

Montreal bridge collapse: A case of criminal neglect

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Last weekend a highway overpass collapsed in Laval, a suburb north of Montreal, causing five deaths and severely wounding four. This tragedy is the outcome of the continuous deterioration of the country's infrastructure as a result of years of indifference and neglect on the part of the ruling elite.

A little after noon on Saturday, September 30, a section of the Concorde overpass, about twenty metres long and three lanes wide, suddenly collapsed onto the Papineau highway, burying two vehicles and their five occupants.

Even if all of the circumstances surrounding the collapse are not yet known, the information already made public attests to criminal negligence on the part of the authorities.

More than an hour before the incident, drivers on the highway had contacted emergency services to notify them about blocks of concrete on the road below the overpass, and just a few minutes before the collapse, a driver had informed them that the bridge platform had fallen several centimeters, causing cars to drop those centimeters when they ascended onto the bridge.

Twenty minutes after the first call, a patrol from the Québec Ministry of Transport appeared at the overpass. (Such patrols are not trained for inspecting highway infrastructure and are responsible only for the retrieval of debris from the highways.) The patrol demanded an inspection as soon as possible, but was given the response that an inspector would show up only on Monday, two days later. A few minutes later, the overpass collapsed.

Government representatives quickly sought to evade any responsibility. As early as Sunday, Jean Charest, the Liberal Premier of Québec, declared that the collapse of the overpass was "inexplicable".

A similar point of view was adopted by the official

media. The chief editorialist for *La Presse*, the most important French-language daily in Canada, wrote, for example: "Absolutely nothing indicates that a political decision, either by this government or by those that preceded it, is at the origin of what happened on Saturday."

The popular reaction was entirely different, characterized by outrage and indignation towards the authorities, as was attested by a hand-written sign left at the scene of the tragedy: "Victims of their incompetence."

The undeniable incompetence of the authorities is tied to a definite social program—a program of which government spokespersons, with the assistance of the big business media, are now trying to erase all traces.

Shortly after the tragic events of Saturday, the Minister of Transport, Michel Després, maintained that almost 5000 structures in Québec like the Concorde overpass were regularly given a "deep" inspection and that the sums expended by his government on highway infrastructure had doubled over the course of three years.

What the Minister passed over in silence was that such a "deep" inspection of the Concorde overpass had been carried out only a year ago and had failed to detect any anomalies—a fact which puts a big question mark over the nature of the inspections so celebrated by Després.

As to the increase in the highways' budget, it is markedly below what is needed. In the chapter of his 2003 report devoted to the Ministry of Transport, Quebec's auditor-general said the Quebec government "did not provide, in the past three years, for more than 66 percent of the recorded need for current and preventive maintenance" to bridges. The report underlined, moreover, that "these needs have been

under-estimated, given that they are not well-established in the system.”

In its most recent annual report, the Ministry of Transport itself admits that only one in two bridges in the province are in good condition. According to Ministry figures, only 58.7 percent of bridges were deemed in good condition during 2001-2. Three years earlier, the figure had been 54.8 percent. One hundred bridges were in an “alarming” state and 1 in 12 bridges were in a “terrible state”.

The goal of the public inquiry announced by Premier Charest is to evade the fundamental questions about the chronic under-financing of, and the indifference of the elite towards, the decline and degradation of infrastructure. Its mandate will be limited to the collapse of the Concorde overpass, without any closer examination of the state of public infrastructure as a whole. It will be presided over by a trusted establishment figure, the former Parti Québécois Premier, Pierre-Marc Johnson. It was the 1981-85 PQ government, led by René Lévesque and then Johnson, that initiated the now quarter-century old program of massive public spending cuts in Quebec, coupling budget cuts and wage cuts for public service workers with a battery of anti-union laws.

The tragic events of the weekend are the latest in a long series of failures of basic infrastructure in Quebec and across Canada.

Six years ago, the support beams of another Laval overpass, under construction, collapsed onto the road under them, killing one person. At that time, the authorities promised that all measures would be taken to assure the safety of the province’s highway network. This promise has obviously remained a dead letter.

More seriously still, in May of 2000, authorities failed to alert the people of Walkerton, Ontario, in a timely manner that their water-supply had been poisoned by e-coli living in effluent from unregulated factory farms. Key factors in this failure were the Ontario Tory government’s recent privatization of water-testing and the hundreds of millions in cuts it had made to the Environment Ministry’s budget.

In 2005, hundreds of residents living in terrible conditions on a native reservation in Kashechewan, Ontario, were evacuated on account of the levels of danger posed by their drinking water—water they had already been boiling for two years.

Although with different proportions, a parallel exists between the collapse of the Concorde overpass and the flooding of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. In both cases, the elite remained indifferent as infrastructure was neglected over years—neglect that was both known and documented by various governmental bodies themselves. These events are the expression of one and the same political climate, in which political life is entirely subordinated to the enrichment of the possessing classes at the expense of the social needs of the majority.



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