

Quebec elections: Right-wing populist ADQ benefits from mass disaffection with establishment

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Monday's Quebec election shattered the political framework that has prevailed in Canada's sole majority French-speaking province for the past three decades.

Both of the parties that have alternated as Quebec's government since the early 1970s—the federalist Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ) and the *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois (PQ)—suffered stunning losses in terms of both seats and popular vote.

The Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), a right-wing populist party that didn't even have official party status in the National Assembly prior to Monday's vote, will now form Quebec's official opposition.

For the moment, the Liberals of Jean Charest, who were first elected to office in April 2003, retain the reins of power, but it is a weak minority government. Weak because of the extent of the Liberal losses, but also because of the breadth of the ADQ's gains. The Liberals captured just seven more seats than the ADQ—48 to 41 in a 125-member National Assembly—and only polled just over 100,000 more votes than the ADQ.

In Monday's election, the Liberals' share of the popular vote was slashed by 13 percentage points, from 46 percent in 2003 to 33 percent, and the number of Liberal legislators was cut by 25. Four Liberal cabinet ministers failed to win re-election.

The election dealt an even more crushing blow to the PQ, which fell from power in 2003 after nine years in office. During most of the past four years opinion polls indicated that the PQ was poised to return to power when Quebecers next went to the polls. But it has now been reduced to third-party status in terms of both seats and popular vote.

At the National Assembly's dissolution, the PQ held 45 seats. Now it has 36.

In the 2003 election, the PQ's share of the popular vote plunged, as the number of Quebecers who voted for the *indépendantiste* party fell by half a million. On Monday the hemorrhaging continued. The PQ's share of the popular vote fell by a further five percentage points, to 28.3 percent. Only in 1970, two years after the PQ had been born from a split inside the PLQ, did it ever win a smaller share of the popular vote.

While Charest is likely to remain at the helm of the Liberal Party, at least in the near-term, the press was rife the morning after the election with speculation that PQ leader André Boisclair, who had been touted as a youthful, telegenic leader, will soon come under great pressure from within the PQ to step down.

The election results constitute a massive popular repudiation of Quebec's traditional big business parties. Together the PLQ and PQ

won barely 60 percent of the votes cast. But if you include the close to 30 percent of the electorate who didn't vote—a near-record abstention rate—the establishment parties won the endorsement of just 44 percent of the electorate.

The Quebec and Canadian ruling elite are seizing on the electoral upheaval in Quebec to push for a dramatic swing to the right. They view it as providing them with the occasion to launch a new assault on public and social services, to further redistribute wealth to big business and the most privileged sections of society through tax cuts, and to press forward with a predatory, militaristic foreign policy aimed at asserting the interests of Canadian capital on the world stage.

Canada's minority Conservative government, which has emerged as one of Bush's staunchest international allies, has viewed the Charest Liberal government as an important, if not its most important, provincial ally.

Charest called the elections only after intensive consultations with Prime Minister Harper and his aides. Harper plotted to secure Charest's re-election by announcing an increase in federal transfer payments to Quebec in a federal budget timed for the last week of the campaign. He then hoped to use the political momentum generated by Charest's defeat of the *indépendantiste* PQ to make a bid to win a parliamentary majority in a spring federal election.

The Conservatives are anxious for an early election because they recognize that there is only a narrow base of support for their neo-liberal and militarist agenda. Their hope is to bamboozle their way to a majority by camouflaging their full agenda and by employing the politics of scandal and provocation.

Whilst unexpected, the sudden rise of the ADQ is seen by Harper and his Conservatives as greatly favoring their push to radically redesign Canada in favor of the corporate elite. After all, ADQ Mario Dumont boasts that he voted for Harper in the last federal election. The ADQ and the Quebec-wing of the Conservatives also share many organizers and activists, and the ADQ's right-wing populist program parallels that of Preston Manning's Reform Party—the party in which Harper cut his political teeth and which constitutes one of the two major components of the current-day federal Conservative Party.

A jubilant Harper proclaimed Tuesday, “[W]e have a government opposed to a referendum [on Quebec independence] and an Official Opposition opposed to a referendum. ... This is a great result for Canada.”

The media pundits, meanwhile, have gone into overdrive to depict the Quebec election results as indicative of a massive and deep-rooted popular shift to the right. The ADQ, we are told, is the genuine voice

of Quebec, at least of Quebec outside the multi-ethnic metropolis of Montreal.

Dumont, in his victory speech Monday night, claimed the election was a “*cri de coeur*” of the people. Later he made an oblique reference to the right-wing policies he will push for as head of the official opposition, calling for the “modernization of the Quebec state,” a code-word for privatization and social spending cuts, and “a mixed health care system,” that is the dismantling of a quality universal public health care system.

In reality, Monday’s election results are much more revealing of a sharp swing to the right on the part of the Quebec bourgeoisie than of working people.

The Charest Liberal government implemented a raft of right-wing policies. It amended the labor code to facilitate contracting out, raised public day care fees and auto insurance and electricity rates, imposed by decree seven-year, wage-cutting contracts on half a million public sector workers, and adopted legislation providing a mechanism through which for-profit, private health care can rapidly be expanded in Quebec.

Yet the Charest government was harshly criticized by big business for failing to carry through a pledge to slash personal income taxes by \$1 billion per year, or \$15 billion over 5 years, and more generally for not pressing forward with unpopular policies aimed at making Quebec more profitable to investors. The dismay within the elite at the popular resistance to their right-wing agenda was typified by a manifesto, “For a Clear-Eyed Quebec,” issued by prominent federalists and *indépendantistes*, including former PQ premier Lucien Bouchard, and which complained of “immobilisme” (paralysis) and popular antipathy to business.

That is why, when the corporate media saw that Dumont, whose ADQ was recording just 12 percent support in the opinion polls last fall, was succeeding in tapping into the popular hostility to the establishment parties that have presided over increasing economic insecurity and social polarization in the past two decades, they lavished attention on the ADQ. Especially noxious was the legitimacy the media and, subsequently the PQ and PLQ, gave to Dumont’s chauvinist demagoguery—to his claims that Quebec has been far too accommodating to immigrants and religious minorities.

Dumont for his part had previously moved to shore up business support, by recruiting Gilles Taillon, the former head of the Conseil du patronat du Québec, the province’s principal employer lobby group, as an ADQ vice-president and his second-in-command.

Even from a narrow electoral standpoint, the claims of an ADQ wave are greatly exaggerated, and not only because many of those who voted for the ADQ said they were doing so because they wanted to make a protest against the political establishment.

Little more than one in five Quebecers voted for the ADQ. While the ADQ admittedly gained half a million votes, parties that portrayed themselves as being to the left of the PQ and PLQ, the Green Party and Quebec Solidaire, won some 250,000 votes more than they or their predecessors did in 2003, for a combined total of just under 8 percent of the popular vote.

That said, the results of Monday’s election do underscore the urgency of the working class breaking with the politics of the nationalist, pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy, which for decades has served as one of the chief bulwarks of the PQ, and charting a new course.

The shift to the right in the Quebec National Assembly be used to intensify the big business offensive against the social position of the

working class and democratic rights across Canada. Right-wing chauvinist politics that scapegoat minorities have also been given a new legitimacy. That Muslims have been specially targeted is a not an incidental question under conditions where the Canadian elite is trying to justify Canada’s participation in imperialist wars by citing the need to emancipate Muslim women.

If the ADQ, with the assistance of the corporate media, was able to tap into and manipulate the anger and frustration of working people at the establishment, it is because the trade union bureaucracy has completely disenfranchised the working class and suppressed its attempts to challenge the assault on jobs, wages, worker rights and social and public services.

The Charest government was roiled by mass social protests, first in December 2003 when demonstrations and strikes erupted across the province against a series of right-wing measures and then in the spring of 2005 by a weeks-long student strike. In both instances, the trade union leaders stepped in to torpedo the opposition movement, saying they wanted to ensure “social peace.”

Just as important was the unions’ direct participation in the massive program of social spending cuts carried out by the Parizeau-Bouchard-Landry PQ government of 1994-2003.

Undoubtedly the union leadership will respond to the rise of the ADQ by proposing to increase their collaboration with the big business PQ and PLQ.

Nationalism has served to divide workers in Quebec from their class brothers and sisters in English Canada, the US and around the world and to subordinate them to the PQ and its reactionary project of creating an independent capitalist Quebec. Now it has provided a political opening for the right-wing populist ADQ to manipulate the popular anger and frustration generated by the social crisis produced by the profit system.

The experience of workers in Quebec over the past quarter-century is fundamentally the same as that of workers around the world. The old nationally-oriented unions and social democratic parties have become instruments through which capital increases ever-more the exploitation of the working class. To defeat globally organized transnational corporations and prevent the world being dragooned into a series of escalating predatory wars among the various, rival nationally-based capitalist cliques, workers must adopt a socialist-internationalist strategy that aims to mobilize the international working class against the subordination of socio-economic life to private profit and the outmoded nation-state system.



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