeoisie. In keeping with this policy, the state took charge of the health and education systems, which up until that point had been left in the hands of the Catholic clergy, and, in response to the militant worker struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s, developed an institutionalized form of corporatist collaboration between government, business and the union bureaucracy.

In calling for a revision of the “Québec model”, Boisclair is indicating that the Québec elite needs a new strategy, one that would entail a reduction in state support for small and medium-sized businesses, further attacks on workers’ rights, and an all-out assault on what remains of the welfare state.

Boisclair has lost no time in showing his true colours. Since becoming head of the PQ, he has distanced himself from the position of the PQ caucus in the National Assembly on the question of the privatization of the health care system and embraced business’s call for major changes to public health care.

The future of Medicare, Canada’s provincially administered national health insurance scheme, has emerged as a key issue in Québec as throughout Canada. While the majority of the public remains adamantly opposed to health care privatization, big business is determined to overthrow Medicare, because it deems it an unacceptable drain on the state treasury and because it perceives the provision of health care to be a massive, largely untapped source of profits.

Pointing to the lengthy waiting lists for even life-saving medical procedures (the result of the brutal cuts made to health care by both the federal and provincial governments), Canada’s Supreme Court has ordered the Québec government to allow big business to establish a system of private health care for the well-off. The latter will be allowed to buy private insurance and even finance a parallel private health care system.

This will drain resources from the public health care system and soon lead to demands from big business and the well-off that state funding of the public health care system be sharply curtailed so that corporate and personal income taxes can be reduced.

Québec is already among the Canadian provinces with the highest proportion of care provided by the private sector. In recent years, hundreds of medical clinics, radiological clinics, and private blood-test centres have emerged.

When it was in power, the PQ reinforced the private health care system, closed hospitals and established a system for rationing health care that involved lengthy waiting lists. None of this prevented the PQ MNAs (Members of the National Assembly) from demagogically demanding that the provincial Liberal government circumvent the Supreme Court order by

using a provision of the Canadian constitution that allows legislatures to suspend the application of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Boisclair has put an end to this stand—which was aimed at refurbishing the PQ’s tattered left-wing credentials—and signaled his intention to support the Supreme Court decision and the expansion of private health care.

In explaining why he was reversing the PQ’s stand on the Supreme Court ruling, Boisclair said he was not “unaware of the discussions taking place at this moment in Québec society” around the role of private health care. “I think it is the right time to discuss things in an intelligent way and to participate in the debate.” The PQ he declared should not be “apostles of the status quo,” a phrase cribbed from *For a clear-eyed vision of Québec*.

“We already have good insurance at this moment,” added Boisclair, “that of the Régie de l’assurance maladie du Québec [Québec’s Medicare scheme]. Are there changes to bring about, improvements? Certainly. We need to view this dispassionately.”

Québec’s official, pro-capitalist “left” has responded to Boisclair’s election and the PQ’s further turn to the right by insisting even more strongly that workers must support the big-business PQ.

Pierre Dubuc, the secretary of the Syndicalistes at Progressistes Pour un Québec Libre (Unionists and Progressives for a Free Québec), who was himself a candidate for the PQ leadership, sharply criticized Boisclair and his “neo-liberal” politics during the leadership race and called on his supporters to give their second-ballot support to Marois. But no sooner was Boisclair elected, than Dubuc and various Québec union officials rushed to embrace the new PQ leader.

Subsequently Dubuc said, “Voices were raised in our political entourage critical of our rallying [to Boisclair], which they judged to be too hasty. Obviously one had to ask how we could rally to this new leader, who we described in the heat of debate as the ‘embodiment of the right.’ ” But, continued Dubuc, the objective of realizing the independence of Québec transcends any division between the right and the left. The PQ “must be a coalition party,” that unites “progressives” and “neo-liberals.”

Meanwhile, Françoise David, the director of Option Citoyenne (Citizen’s Option), which is to unite with the Union of Progressive Forces (UFP) in January 2006 to form a “new party of the left,” has criticized Dubuc for identifying Boisclair with the right wing. The new PQ leader has “interesting positions on certain subjects,” declared David.



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