

The Bloc Québécois: populism and nationalism in the service of the Québec bourgeoisie

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If the opinion polls prove correct, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the federal party which promotes the independence of Québec, will obtain its best ever result in next week's election. When the federal elections were called, the BQ had 54 Members of Parliament—all of them from Quebec, which accounts for 75 of the House of Commons' 308 seats.

The BQ presents itself as a progressive party that defends "the interests of Quebecers" and is supported by virtually the entire Quebec union bureaucracy. Some unions give the BQ their official support and donate union facilities and funds. Others officially refrain from supporting any party, but insist that both the Liberals and the Conservatives should be opposed: in other words, they call for a vote for the Bloc. The BQ also benefits from the support of the Parti Québécois (PQ), its sister party at the provincial level, which imposed savage budget cuts in social spending when it last formed Quebec's government (1994 to 2003).

Far from being a progressive party, the BQ defends the interests of big business and of that section of the Québec bourgeoisie that hopes to benefit from a rearranging of the nation-state system in North America and the creation of a capitalist République du Québec. Formed in 1993 by renegade Quebec MPs from the Progressive Conservatives and the Liberal Party of Canada, and supported at its birth by then-Quebec Liberal Premier (Robert Bourassa), the Bloc Québécois displays a deep hostility and contempt for the working class of both Québec and the rest of Canada. The BQ supported the "zero deficit" campaign, the name given to the PQ's program of severe cuts to social spending, and privately hopes that the Conservatives, a right-wing party with close ties to the American Republican Party, will form Canada's next federal government.

The BQ was eager for new federal elections, thinking the moment propitious for it to gain more MPs and votes (each vote brings a government subsidy of \$1.75 per year), as opinion polls last fall were showing that the BQ was poised to win more than 50 per cent of the popular vote in Québec. Another important consideration for the BQ is the weakening of the federal Liberals, who, together with the Liberal Party of Québec, have long formed the principal federalist political forces in Québec.

An increase in the number of BQ MPs and the weakening of the Liberals is seen among the *indépendantistes* as an important step toward a third referendum on the independence of Québec.

While professing indifference to which party forms Canada's next government, the *indépendantistes* would prefer that the Conservatives replace the Liberals because the Conservatives are closely tied to the bourgeoisie of western Canada, which, like them, favors a

decentralization of federal powers in favour of the provinces. Decentralization, in addition to offering more autonomy to the provinces of the West, is seen by the Conservatives as an instrument through which to raze what remains of the welfare State.

The BQ and the PQ also hope to use the election of a Conservative government, along with the unpopular measures that such a government would inevitably implement, as a way of arguing that Québec is different from and alien to Canada. (The Conservatives have for long been overwhelmingly based in English Canada, and the chances that they will elect more than a handful of deputies in Québec in this election are slim.)

The BQ collaborated closely with the Conservative Party of Stephen Harper in the last parliament, joining with the Conservatives in proclaiming the sponsorship scandal to be of unprecedented importance and in seeking to frame the coming election as a referendum on Liberal corruption. Their collaboration is so widely recognized that both the BQ and the Conservative Party are regularly compelled to deny that they are allies. The social conservatism and Anglophone-chauvinism with which the Conservative Party is associated are very unpopular in Québec, while the separatist option of the BQ provokes a visceral hatred among much of the Conservative Party's base.

The BQ's increased strength in the 2004 elections and likely strong result in this month's vote is not due to a popular groundswell for either the BQ or its *indépendantiste* option. Indeed, after the 2000 federal elections, and even more so after the PQ fell from power in 2003, there was much media speculation that the BQ would disappear.

The corporate media attributes the BQ's resurgence almost entirely to the sponsorship scandal—the exposure of a kickback scheme under which tens of millions in federal funds were supplied to Liberal-friendly advertising firms for little or no work, with a portion of the money then used to provide support to the Quebec wing of the federal Liberal Party.

But the real cause of the rise in the Bloc's fortunes is the same as that responsible for the decline in popular support for both it and the PQ at the end of the 1990s: deep-rooted, public opposition to cuts to social and public services, and widespread dissatisfaction with sinking living standards and increasing economic insecurity. The Quebec Liberal Party won power in Quebec in 2003 by making a calibrated appeal to popular anger over the decline of health care, education and other public and social services during the nine years of PQ rule. But support for Jean Charest's provincial Liberal government melted away like snow in the sun after it became clear that he wanted to go

much further with privatizations, the reduction of social and public services and tax cuts for the rich than had his PQ predecessors.

That the BQ and the PQ were able to benefit from popular opposition to the Charest government and its “reengineering of the State” was far from automatic or inevitable. It is mostly because the union leaders went out of their way to try to refurbish the tattered progressive credentials of the PQ and BQ, by strengthening their links with the two *indépendantiste* parties. At the same time, the union leaders have done everything in their power to suppress working-class opposition to the Charest Liberal government.

In December 2003, angry workers took to the streets in protests and spontaneous strikes against the Charest government. In order to maintain control of their members, the union leaders were forced to pledge that they would organize a one-day general strike early in the coming year. The strike was never called. Instead, the union leaders began promoting the claim that the only way to answer Charest was by returning the PQ to power in elections in 2007 or 2008, and a section of them created a faction within the PQ—the

Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre (SPQ libre)—to promote support for the BQ’s sister party.

Because it will never form the federal government, the BQ has great latitude in making populist promises, such as increased funding for Québec universities, the construction of social housing in Québec and reform of the employment insurance program to make it more beneficial to the jobless in Québec’s impoverished, hinterland regions. Such promises are combined with others that articulate the demands of big business, such as the BQ’s call for federal subsidies for large enterprises with subsidiaries in Québec, including the aerospace industry (Bombardier, Oerlikon, Bell Helicopter), the pharmaceutical industry, and the tobacco industry.

The BQ also echoes the traditional demands of the right for the reinforcing of law and order and supports the anti-democratic anti-terrorist laws adopted by the Chretien-Martin Liberals. In the electoral platform of the BQ, a document of 200 pages, one will find a lone mention of the war in Iraq as “illegal and illegitimate,” but this represents nothing more than a rhetorical flourish. In effect, the BQ insists “that Canada preserve its alliance and its friendly ties with the United States... [without] supporting all of the initiatives of the present American administration.”

In its attitude to the war on Iraq, the BQ adopts the traditional position of the Canadian bourgeoisie, which holds that its predatory interests are best served by balancing between European and US imperialism. In any case, the BQ would have supported the war in Iraq if it had been sanctioned by the United Nations, and supports “pre-emptive” wars carried out under the auspices of the Security Council of the UN.

The BQ and the PQ cultivate a calculated ambiguity regarding their call for Québec’s independence. In order to win maximum support and in order to better defend the interests of the bourgeoisie, the sister parties leave vague how they envisage the political and economic links between a sovereign Québec and Canada. Independence is touted as though it would be a paradise for workers, but the laws and the politics of an independent Québec would in fact be tailor-made to defend the interests of big business. The BQ, like the PQ, calls for an independent Québec that will participate in all of the major treaties in which Canada presently participates, including NATO and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTO).

On social questions, the real attitude and class character of the Bloc Québécois is revealed by its relationship with the Parti Québécois.

(While formally the two parties are distinct, they function in tandem, with the BQ serving as a farm team for the older and more politically important PQ.)

Between September 1994 and April 2003, the PQ formed one of the most right-wing governments in North America. It imposed, beginning in 1996, severe cuts in public and social spending, and eliminated tens of thousands of jobs in the public sector, so PQ Premier (and BQ founder) Lucien Bouchard could realize a promise to Wall Street to reduce public sector wage costs by 6 percent. The totality of these measures, along with the PQ’s anti-union laws, was saluted by the BQ.

Today, the BQ is ready to play the same role in a new big-business offensive against the working class. BQ leader Gilles Duceppe works hand in hand with André Boisclair, who won the PQ leadership by advocating the party move still further right. In December, Boisclair announced that if the PQ were to form the government after the next election, it would not reopen the wage-cutting and concessionary 7-year collective agreements the Charest government had just imposed on 500,000 public sector employees by decree. This anti-worker law also includes very severe reprisals for any job disruption, a measure the government included so as to pave the way for implementing its plans for privatization, contracting-out and job reductions in the public sector.

While Duceppe poses as sympathetic to the concerns of working people, he proclaimed that the *Manifesto for a Clear-Eyed Vision of Québec*, which was co-written by Lucien Bouchard, was a valuable contribution to public debate. This document, which has been endorsed by many prominent *indépendantiste* and federalist leaders, calls for a series of radical right-wing measures, such as reducing the income taxes of the well-to-do, increasing consumption taxes, carrying out privatizations and public-private partnerships, raising residential electricity rates and gutting labor regulations.

The campaign of the BQ, its close ties to the PQ, its defence of big business and its nationalism together constitute a warning for workers: this party is a trap for the working class.



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