Canada: Bloc Québécois props up Conservative government

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The Bloc Québécois—the *indépendantiste* party strongly supported by the Quebec trade union bureaucracy—is playing a pivotal role in sustaining Canada's new minority Conservative government in power.

While the BQ presents itself as a "progressive" party, its leaders were quick to endorse this month's Throne Speech, the inaugural address that outlines the government's agenda.

Drafted by Prime Minster and neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, the Throne Speech underscored that the Conservatives are determined to move the country sharply to the right. The speech trumpeted the Canadian Armed Forces' intervention in Afghanistan and pledged that Canada and its military will be more active on the world stage and work still more closely with the Bush administration. The speech also promised "fiscal responsibility" (the Conservatives long attacked their Liberal predecessors for "excessive" social spending), measures to strengthen "law and order" at the expense of democratic rights, and, in the name of "innovation," a much greater role for the private sector in the provision of health care.

"If the [government] continues to talk like that, we are ready to give it the benefit of the doubt and vote in favour," declared BQ leader Gilles Duceppe.

Subsequently, the BQ joined with the other opposition parties in praising the Canadian Armed Forces' deployment in the Kandahar region of Afghanistan, where Canadian troops are working with the US military to suppress opposition to the US-installed government in Kabul. "The work of the soldiers is exemplary," declared BQ MP Claude Bachand. "If Canadians and Québécois understood precisely the nature of the work the soldiers are doing, they would receive overwhelming support."

Duceppe's post-Throne Speech endorsement of the Harper government only repeated what he and other BQ leaders had been saying since the January 23 election: that the BQ is ready to give the Conservatives a "chance" to govern, since the replacement of the "corrupt" and "centralist" Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin is in "Quebec's interest."

In rallying behind the Conservatives, the BQ is responding to the push of the Canadian and Quebec corporate elite for a change of regime in Ottawa. Although the Liberals carried through the greatest tax and social-spending cuts in Canadian history and launched a major expansion of Canada's military, big business became increasingly dissatisfied with the Chrétien-Martin Liberals for temporizing in the face of popular opposition to big business's agenda.

The BQ played an important role in assisting the Conservatives' rise to power. During the last parliament and last winter's election campaign, the BQ worked hand-in-glove with the Conservatives in trying to frame the vote as a referendum on Liberal "corruption."

Apart from the need to "clean house" in Ottawa, the BQ is justifying its support for the most right-wing government in modern Canadian history on the grounds that the Conservatives are "more open to the interests of Quebec." By this, the BQ means more amenable to the demands of Quebec's ruling elite for greater funding and autonomy for the Quebec provincial government—the section of the state it most directly controls.

The "decentralization" advocated by Harper and his Conservatives and strongly supported by the bourgeoisie in Alberta and the other western provinces, as well as by Quebec's elite, has a double aim: to reapportion power amongst the various factions of the Canadian ruling class and to provide a mechanism for the Canadian ruling class to dismantle what remains of social programs and public services.

The BQ's current *de facto* alliance with the Conservatives is far from an accidental phenomenon

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arising out of the present parliamentary arithmetic. Despite its progressive and even anti-establishment claims, the BQ is a capitalist party, with myriad ties to the Quebec and Canadian bourgeoisie.

The BQ was created in 1991 following the defeat of Meech Lake—a constitutional accord that would have given the Québécois political and economic elite more power—as a means for the Québec bourgeoisie to pressure the Anglo-Canadian establishment. For this reason, the creation of the BQ was supported not only by the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois, but also by the then provincial Liberal government of Robert Bourassa.

The initial BQ MPs came from the ranks of both the traditional parties of the Canadian ruling class—the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives. The party's founder-leader was Lucien Bouchard, a former federal Conservative cabinet minister and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's designated Quebec lieutenant. This is the same Bouchard who recently co-signed the *Manifesto for a clear-eyed Québec*, a right-wing pamphlet that urges the Québécois elite, federalist and pro-independence, to temporarily put aside their differences over Quebec's constitutional status so as to focus on dismantling the social gains of the Québec working class and otherwise support big business in winning overseas markets.

The true nature of the BQ is most apparent in the record of its sister party, the Parti Québécois. Rather than two parties in close collaboration, the BQ and the PQ are best understood as one and the same party with two wings, one working at the provincial level and the other on the federal arena.

Having formed the government in Québec for four terms during the past three decades, the PQ has repeatedly demonstrated that "defending the interests of Quebec" means upholding the interests of big business against the working class.

One only has to consider the "zero-deficit" campaign launched by the PQ government under Lucien Bouchard. (After the defeat of the Yes-side in the 1995 referendum on Quebec independence, Bouchard left the leadership of the BQ to replace Jacques Parizeau as head of the PQ and Quebec premier.) In the name of eliminating the provincial deficit, the PQ cut tens of thousands of jobs in the public sector, closed hospitals and slashed public services. Then, in a progression that mirrored that of their federalist adversaries in the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government, the *péquistes* proclaimed, once the provincial deficit had been eliminated, that tax cuts were their new priority.

Since falling into opposition in 2003, the PQ has shifted still further right. Their new leader, André Boisclair, has welcomed the ongoing campaign for the privatization of whole sections of public health care, declaring that there are "modifications to carry out" in Quebec's universal and free public health insurance system. Boisclair has also endorsed the draconian special law that was imposed by the Quebec Liberal government last December against a half-million public sector workers. Boisclair has said that there is no question of a future PQ government re-opening the seven-year, concessions-laden collective agreements that the Liberals' imposed on the public sector worker by decree.

Both parties, the BQ and the PQ, have continually benefited from the loyal services of the union bureaucracy in rallying the working class behind the reactionary project of Québec sovereignty, which aims to further the predatory ambitions of Québec's ruling elite by dividing the working class along ethno-linguistic lines and carving out a new capitalist nation-state and US ally in North America.

The Québec unions supported the BQ during the recent federal elections, knowing full well that the BQ would throw its support behind a minority Conservative government. They thus played an important role in bringing to power the Conservatives. And the Quebec union bureaucrats are working actively to disorganize and suppress any working class resistance to the new government, by peddling the claims of the Conservatives and of the corporate media that the Harper government has a "moderate" agenda.

"I am happy to see the Conservatives will be a minority," declared Henri Massé, the president of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), the largest union federation in Quebec, in response to the Conservative election victory. "I'm not too worried for the workers," added Massé. "Mr. Harper hasn't made any promises to ransack the state, to cut services. He will just do a little housekeeping in the highest public office."

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