

Quebec: Parti Québécois introduces bill to restrict the rights of non-francophones

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The Parti Québécois (PQ) has launched a campaign to restrict the political rights of Canadian citizens born outside of Quebec if they do not show an “acceptable knowledge of the French language.”

Pauline Marois, the new leader of the PQ, has tabled a bill in Quebec’s National Assembly proposing the creation of a Quebec “citizenship.” While citizenship rights would be conferred on all Quebec residents who are Canadian citizens on the passage of Bill 195, Quebec citizenship would subsequently only be automatically granted to those born in Quebec or of Quebec parents. Any other Canadian citizen moving to Quebec—whether born elsewhere in Canada or a naturalized citizen—would have to pass a French language test after three years’ residence in Quebec. Those failing this test would forfeit the right to Quebec citizenship and be stripped of some fundamental political rights. They would be barred from standing as a candidate in municipal, school or Quebec provincial elections, from contributing financially to political parties, and from petitioning the National Assembly.

The PQ bill exposes the ultra-reactionary character of the debate over the supposed “excessive accommodation” being made to immigrants that has been stoked by the political and media establishment in Quebec. [See Quebec’s Commission on “Reasonable Accommodation” and the growth of anti-Muslim chauvinism.] In the guise of defending secularism and equality between the sexes, the Quebec ruling class is fanning the flames of anti-Muslim prejudice and of francophone chauvinism. Marois’s Bill 195 will not be the last xenophobic act carried out in the name of the defense of “Quebec values.”

The response from Quebec’s media and political establishment to the PQ bill reveals the lack of any serious attachment to the defense of democratic rights within ruling class circles.

The Leader of the Opposition, Mario Dumont, who exploited popular disaffection with the establishment parties in the last election by posing as the defender of the Québécois “de souche” (“old stock”—i.e., French-Canadians) and by adopting a virulent anti-immigrant platform, showed his basic agreement with Marois by criticizing the proposed law solely for being “badly put together.”

Quebec Liberal Premier Jean Charest denounced the project as “a bill which proposes to establish two classes of citizens.” But his own government has adopted discriminatory policies toward cultural minorities.

Charest, for example, has put forward a law that would deny

women who wear a *burqa* or face-veil to the polls the right to vote, under the pretext that visual identification is necessary to ensure against ballot-fraud. This issue applies at most to several dozen women across all of Quebec. The utterly hypocritical and racist character of this law is underscored by the fact that the premier has indicated that he intends to allow the widespread practice of voting by mail to continue. (The federal minority Conservative government, with the support of the all opposition parties, is implementing a similar law—stripping veiled women from voting, even if they bring multiple pieces of identification to the poll, while allowing people to vote by mail without presenting any identification whatsoever.)

Charest also launched the Bouchard-Taylor Commission on Reasonable Accommodations, whose hearings have served to legitimize the growing intolerance toward religious minorities and immigrants, especially toward Muslims in particular. Without even waiting for the conclusions of his own commission, Charest has begun to amend the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms to place new limits on a democratic principle as basic as the freedom of religion with the purported aim of bringing it more in line with Quebec values.

The bill sponsored by PQ leader Marois has a similar thrust. It insists that in interpreting and applying the Quebec Charter, the courts and government must take into account “our historic heritage and the fundamental values of the Quebec nation”—which are defined as protection of the French language, the “equality” of men and women, and the “secularization” of public institutions.

By fanning Quebec chauvinism, Marois hopes to rally backward social layers and thereby staunch the party’s plunging support, and to develop a social base for the still further turn rightward that big business is demanding of the PQ.

The PQ has formed Quebec’s government for 18 of the last 31 years, but in the March 2007 provincial election, it not only failed to return to power after 4 years on the opposition benches; it lost the title of Official Opposition to the right-wing populist Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) of Mario Dumont. Whereas in the 2003 election, when it fell from office, the PQ saw its total vote fall by 20 percent or one fifth; in this spring’s election, its vote fell by a further 10 percent, even though Charest’s Liberals suffered huge losses and were reduced to a minority government.

This electoral debacle forced the resignation of PQ leader Andre Boisclair, and in June 2007 Pauline Marois, a former deputy premier, became the party’s new leader in an uncontested election.

During its last stint in office (1994 to 2003), the PQ formed one of the most right-wing governments seen in Canada since World War Two. Under the tenure of former federal Conservative minister Lucien Bouchard, the PQ, like its federalist opponents in Jean Chrétien's Liberal government, made eliminating the budget deficit through draconian spending cuts its overriding priority.

Like her predecessors in the PQ leadership, Lucien Bouchard, Bernard Landry and André Boisclair, Marois was a key figure in the PQ's all-out assault on social programs and public services. Successively, she held all the major ministries, including Education, Health, and Finance.

In the last half of the 1990s, the PQ closed a dozen hospitals, eliminated tens of thousands of jobs in the public sector and savagely attacked social welfare recipients by cutting funds and tightening up qualifications.

The Quebec ruling class warmly welcomed these measures, especially since the PQ could count on the trade union bureaucracy to stifle all working class opposition. In fact, it was the trade union leaders who insisted that the PQ government use public sector workers' pension funds to finance an early-retirement scheme that resulted in the elimination of tens of thousands of public sector jobs.

These brutal right-wing measures eroded electoral support for the PQ, whose pro-business social program is no different from that of the Liberals under Charest or the ADQ. In addition, the PQ is now threatened by the ADQ on the sole platform that still differentiates it from the other big business parties, that of nationalism and of Quebec chauvinism.

Immediately following the PQ's trouncing in the 2007 elections, elements within the PQ denounced the party leadership for allegedly ceding the "identity question" to Mario Dumont and his ADQ—that is, of not having more aggressively competed with him for the mantle of champion of the Québécois "de souche." Among the most fervent proponents of this claim were the "Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre" (*Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec* or SPQ libre), an officially recognized PQ faction representing the trade union bureaucracy.

Since her accession to the PQ leadership, Marois has made clear that she has heard, and will follow, this appeal. She recently proclaimed, "We will not allow ourselves to be overtaken [on the identity question], this time we will seize the initiative."

Marois has reintroduced "nous" [us] as a means of referring to the Québécois "de souche," who trace their origins to the several thousand French colonists who came to North America before 1760. The use of this "nous" had been dropped by the PQ establishment as part of an attempt to refute federalist claims that the Quebec independence project is a form of ethnic nationalism. In 1995, Jacques Parizeau resigned as PQ leader and Quebec premier after he responded to the failure of a referendum on Quebec independence to rally majority support, by asserting that while the Québécois (nous) had voted in favor of independence, victory had been stolen from them by "money and the ethnic vote."

With her open stoking of anti-immigrant chauvinism, Pauline Marois is definitively burying the PQ's pretension that it is the bearer of a "social project" favorable to ordinary people.

In the 1970s, the PQ tried to sell Quebec independence as a progressive project which would permit the development of a more egalitarian and a more just society, all the while reassuring big business that an independent Quebec would create an advantageous climate for them. Today, the PQ no longer pretends that achieving Quebec independence would better the living conditions of the working class.

In her first speech as leader of the PQ, Marois made clear her vision of the rightward turn she plans for the PQ. "We have to accept to be open to new and audacious forms of collaboration between the private sector, the community sector, and the public sector," she said, adding that Quebecers have to stop "fearing wealth."

In the same vein, she announced her intention to whip up right-wing nationalism. We must, declared Marois, "stop being afraid...of being seen as intolerant,...afraid to take roads we have never before been down,...afraid to speak of memory, of history, of a People, of identity, of culture."

Since Marois became head of the PQ, the party has thrown out its traditional support for maintaining a freeze on university tuition fees and supported a turn towards privatization of the health system. The PQ also supported the budget of the minority Liberal government of Jean Charest, which rationed social spending so as to implement further tax cuts.

The trade union bureaucracy, one of the principal pillars of the PQ, has basically thrown its weight behind Marois's reactionary citizenship bill.

After Marois released her bill, Marc Laviolette, a former president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) and the head of SPQ libre, declared, "On the question of identity and the national question, the Chief has given new impetus to the party."

The leaders of the major trade unions have accepted the basic premise of Marois's bill—the denial of basic political rights to non-French speakers—limiting any criticisms to the details. Henri Masse of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) said, "What aggravates me in this bill is that we are taking everyone else in Canada, and putting them in the same situation [as immigrants]." For her part, CNTU President Claudette Charbonneau said that the proposed law would be justified if Quebec were a "normal society," that is, one that had acquired its independence from Canada. The CNTU has long favored Quebec's secession from Canada.



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