

Quebec: La presse editorialist denounces Quebecers as “selfish”

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The Quebec bourgeoisie and its propagandists are raising a hue and a cry over the Quebec government’s rapidly deteriorating fiscal position so as to prepare the political and ideological ground for a massive restructuring of public and social services.

For several months Quebec’s most important daily, *La presse*, and especially its lead editorial writer, André Pratte, have been aggressively arguing that the provincial Liberal government and the entire political establishment must make their next priority eliminating the provincial budget deficit, produced by the economic slump, and then systematically reduce the provincial debt.

Pratte has long been agitating for a “re-engineering” of government, that is the levelling of what remains of the welfare state. He was a signatory of the “Manifesto for a Clear-eyed Quebec.” Published in 2005 and signed both by prominent federalists and *souverainists* (supporters of Quebec independence), the manifesto decried the *immobilisme* of Quebec society—that is, the widespread popular resistance to neo-liberal policies—and advanced a profoundly anti-working class agenda: privatization, imposing or raising fees for government services, lowering taxes for the rich, etc.

At the end of May, Pratte published two especially right-wing, cynical and tendentious editorials. The first titled “Selfish Quebec,” deplored the “selfishness” of Quebecers. According to Pratte, Quebecers have “developed a passion” for various public services, ignoring that there is insufficient government revenue to pay for all of them and the burden that inadequate government resources imposes on hospital patients and the elderly.

This manner of argument, justifying right-wing politics by pointing to the deterioration of public services, is not new. The same ploy has been used to justify the push for privatisation of the health care system. In the Chaoulli case, Canada’s Supreme Court ruled that “the long delays to obtain necessary medical care and the ban on private insurance to provide such care constitute a violation of the guarantee of security of the person in the Quebec Charter of Rights.” This ruling, which ignored that the deterioration of public health is the result of two decades of government budget cuts and chronic underfunding,

has opened the door wide to the privatisation of Canada’s health care system.

Throughout his editorial, Pratte implies that public and social services should be slashed. He derides the “modest fees” charged by government-subsidized day cares, Quebec’s “particularly generous” parental leaves and drug plans, and “incredibly low” school taxes and electricity rates. According to Pratte, cutting these programs or imposing “true cost” user fees would allow the provincial government to “further concentrate public resources in the priority sectors of the health care system.”

Quebec’s health system has long been in crisis and this crisis has been an issue in successive elections. According to *La presse*, the average emergency room waiting time for 2007-2008 was sixteen-and-a-half hours. Months’ long waits for necessary and in many case potentially lifesaving medical procedures are routine. The health care system also suffers from a chronic shortage of medical personnel.

Pratte adopts a particularly hypocritical posture in writing about retirement homes, where conditions for the elderly are similarly arduous. He calls the province’s retirement homes “quasi-death chambers where [the elderly] are treated like children or retards, where no one, least of all their family, comes to see them, to talk to them, to hold their hand.” And Quebecers, he claims, accept all this “in silence.”

What Pratte deliberately omits to mention is that the desperate situation in the health care system and other public and social services stems from the right-wing policies advanced by the ruling elite, and that *La presse* has itself played an important role in championing the need for slashing government spending and reducing the taxes of big business and the wealthy.

In the 1990s, the *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois (PQ) closed hospitals, eliminated tens of thousands of public sector jobs, and made dramatic across-the-board cuts in government spending in their campaign for a “zero deficit” budget. The Liberal Party, elected in 2003, has pursued the same right-wing course, instituting billions in tax cuts and thereby depriving the state of resources to invest in public services. At the federal level, the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, and their successors in the Harper Conservative

government, have pursued the same course, siphoning—in the form of budget and tax cuts—tens of billions of dollars from government programs into the pockets of the most privileged sections of society.

Under Jean Chrétien, whose daughter married into the billionaire family that owns *La presse*, the Demarais, the federal Liberals made especially deep cuts to the transfer payments made to the provinces to fund health care, post-secondary education, and welfare. The bourgeois media, including *La presse*, gave its full and enthusiastic support for this socially retrograde agenda.

There is evident irony in Pratte's accusation that the Quebec working class is "selfish." The reactionary politics pursued by the parties of the political establishment at the provincial and federal levels were the means through which the bourgeoisie snatched back a significant portion of the concessions they made to the working class in the 1960s and 1970s, enriching themselves fabulously in the process. In the last two decades, social inequality in Canada has risen consistently, with an increasingly thin layer of the population accumulating an ever-larger share of the total wealth while the overwhelming majority of the population has seen its conditions of life stagnate or regress.

In 1998, the average salary of a CEO was 104 times the salary of the average Canadian worker. By 2006, the average salary of a CEO had risen to 218 times that of the average worker. From 1980 to 2005, the average Canadian income rose in real terms by just \$53. Meanwhile, the income of the poorest 20 percent of Canadians workers fell by 20.6 percent.

Right-wing ideologues like Pratte praised this increase of social inequality, presenting it as an essential feature of economic growth, the richest being the most deserving of society's wealth.

Pratte's second editorial, published a few days after the first, was titled "A Frog in Hot Water" and sought to advance fresh justifications for an assault on vitally needed public and social services. In this editorial, Pratte drew upon an analysis developed by economists for Caisses Desjardins, a prominent Quebec financial institution, which asserts that "the aging of the population of Quebec, along with the consequently shrinking workforce, will deal a serious blow to economic growth."

The economists warn the population that "a wave of reforms even more painful than those of the last decade cannot be avoided."

Pratte ends his editorial by saying: "It is necessary to find the courage to make the choices that will preserve essential government services and concentrate our limited resources."

Pratte's argument, that the state has diminishing resources in the face of mounting needs and that the "Quebecers" must make sacrifices, is nothing but pure sophistry in service of the bourgeoisie.

Pratte is attempting to develop the pretexts that will serve to

justify the next "even more painful" wave of reforms. The assault on the standard of living of the working class, ongoing for 30 years, has nothing to do with the aging of the population. Rather, it is a reaction of the bourgeois elite to the decline in the rate of profit and the crisis in capitalist accumulation that shook the capitalist system in the 1970s. Since the 1980s, the bourgeoisie combined its assault on the social position of the working class with the turn towards rampant financial speculation, the build-up of the militarism, and attacks on democratic rights.

While the overwhelming majority of the world's population saw its standard of life stagnate or regress, the globalisation of the productive forces created the conditions for a vast increase in the wealth produced by the labour of the working class, an increase that could permit a bountiful social response to the problems of an aging population. This immense potential is strangled by the subordination of society to the profit imperative of a tiny minority of the population and the destructive competition between capitalist nation states.

Some weeks after Pratte published his two editorials, comments by Francois Legault, spokesperson for the official opposition Parti Québécois on Finance and Economics, demonstrated that *La presse's* campaign is beginning to find a clear echo in the political elite.

During the debate on a bill amending Quebec's "anti-deficit law" so as to permit the government to accrue deficits in the next five years, Legault demanded that the government immediately advance a bold plan to improve the province's financial position. The government, Legault insisted, must be ready to attack "sacred cows"—what remains of the welfare state—by slashing services, privatization, and huge hikes in user fees. He compared his recommendations to those of the "clear-eyed" in 2005.

Shortly after Legault's comments, another high-profile editorialist from *La presse*, Alain Dubuc, congratulated Legault for his recommendations. He urged the PQ and Action Democratique du Québec (ADQ), a right-wing populist party, to pressure the Liberal government to have more "rigour" in its fiscal policy and more readiness to make "unpopular choices." "It is necessary to reconsider everything," wrote Dubuc, "including the setting of fees, the price of electricity, [and] our conception of the health care system."



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