

Quebec's Liberal government engulfed by scandals and crisis

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Quebec's Liberal government is emitting a *fin de regime* (end of regime) odor.

According to opinion polls, support for the Liberals, who have governed Quebec since May 2003, has never been lower in the history of modern Quebec. The press is rife with speculation that Premier Jean Charest will resign in the coming year. Only he has no obvious successor. Most of his ministers are considered political lightweights.

Late last week Charest announced that he was postponing his departure for a high-profile, week-long trip to France, so he could participate in yesterday's vote on a non-confidence motion brought by the official opposition Parti Québécois (PQ). Charest's announcement was a surprise given that his party has an ample, albeit narrow, parliamentary majority and such motions are standard fare.

But Charest was clearly anxious to put on a strong front under conditions where his government has been rattled by a series of scandals concerning the tendering of construction contracts, illegal party donations, and the nomination of judges.

All of Quebec's major dailies led last Thursday with the announcement by the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) that it now supports a public inquiry into allegations of collusion and corruption in the construction industry, including in the tendering of provincial and municipal contracts. Quebec's largest union federation and the dominant union in Quebec's construction industry, the 500,000-member QFL, had been the Liberal government's only ally in opposing the convening of such an inquiry.

"QFL about-face isolates Charest," declared the *Montreal Gazette*. Meanwhile, *La Presse*, Quebec's most influential daily, published a graphic across the top of its front page meant to demonstrate the isolation of the government. It listed on one side some of those calling for a public inquiry into the construction industry—the PQ and the other two parties represented in the National Assembly, the QFL and the rival Confederation of National Trade Unions, the organization representing the province's municipalities, the Association of Crown Prosecutors, and the Quebec Police Association—and on the side all those opposing an inquiry—the Charest government. The following day, the broadsheet *La Presse* gave over its entire op-ed page to a single cartoon showing Charest in a small row-boat about to be inundated by a massive wave.

Unquestionably, Charest and his Liberals are resisting an inquiry because they are afraid that it will produce a series of embarrassing, likely criminal, revelations about the web of ties that connect the government, Liberal Party fundraisers, and contractors who have received billions of dollars in contracts under the province's urgently needed, if inadequate, infrastructure renovation program.

Earlier this year, Charest appointed a former Canadian Supreme Court justice, Michel Bastarache, to investigate an allegation made against him by his estranged ex-Justice Minister, Marc Bellemare. Bellemare, who quit his cabinet post in 2004 after just a year as a member of the National Assembly, has claimed that Charest instructed him to do the bidding of a Liberal fundraiser in the naming of three judges.

Charest's appointment of the Bastarache Commission, which he claimed necessary to maintain his honor and the integrity of the justice system, was a patent maneuver aimed at dodging the calls for an inquiry into the construction industry. It badly backfired, however. The press was willing to give Charest the benefit of the doubt as to what had passed between him and Bellemare. But the inquiry heard much testimony showing the ready access Liberal fundraisers have to the premier's office, especially his aide charged with government appointments, and opinion polls have repeatedly shown that most Quebecers believe Bellemare, not the premier.

An analysis of recent municipal construction contracts suggests that collusion between contractors and their political friends has led to grossly inflated prices. It found that since the eruption of the construction scandal and the launching of multiple police investigations, winning bids have come in 25 to 30 percent lower than projected.

As for the QFL, it has been accused of colluding with various construction bosses and using intimidation to maintain its dominance during the triennial government-mandated union representation campaign. Last year, the head of the QFL's construction wing was forced to resign in an expenses scandal.

That said, many of those most vociferous in attacking QFL corruption are indifferent, indeed hostile, to the interests of construction workers. Their real complaint is that the QFL bureaucracy, upon whom Charest has repeatedly relied to suppress opposition from the working class, has too much influence with the government. A related big business beef is that the QFL bureaucracy controls the multi-billion mutual Solidarity Fund that enjoys special tax concessions.

The corporate press contends that the construction and other scandals are at the root of the crisis rocking the Charest government.

The reality is quite different. The true source of the crisis wracking the government is the ever-growing gulf between the needs and aspirations of working people and the demands of big business for a dramatic lurch further right.

Opinion polls have repeatedly shown mass popular disaffection with the entire political establishment, including the PQ, the preferred party

of the labor bureaucracy, and with the evolution of Quebec society over the past decade. Meanwhile, big business has become ever more strident in its demands for the dismantling of all the social conquests of the working class.

The Charest government came to power in 2003 promising to “re-engineer” the Quebec state—that is to press forward with the downsizing and privatization of public services—and to otherwise pursue a big-business agenda. And it has done so. The Liberals have passed legislation to facilitate the contracting out of work, pried open the door to the privatization of health care, ended the freeze on university tuition fees, and cut taxes on big business and the rich.

But it has had to pursue this program incrementally, relying on the QFL and the other union federations to keep “social peace.” In December 2003, a first wave of right-wing government measures prompted mass worker protests and strikes. To maintain control of the opposition movement, the unions had to demagogically threaten a general strike. Subsequently, the unions used the Christmas holidays to demobilize the rank and file. The press, meanwhile, exhorted Charest not to abandon the “Quebec model” of tripartite collaboration, between the government, unions and big business. Charest got the message, and this would prove invaluable for him in the years to come.

In 2005, the union bureaucracy assisted the government in bringing to an end the longest student strike in the province’s history—a strike that they both feared could become a catalyst for a broader social movement. And in 2007, the unions painted Charest as the “lesser evil” to the right-wing populist ADQ (Action-démocratique du Québec).

However, from the middle of the decade big business became increasingly critical of the Charest government for not moving more aggressively against the working class. This stance was exemplified by the issuing in 2005 of a neo-liberal clarion call, the Clear-Eyed Manifesto for Quebec, by a group of ex-federalist and Quebec *indépendantiste* politicians and other opinion makers, including former PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard, dubbed the *lucides*.

In the 2007 elections, the corporate media gave a boost to the ADQ, hoping to use it as an instrument to shift politics sharply to the right. Charest responded to this pressure, announcing on the eve of the vote that all of the \$1 billion the Quebec government was about to receive in additional funding from Ottawa would be used to finance tax cuts.

But with the Liberals unexpectedly reduced to a minority government in that election, they faced difficulty in heeding business’s demand that they show “leadership” by imposing unpopular social spending cuts. Moreover, once the population became better acquainted with the right-wing, “free market” policies of ADQ, its popular support plunged. Today the ADQ has just four National Assembly seats.

In the December 2008 Quebec election, held in the immediate aftermath of the eruption of the world economic crisis, big business rallied behind Charest and the Liberals, calculating that a Liberal majority government would be the best vehicle for pursuing their agenda.

But big business’s skepticism toward the Charest government and its readiness to take “hard decisions” and attack “sacred cows” has remained. Moreover, the economic crisis has only made big business more insistent that Quebec has fallen “behind” the rest of North America in dismantling the welfare state and lowering taxes on the well-to-do. On almost a daily basis, one or another of Quebec’s major dailies has an editorial or op-ed column decrying the “immobilisme”

of Quebecers—that is their resistance to the right-wing policy prescriptions of big business. The corporate media has also given favorable and lavish coverage to various efforts to found a new unabashedly right-wing party in Quebec.

The scandals enveloping the Charest government and its loss of popular support must be understood in this context.

The construction scandal was not conjured up like the sex scandal the US Republican right used to destabilize and try to unseat Bill Clinton. But sections of the press certainly did use the allegations of corruption surrounding the construction industry and the QFL, particularly in the fall of 2009 and winter of 2010, to chastise the government and demonstrate their dissatisfaction with it.

In response, the Charest Liberal government introduced a budget last March that included a raft of right-wing measures, including hiking fees for government services, a new health care tax, and a pledge to dramatically cut real spending in the years to come.

Significantly, it was in the aftermath of this *lucide*-inspired budget that popular support for the Charest government began to hemorrhage.

The great danger is that the working class continues to be politically paralyzed by the trade unions.

Within the ruling class there are concerns that the Charest government is so discredited that it will lack the necessary legitimacy to press forward with the right-wing measures outlined in its last budget. There are also fears that the scandals are only bringing the political establishment into further disrepute.

But the ruling elite has vast means at its disposal to manipulate public opinion and otherwise impose its will. Insofar as the working class is not armed with a socialist program, big business will develop the means to exploit the current crisis of the Charest government so as to push politics still further right.

In this regard it is important to take note of the role being played by Quebec Solidaire, which describes itself as a left pro-Quebec independence party. In the name of opposing the Liberals on the corruption scandal, it has repeatedly made common cause with the big business PQ. And like the PQ, it is portraying the call for a public inquiry into the construction industry—not opposition to the ruling class assault on jobs and public services—as the pivotal issue facing Quebec working people today.



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