

Quebec's parliament reopens:

Full speed ahead to the right, damn the public

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Quebec Liberal Premier Jean Charest gave an Inaugural Speech at the opening of Quebec's new parliamentary session May 9 that repudiated the popular will expressed in the March 26 provincial election.

The election saw a historic collapse of popular support for Quebec's two traditional big business parties, which have alternated as the provincial government for the past 37 years. Between them, the Liberal Party (PLQ) and the Parti Québécois (PQ) won barely 60 percent of the vote. When one takes into account the high abstention rate of 30 percent, Quebec's two traditional parties won the support of just 44 percent of the electorate, as compared with 65 percent nine years ago.

The collapse in popular support for the traditional parties must be understood in light of the policies they have implemented. In their four years in office, from 2004 to 2007, the Quebec Liberals under Charest introduced a gamut of free-market measures. They amended the Labor Code to facilitate contracting-out, lowered taxes in favor of the rich, imposed concession-laden labor contracts on a half-million public service workers, and adopted legislation facilitating the expansion of for-profit health clinics to the detriment of the public health system.

It was the PQ governments of 1994 to 2003 that paved the way for the Liberals' program of social demolition. Under Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard, and then Bernard Landry, the PQ launched a frontal assault on public services in the name of eliminating Quebec's annual budget deficit, while substantially cutting corporate and later income taxes.

In other words, what the population censured in last March's election were the right-wing policies both the

Liberals and Pequistes have carried out on behalf of big business.

The voters' decisive disavowal of the establishment received only a passing mention in Charest's Inaugural Speech. "By your choice last March 26," declared the premier, "you sent us a clear message. You want a different government."

In the rest of his speech, Charest, whose government was reduced to minority status by the March election, outlined initiatives to reinforce the neo-liberal orientation that had been rebuked by the electorate.

"To give you more money, we will lower your taxes," the Liberal leader promised. This measure however was addressed not to Quebecers as a whole, but to the well-to-do and to big business, which sharply criticized the first Charest government for failing to reduce taxes by \$15 billion over five years as promised and for being too hesitant in applying other unpopular measures.

"We will open the door wider to private participation in our public health care system," Charest continued. "As permitted by Bill 33 adopted last December, the State will purchase services from the private sector."

This measure stands in direct opposition to public sentiment, reflected in numerous public opinion polls that show citizens' chief preoccupation is the maintenance and improvement of the public health system. Of all Canada's ten provinces, Quebec is the one in which the private sector plays the largest role in the health system. And this role will widen considerably as hospitals resort to subcontracting to the private sector. The inevitable result will be a degradation of the public network, already suffering from chronic under-funding, and the development of a two-tier health system where access to adequate health care will be decided by the thickness of one's wallet.

On the question of education, Charest announced that “we will proceed to unfreeze fees for [university] education.” The elimination of the relatively modest ceiling on post-secondary education costs in Quebec, a policy that has somewhat set Quebec apart from the rest of Canada and the United States, will make college and university-level studies less accessible to youth from families of modest means, and is meant to set the stage for further and much more substantial tuition fee hikes in the future.

One telling reaction to Charest’s Inaugural Speech was that of the leader of the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ). This radical right-wing party profited from the fact that the union bureaucracy strangled the huge working-class movement that erupted against the Charest government, thus enabling the ADQ to assume a demagogic anti-establishment pose in the March elections and thereby gain sufficient votes to form the official opposition in the National Assembly.

“There are certainly undertakings [in Charest’s speech] in which we rejoice,” said ADQ leader Mario Dumont, whose party has long demanded that the government lift the freeze on university tuition fees and press forward with the privatization of health services.

Then, assuming the role that big business has mapped out for the ADQ, that of a right-wing prod for the government, Dumont declared, “I remember the Inaugural Speech of 2003. It spoke of ...a different model of the State... which would transform Quebec from top to bottom. Nothing of that came to pass.”

To divert the popular anger over mounting economic insecurity and social inequality in a reactionary direction, the ruling elite, through the corporate media and their political representatives, have in recent months exploited a handful of incidents to mount a hullabaloo about a purported menace of religious fundamentalism being introduced into Quebec by Muslim immigrants.

Charest did not fail to make mention of this issue in his inaugural speech, proclaiming that he will oppose religious obscurantism in favor of “Quebec values,” which he defined as “individual liberties, equality between men and women, the separation of Church and state.”

These crude appeals in defence of purported “common values” seek to divert attention from the emergence in Quebec, as throughout the advanced

capitalist world, of unprecedented levels of social inequality, and from the growing attack that the elite is mounting on basic democratic rights, in the name of the “fight against terrorism.”

They also dovetail with the efforts of the elite to whip up support for Canada’s neo-colonial military intervention in Afghanistan, an intervention aimed at asserting the interests of Canadian capital in the Middle East and Central Asia, but which has been sold to the public as aimed at liberating the Afghan people, and especially its women, from Islamic fundamentalism.

Charest used the parliamentary opening to add his voice to the xenophobic campaign launched by Mario Dumont as the self-avowed champion of a “Quebec identity.” “Our charters [of rights],” pontificated the premier, “have always had the purpose of protecting minorities against the abuses of the majority. They were never meant to permit the opposite. This is to say therefore that there is a limit, a line which must be drawn.”

Charest’s Inaugural Speech was enthusiastically endorsed by the corporate media. André Pratte, chief editor of *La Presse*, the main business paper in Quebec, said, “The Liberal leader has drawn lessons from what has happened on the federal and provincial political scenes in the past few months.”

Speaking on behalf of the corporate elite, Pratte seeks to present the relative political success of the right-wing demagogy of the likes of Canadian Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Adéquite Mario Dumont as a popular mandate for a pronounced right-wing shift. But the real underlying political process is the collapse of popular support for the traditional parties of the establishment and an incipient popular radicalization.



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