Canadian elections: Whose class interests does the Bloc Québécois defend?

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The Bloc Québécois election campaign has been punctuated by demagogic appeals intended to give the party a progressive façade and mask the real class content of its politics.

The second or third largest party in every Canadian parliament since 1993, the Bloc Québécois (BQ) is a regionalist party that presents itself as the defender of "Québec's interests" on the federal stage, pending the winning of Quebec independence.

BQ leader Gilles Duceppe has spent much of the campaign accusing Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper of being a clone of the notorious right-wing American president, George W. Bush. However, Duceppe has neglected to mention that the Quebec *souverainiste* or independence movement has consistently sought to ingratiate itself with Washington. During the 1990s, for example, *souverainiste* leaders and strategists theorised that an independent Québec could adopt the US dollar as its national currency and urged that Canada consider doing so in the meantime. More recently, in another signal to Washington of its eagerness to ally with the US, the BQ has strongly supported the Canadian Armed Forces' leading role in the counter-insurgency war in support of the US-installed government in Kabul, with Duceppe himself hailing the Afghan war as a "noble cause." Duceppe has also repeatedly denounced the call of the nominally social-democratic NDP for an immediate end to Canada's combat role in Afghanistan, terming it "irresponsible."

Duceppe has made few references to Quebec independence during the BQ campaign. Instead he has openly urged federalists to rally round the BQ "to block " the Conservatives' cuts to arts funding, pro-Big Oil policies, and punitive treatment of young offenders, while promoting the BQ as the incarnation of "Quebec values" like social justice and tolerance.

In reality, the Quebec *indépendantistes* have a long tradition of collaborating with Canada's avowed right-wing, from the support they gave to the Mulroney Conservatives in the 1980s, through the role Duceppe played in the period preceding the 2006 elections to facilitate Harper's victory, to the subsequent parliamentary votes in which the BQ assured the survival of the Conservative minority government.

The Bloc's true class orientation is exemplified by the policies implemented by its twin party on the provincial level, the Parti Québécois. When it last governed Quebec from 1994 to 2003, the PQ savagely cut social spending, eliminated tens of thousands of jobs in healthcare and education, imposed workfare, and lowered taxes for big business and the wealthy.

Despite Duceppe's populist phrase-mongering, his essential political message is addressed to the Quebec ruling class, among whom there is growing doubt as to the continued usefulness of the Bloc Québécois.

The majority of the Québécois elite consider a Conservative government to be the best instrument to make deep cuts to social spending, reduce taxes on wealth, and assert their interests internationally, including through military force. As polls predict that Harper's party will at least preserve its status as a minority government, the ruling elite in Quebec is anxious to ensure Quebec elects a sizeable contingent of Conservative MPs so politicians directly beholden to it have cabinet seats.

The Quebec elite's enthusiasm for Harper was reinforced by the Conservatives' recognition, by way of a parliamentary motion, of the existence of a "Québécois nation within a united Canada" and by their repeated pledges to restrict the role of the federal government to its "constitutional" functions, especially as regards to social policy. The Quebec bourgeoisie favors greater autonomy and decentralization not only because it would give the provincial Quebec state greater power, but also because they view decentralization as a choice means for pushing forward with the dismantling of what remains of public services and a "social safety net."

With the support of PQ and Liberal governments in Quebec City, private schools and medical clinics have cropped up in Quebec as fast, or faster, than any other province.

Duceppe's campaign was directed at convincing the ruling elite of the continuing "*pertinence"* or relevance of the BQ, that is that the BQ can still be useful in pressing Ottawa to pursue policies that serve their interests.

Well aware of the thinking of his target audience, Duceppe made certain never to *call for the defeat* of the Conservative government, only for the Conservatives to be denied a parliamentary majority. Despite his lively denunciations of Harper, going so far as to attack him personally at the end of the campaign as a "cheater," "retrograde," and an "arrogant" man, Duceppe did not rule out the possibility of (further) collaboration with a minority Conservative government. Indeed, he made clear that he very much hopes to be in a position to "leverage" the BQ's support for a minority Conservative government.

"We don't mind," declared Duceppe, "if it's a red label, a green label, a yellow label, or a blue label...any kind of label." (Blue is the traditional color of the Conservatives and, not accidentally, also of the Quebec nationalists.) "We look," continued Duceppe, "at the substance of each proposal and then we look if it goes in the direction of Quebec's interest and Quebec's values. If it does we support it, if not we oppose it."

Throughout the campaign Duceppe has accused the Conservatives of being the spokesmen for Alberta's "oil industry." This bit of demagogy has, from the standpoint of the BQ, had the virtue of both burnishing the BQ's "left" credentials and painting the Conservatives, who are the BQ's biggest rivals for Quebec seats, in regionalist

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fashion, as a non-Québécois, pro-Western party.

In reality, the BQ's attacks are from the perspective that the state should defend big business in Quebec, with the same, if not more vigour, than the oil industry (which both the Liberals and Conservatives have hailed for its potential to make Canada an "energy superpower.")

The BQ election program proclaims "the aerospace sector, the pharmaceutical industry, optics, computer technology, environmental technology and transport" to all be "jewels" of "our [Quebec's] new economy. "Because high tech enterprises are less common in Canada than Quebec," deplores the BQ, "Ottawa gives little support to industrial research." Further in its programme, the BQ demands funding to modernise the manufacturing sector, the forestry industry, and the aerospace industry-all industries more developed in Quebec than in the rest of Canada.

The BQ has made much of its support for the Kyoto Accord. But again this is bound up with its championing of the interests of the Quebec élite, specifically its calculation that Quebec's hydro-electric resources constitute an important competitive advantage. Declared Duceppe, "By reducing by half Quebec's dependence on oil, we can speed economic growth and significantly reduce the trade deficit. This would give us a major strategic advantage that could make Quebec among the most prosperous regions in North America."

While the BQ has decried the huge environmental damage caused by the development of Alberta's tar sands, it has no such reservations about drilling for oil and gas in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The unions and the BQ

In an effort to push the BQ even further right, Jacques Brassard, a former PQ cabinet minister, denounced it at the beginning of the election campaign for abandoning the struggle for Quebec independence, for its "bric-a-brac left ideology," and for being a "clone of the NDP."

The province's newspaper editorialists and commentators echoed and amplified Brassard's comments, denouncing the BQ for being "too close" to the trade unions, and much further left than the Quebec electorate. They highlighted the fact that Duceppe and several other BQ leaders hail from the trade union officialdom. Several days later, five former BQ MPs aligned themselves with Brassard and attacked the BQ for becoming a "special interest group, defending above all the interests of the trade unions."

The arguments advanced by Duceppe in order to justify the presence of former trade union leaders in the Bloc-a presence encouraged by the *souverainiste* movement in an attempt to retain some credibility with ordinary workers after years of reactionary PQ government-reveal much about the class nature of the BQ and their allies in the trade union bureaucracy. Duceppe emphasised that the Quebec Federation of Labour (Fédération des travailleurs du Québec - FTQ), the union representing the majority of industrial workers in the province, founded and manages the Solidarity Fund (Fonds de solidarité).

This state-supported investment (mutual) fund has invested in over 1600 businesses in Quebec, frequently intervening to prop up companies in financial trouble as they cut jobs and slash wages. Its creation in the early 1980s marked a new stage in the unions' development of corporatist relations with big business and the state, relations that have resulted in the unions functioning more and more as an auxiliary of management. Louis Laberge, the anti-Communist bureaucrat who spearheaded the Fonds de solidarité, was acutely conscious of the right-wing perspective that underlay its creation, declaring with intended irony that it was a more "radical step" than the "creation of a workers' party."

The trade union bureaucracy, one of the main pillars of the Quebec *souverainiste* movement, plays a key role in fostering illusions among workers about Québécois nationalism in general, and the BQ and PQ in particular.

In the course of this campaign, the major union federations have rushed to the aid of the BQ. The FTQ has called on its cadres "to work for the Bloc in the different ridings in Québec. It is important for us that the Conservatives are denied a majority government." The Confederation of National Trade Unions (Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux - CSN) urged its members to vote "strategically" against the Conservatives. But its president specified that "...in almost two thirds of the ridings (in Quebec), the real fight is a duel between the Bloc and the Conservatives. In that case, call a spade a spade: a strategic vote means a vote for the Bloc."

Québec Solidaire-a pro-Quebec independence and self-described "left-wing" party which counts among its constituent elements the Communist Party of Québec (Parti Communiste du Québec--PCQ) and the pseudo-Trotskyists of the Socialist Left (Gauche Socialiste - GS)-has also intervened in the federal elections to urge a vote to stop a Conservative majority government, in effect a vote for the BQ. "Vote for an ecological Québec, for justice and equality... not for the narrow, menacing, and profoundly unequal society envisioned by the Conservatives," recommended the co-leaders of Québec Solidaire, Francoise David and Amir Khadir.

All these forces lending a "left" image to the Bloc Québécois play a critical role in binding the working class in Quebec to the *souverainiste* movement, in promoting the conception that the fundamental divide in Canada and Quebec is ethno-linguistic not the antagonism between capital and the working class, and in quarantining the struggles of Quebec workers from those of their class brothers and sister in English Canada and around the world. They seek to reverse the erosion of working class support for the BQ, portraying it as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives, rather than a party committed to the defence of Québécois big business.

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