

# Quebec indépendantistes maintain Conservatives in office

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In a parliamentary vote on September 19, in which the very survival of Canada's minority Conservative government was at stake, the Bloc Québécois, the pro-Quebec independence party in the federal parliament, distinguished itself from the two other opposition parties by approving the Canada-US softwood lumber agreement.

This is not the first time that the Bloc Québécois (BQ) has backed Stephen Harper's neo-conservative government in office. The day after the Conservatives took office last February, the BQ announced it was "going to give the competitor his chance." Subsequently, the BQ voted for the Conservative Throne Speech. Then in May, it endorsed the Conservative budget, which slashed corporate and personal income taxes, scuttled a national day scheme, and lavished additional funds on the military and national security apparatus.

There is a large consensus within the Canadian establishment for the Conservative agenda: the adoption of an aggressive, militarist foreign policy, including the current Canadian Armed Forces' CAF counter-insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan, further reductions in social spending, and massive tax cuts for big business and the wealthiest sections of the population.

The support of the BQ for a party espousing such an agenda demolishes its pretensions to be a progressive, worker-friendly party. The fact is that the Quebec elite, for whom the BQ speaks, supports no less strongly than Bay Street and the oil barons of Alberta the sharp move to the right that the Harper government is spearheading—including the adoption of a policy aimed at increasing Canada's weight in global affairs by embroiling Canada in foreign wars and otherwise aligning Canada more closely with the Bush

administration.

In a recent letter to the Montreal daily *La Presse*, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe was determined to rebuff the newspaper's suggestion that the BQ was undermining the CAF mission in Afghanistan because it is calling for a parliamentary debate on the mission. Duceppe was emphatic that the BQ supports the CAF's counter-insurgency campaign and is not in anyway suggesting that the Canadian troops occupying Afghanistan be withdrawn. The BQ, said Duceppe, was calling for a debate, because it wants the government to better "explain" its sharp militarist turn. "The Quebec people and Canadians", he wrote, "cannot support the Harper government's move if they are left in ignorance, if they don't understand the ins and outs of this operation and other military interventions elsewhere in the world." Far from opposing the imperialist aims of the Canadian elite, the BQ wants to help its ostensible federalist political opponents in giving them a "humanitarian" veneer.

The BQ limits its opposition to the Harper government to what affects the interests of Quebec's big business, as on the question of the size of the transfer and equalization payments Ottawa makes to the Quebec provincial government. These are the narrow class interests that are at stake when the BQ and its sister party at the provincial level, the Parti Québécois (PQ), speak of the defence of "Quebec's interests".

The BQ's support for the Conservative Party, the traditional home of the most vociferous Anglo-chauvinist elements of the Canadian political establishment, is far from a passing error. The Quebec nationalist movement has a long history of co-operation with the regionalists of the West (western provinces) and the Canadian right wing, not only before the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960's, when Quebec nationalism

was associated with opposition to social progress in Quebec, but also after.

It must be remembered that Maurice Duplessis, by putting his electoral machine at the service of the Progressive Conservative leader John Diefenbaker, allowed the latter in 1958 to obtain the biggest parliamentary majority in the history of the House of Commons. And in 1984, René Lévesque, the principal founder of the Parti Québécois and the then premier of Quebec, called on his *indépendantistes* followers to take the “beau risqué” (beautiful risk) of electing a Conservative government led by Brian Mulroney. The PQ supplied workers and several candidates to boost the fortunes of Mulroney, the Canadian protégé of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

In the subsequent federal election, that of 1988, which centered on the Conservative plan to enter into a free trade pact with the US, Bernard Landry and the other PQ leaders campaigned in favour of the free deal, thus giving decisive, albeit implicit, support to the re-election of Mulroney.

After the failure of the Meech Lake constitutional agreement, Lucien Bouchard, who had been Mulroney’s Quebec lieutenant, left the Progressive Conservatives in order to found with several other Conservative renegades and a few Liberal dissidents the BQ.

After being acclaimed PQ leader and Quebec premier in 1996, Bouchard formed one of the most rightwing governments in North America, implementing massive social spending cuts with the help of the trade union leaders.

Since at least 2000, the BQ has manoeuvred with the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and then the Conservatives to oust the Liberals from power. In particular, the BQ lent support to the Conservatives’ attempt to whip up a furor over the sponsorship scandal thereby diverting attention from their own right-wing program and intentions.

Ultimately, the BQ and the social-democratic NDP joined forces with the Conservatives last November to bring down the minority Liberal government of Paul Martin on a non-confidence motion that indicted the government not for its right-wing socio-economic policies and plans to further embroil Canada in the NATO intervention in Afghanistan, but rather for corruption. This played into the Conservative effort to

paint the ensuing election as a referendum on Liberal corruption.

The trade union bureaucracy totally endorses the close collaboration between the BQ-PQ and the Conservatives. Henri Massé, the president of the Quebec Federation of Labor (FTQ), the biggest central union body in Quebec, expressly asked the BQ to vote in favor of the Canada-US softwood lumber accord. At the last elections, Massé declared that workers had nothing to fear from a Conservative government if they elected BQ MPs to represent them.

It should also be noted that Québec solidaire (Solidarity Quebec), which presents itself as a left opposition to the PQ, has failed to make an issue of the support that the PQ’s sister party, the BQ, is giving to the Harper Conservative government. To expose the BQ’s complicity in maintaining the Conservatives in office would damage Québec solidaire’s hopes of concluding an electoral pact with the PQ at the next provincial elections and undermine its efforts to paint Quebec nationalism and the project of creating an independent capitalist nation-state of Quebec in progressive colors.



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