The Parti Québécois loses another leader: what's behind the crisis?

Richard Dufour
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André Boisclair resigned as leader of the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ) May 8, seven weeks after the PQ suffered a debacle in the Quebec elections, winning its smallest share of the popular vote since 1970.

The election results came as a shock to the PQ's leadership and ranks, who had expected that their party, which has alternated with the Liberals as Quebec's governing party for the past 30 years, would be the principal beneficiary of the immense popular anger engendered by the attacks on social programs and workers' rights carried out by the Liberal government of Jean Charest. Instead, a substantial number of the PQ's traditional supporters abandoned the party and voted for the Action démocratique du Quebec (ADQ), a right populist party which until now had been a marginal force.

With only 28 percent of the popular vote in the March 26 election, the PQ has been relegated to third-party status. The Liberals, whose vote sunk 13 percentage points from the 2003 elections, have formed a minority government, with the ADQ, led by Mario Dumont, constituting the official opposition.

The intense pressure the PQ establishment put upon Boisclair to resign is a sign of the profound crisis shaking this big business party—a party to which the working class has been subordinated, thanks to the support given it by the trade union bureaucracy and the petty-bourgeois left, since the early 1970s.

In the days and weeks following the PQ's election debacle, Boisclair was the object of growing criticism, not only from the *Péquistes*, but also from the editorial boards of the corporate media. Much was made of Boisclair's lack of charisma and poor judgment. The straw that broke the camel's back was an interview in which Boisclair crudely accused Gilles Duceppe, leader of the Bloc Québécois, the PQ's sister party on the federal front, of plotting to replace him as head of the PQ .

The appointment of a new leader—former PQ cabinet minister Pauline Marois now appears poised to succeed Boisclair—will not resolve the internal tensions tearing apart the PQ, nor restore its popular appeal.

The PQ's crisis is rooted not in the leadership shortcomings of Boisclair or of his predecessor as leader, Bernard Landry, but rather in the erosion of the PQ's popular support. The past four decades have conclusively demonstrated that the pretense that the PQ could, through the project of establishing a sovereign or independent Quebec, serve as a vehicle of social progress, even of emancipation, is a fraud. The PQ is now rightly seen by large sections of the population as a party of the establishment, as no less distant from the interests and aspirations of ordinary people than the Liberal Party of Quebec, the provincial party traditionally associated with big business.

The bitter, anti-working-class record of the PQ when in power has been especially instructive in this regard. The PQ has formed Quebec's provincial government in 18 of the past 30 years. During its last two mandates, which stretched from September 1994 to April 2003, the PQ mounted an all-out assault on public services, including shutting a dozen hospitals and cutting tens of thousands of public sector jobs, all in the name of eliminating the provincial budget deficit. The popular anger these policies provoked paved the way for the election in 2003 of Jean Charest's Liberals, who then launched a new frontal attack on the social conquests of the working class.

The election of Boisclair as head of the PQ in November 2005 marked a further shift rightward, a shift that reflected the Canadian ruling elite's repudiation of any policy of social compromise in favor of unrelenting class war. Boisclair served as the spokesman for those in the PQ who insisted on revising the party's political platform to even more faithfully and directly articulate the interests of big business. He promised to break the influence of the trade unions within the PQ, stating that the party would no longer be the "hostage" of "pressure groups" and, before a group of prominent businessmen, promised to make Quebec "a paradise for capital."

Boisclair was a protégé of Lucien Bouchard, the former PQ leader who, as Quebec premier in the late 1990s, insisted that a drastic reduction of social spending was an essential "winning condition" for any future referendum on Quebec independence. Although now retired from active political life, Bouchard intervenes regularly in public debates. He is one of the authors of the "Manifesto for a Clear-eyed Quebec" (*Manifeste pour un Québec lucide*), which denounces the "immobilisme" (rigidity) of the Quebec population—that is, its opposition to the continuous assault on its wages, working conditions and on social and public services.

The emphasis Bouchard placed, in the aftermath of 1995 Quebec referendum, on "fiscal responsibility" as a necessary condition for secession was a response to the fears of the most powerful sections of Quebec business concerning the political and economic instability that would accompany independence. These fears were further stoked by the new, anti-secessionist hard line, including the threat to partition a seceding Quebec, that the federalist political elite adopted after defeating the PQ's separatist project by a mere 50,000 votes in the 1995 referendum.

Twelve years on, big business in Quebec continues to fear that the PQ's "referendum obsession" will turn its attention away from what it deems to be the pivotal task—creating the best conditions for Quebec capital to prevail in the face of ever-ferocious international competition through an intensification of the assault on the working class.

As party leader, Boisclair distanced himself from the PQ program's pledge to hold a referendum in the shortest time possible after the PQ's return to power. Like his mentor Bouchard, Boisclair tailored his message to the needs of business, promising tax cuts for the rich and tight control over government spending.

But in so doing, he alienated himself from what was left of the PQ's popular base, undermining at the same time the party's ability to channel—with the crucial help of the trade union bureaucracy and the left pressure groups—the desire of ordinary workers for change behind the

capitalist PQ and its *indépendantiste* project.

In other words, the rightward turn of the PQ also reduced its ability to control the masses and therefore its usefulness for the ruling class. This is the meaning of the numerous articles that have appeared in the corporate press since the March elections devoted to questioning the continued relevance of the PQ and speculating as to its eventual marginalization or even disappearance from the Quebec political scene.

A critical element in the decline of the PQ has been the emergence of the ADQ, which profited from the electorate's disaffection with the two establishment parties by making right-wing appeals cloaked in anti-establishment demagogy. Hiding his neo-liberal program with populist rhetoric, ADQ head Mario Dumont spiced his speeches with large doses of the PQ's traditional nationalist ideology about the preservation of Quebec's "cultural identity."

The rise of the ADQ is the bitter fruit of the trade union bureaucracy's smothering of the mass opposition that repeatedly erupted against the anti-social measures of Charest, in particular in December 2003, when there was a wave of anti-government strikes and demonstrations, and in the spring of 2005, when post-secondary students mounted a weeks-long strike.

In the 1995 referendum on Quebec sovereignty, Dumont joined the "yes" camp led by the PQ. Today he rejects the idea of another referendum on independence, proclaiming himself an "autonomist" who seeks to limit the federal government's power to spend in areas constitutionally defined as falling under provincial jurisdiction. At the same time, Dumont advocates a "smaller government," the privatization of the health system and the end of obligatory union dues.

During the recent election campaign, the ADQ made the denunciation of "reasonable accommodation"—a legal principle which prevents discrimination based on physical handicap, sex, race, religion or culture—its battle cry.

The "reasonable accommodation" principle stipulates that a public institution or an employer is obliged to promote the access of minorities to public services and to jobs, thus furthering their integration into society, so long as the cost is not excessive and the accommodation to the traditional practices of a minority does not prejudice others.

Bolstered by the most retrograde sections of the corporate media, especially the *Journal de Montreal*, Mario Dumont has claimed that this principle of integration and of tolerance is harmful to Quebec society. "The majority is required to hide its principles, its way of life," declaimed Dumont in a solemn, dramatic tone repeatedly in the months preceding the March 26 election.

The purpose of this fabricated image of a Quebec society under siege from a horde of religious extremists is to channel in a reactionary direction the anxiety people feel due to increasing economic security and the rise of armed conflicts internationally.

In the name of secularism and the equality of the sexes, principles purportedly threatened by the religious fundamentalism imported by foreigners, this campaign seeks to stigmatize and to intimidate entire communities of immigrants, especially Muslims.

Anti-immigrant chauvinism plays the same role in Quebec as it does internationally—to stoke the prejudices of the most backward sections of the population in order to develop a social base for the most reactionary measures.

At the outset of the election campaign, Boisclair timidly criticized Dumont for having "turned in an irresponsible manner a nonetheless important debate." But seeing his electoral support sag and that of Dumont increase, the PQ leader bit the bullet and tried to outdo the ADQ in the chauvinist game.

Several days before the election, Boisclair publicly supported right-wing elements who threatened to mount provocations if the election law were not changed to remove the right of veiled Muslim women to vote. The intervention of the PQ leader heavily influenced the subsequent capitulation of Quebec's director-general of elections to this right-wing hysteria. Citing the threat of violence, the director-general reversed his initial decision upholding the existing rules, which he explained were designed to encourage voting by allowing for different ways for a voter to identify him or herself, other than the provincial government-issued photo identity card.

The PQ's adaptation to the ADQ and to its chauvinist appeals did not stop when the election campaign ended. Following the election, PQ Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Daniel Turp called on his party to support the ADQ's proposal that Quebec adopt a constitution reasserting the Quebec government's areas of sovereign jurisdiction. The constitutional project presented by Turp included a clause intended to strictly define and limit "reasonable accommodations" to minorities.

Turp's proposal, which apparently was made with Boisclair's approval, was met with opposition from the majority of the PQ leadership, which fears that the PQ will find itself marginalized by the ADQ if it is seen to be giving up its traditional constitutional demands and to be advocating something less than full independence for Quebec.

The PQ has a long history of chauvinism. In the late 1960s, it mounted a campaign to force immigrants to send their children to unilingual French schools. After its electoral victory in 1976, the PQ passed Bill 101 which imposed French as Quebec's sole official language, barred English from virtually all commercial signs, and sharply limited language choice in education. After the failed 1995 referendum, the then PQ leader Jacques Parizeau blamed the defeat on "money and ethnic votes," although the majority of those who voted against Quebec separation were Quebec-born francophones.

Important sections of the PQ not only want the party to perpetuate this chauvinist tradition but to go even further. The *Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre* (Unionists and Progressives for an Independent Quebec), a political club formed inside the PQ by a section of the union bureaucracy, criticized the PQ election campaign for having been out-done by Mario Dumont in anti-immigrant diatribes and appeals to Quebec chauvinism. Two days after the elections, *SPQ Libre* wrote that "globalization and the migratory wave accompanying it give birth in the world's populations to an insecurity of identity which translates into a desire for national assertion" and that, as opposed to the PQ leader, "Mario Dumont" had "seized on this."

As the above citation underscores, the union bureaucracy, which regularly invokes globalization of production and increased foreign competition to justify its intimate collaboration with business to eliminate jobs and cut wages, tries in the same way to infect workers with nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism.

Against these efforts to pit workers against each other on national and ethno-linguistic lines, the working class must counterpose a socialist internationalist perspective—a perspective that gives conscious expression to the objective unity of the international working class under conditions of a globally integrated economy by spearheading the struggle to unite workers around the world against the capitalist profit system and for social equality.