

Quebec: Resignations of prominent legislators rocks Parti Québécois

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Three Parti Québécois (PQ) frontbenchers resigned from the party June 6 to sit in the Quebec National Assembly as independents. Coming on the heels of the debacle suffered by the PQ's sister party, the Bloc Québécois, in the May 2 federal election; the resignations have thrown the PQ into disarray and greatly exacerbated a mounting crisis in the Québec sovereignty (independence) movement.

Until recently the PQ was viewed as almost a sure bet to replace the massively unpopular provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest when Quebec next goes to the polls. Now many commentators are questioning whether the PQ will long remain Quebec's second party and alternate party of government.

In the May 2 federal election, the BQ—which since 1993 had never won less than half of Quebec's 75 seats—saw its House of Commons presence reduced to 4, and its share of the popular vote plummet to just over 25 percent.

Louise Beaudoin, former PQ critic on secularism and the condition of women, Pierre Curzi, former president of the Union of Artists and former PQ critic on language, and Lisette Lapointe, wife of former Québec Premier Jaques Parizeau, quit the Parti Québécois en bloc. The next day they were joined by Jean-Martin Aussant, a younger MNA (Member of the National Assembly), former investment banker, and rising star within the party.

The four submitted their resignations after the Parti Québécois tabled Bill 204, an anti-democratic law that would prevent Quebecers from challenging the legality of a contract between the City of Québec and Quebecor Media governing the management of a future amphitheatre/hockey arena. The bill could hardly be more direct in its defence of the interests of Quebecor, a Canadian media and telecommunications giant, and its owner, Pierre Karl Péladeau, a Québécois billionaire known for his anti-worker business practices and vicious rightwing politics. With its daily newspapers, other tabloids, and television stations, Quebecor plays a central ideological role in advocating, in Quebec and across Canada, on behalf of the most right-wing sections of the bourgeoisie who are determined to mount an immediate frontal assault upon all the social gains of the working class.

Although the PQ spearheaded the campaign for Bill 204, in a patent attempt to ingratiate itself with Péladeau, the bill quickly

won the backing of the Liberal government and indeed virtually the entire political establishment. One after another, MNAs declared their support for legislation explicitly designed to provide supra-legal protection for a contract awarded by Quebec City without tender—a contract that unabashedly serves the interests of Quebecor by transferring all risk for the building of the amphitheater onto the public, while guaranteeing Quebecor that it will profit from the amphitheater's management, especially if it succeeds in bringing a National Hockey League franchise to Quebec City.

However, a campaign against Bill 204 led by an electoral opponent of Québec City Mayor Régis Lebaume and supported by Québec Solidaire, which postures as a “left” nationalist party, resulted in a mounting public outcry. In resigning, the three PQ MNAs declared that they could not support a law so blatantly designed to support the powerful, warning that it would further discredit the political process. “Is this how we will make Quebec independent” asked Louise Beaudoin in a post-resignation press interview. “Will the citizens who have become so distant from the political class, who are so disappointed in the political class, all parties included, will they want to embark in this beautiful and great collective and common project?”

The resignation of the four PQ MNAs, although triggered by the debate around Bill 204, has much more to do with internal disagreements about the program and posture of the party under conditions where PQ leader Pauline Marois has chosen to soft-peddle the PQ's sovereigntist option in a bid to regain office. The four newly independent deputies were all identified with the “hardline” wing of the party that favors emphasizing sovereignty, including committing a future PQ provincial government to using its powers to promote independence.

While the PQ has repeatedly been torn by such frictions since its founding in 1968, they have taken on a new character under conditions where the PQ, and its junior sister, the BQ, have suffered a series of devastating electoral reversals. These reversals began with the 2003 Quebec election when the PQ fell from power and lost 500,000 votes, approximately 25 percent of its electoral support, and reached a new low with last month's electoral implosion of the BQ.

Behind the fall in electoral support for the Parti Québécois is

a far-reaching disillusionment in a party that, touting itself as “social democratic”, instituted savage cuts in public services and social programs and reduced taxes for big business and the rich, when it held office from 1994-2003. While the union bureaucracy in Quebec has continued to steadfastly support the PQ, it has rightly been deserted by much its traditional working class electorate.

In the 2007 provincial elections, the PQ was reduced to third place, when many voters supported the rightwing populist Action-Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) to register their protest against the PQ and Liberals, the big business parties that have alternated as Quebec’s government for the past four decades. Once the rightwing platform of the ADQ became between known, support for it plunged. In the December 2008 election, the PQ was able to claw back to Official Opposition status.

Support for the eight year-old Charest Liberal government has since plunged as it pushes forward with a big business austerity program of steep social spending cuts and service-fee hikes. But even before the May 2 election—in which, in a staggering popular rejection of the entire Quebec political establishment federalist and sovereignist, the New Democratic Party (NDP) was catapulted from 1 Quebec seat to 59—it was patently evident that the PQ’s relatively good poll numbers were entirely due to hostility to the Charest government.

How has the Parti Québécois reacted to the decline in its popular appeal over the past decade?

Firstly, it has adopted an increasingly chauvinist stance, placing “questions of identity” at the heart of its programme. In defence of “Québécois values,” the PQ has encouraged racist, anti-immigrant, and Islamophobic sentiments, becoming, alongside the ADQ, the principal promoter of the corporate media’s campaign for immigrants and minorities to show “greater respect” for the “majority.”

One of the first steps taken by Marois after she gained the PQ leadership following the party’s 2007 electoral disaster was to propose the creation of a “Quebec citizenship.” Under the law that she proposed, newcomers to Quebec, whether immigrants or Canadians, would be deprived of certain fundamental political rights if they didn’t prove able after three years in the province to pass a French-language test. The rights that Marois proposed be taken away included the rights to stand as a candidate for provincial or municipal office, to donate to provincial and municipal parties, and to sign petitions to the National Assembly.

In its new updated program, the PQ pledges that, if elected, it will proceed with its reactionary Québécois citizenship project.

The other prong in the PQ’s response to its narrowing base of support has been to step up its efforts to secure the backing of the most powerful sections of the Québécois capitalist elite, who are impatiently demanding a profound political shift to the right.

The PQ has repeatedly chastised the Liberal government for

not cutting social spending sharply enough.

In March 2010, after a colloquium on “the creation of wealth,” the PQ withdrew recognition of SPQ Libre (Unionists and Progressives for a Free Québec) as an organized political club within the party. The SPQ Libre had been formed after the PQ’s 2003 election defeat by a section of the union bureaucracy that was anxious to prop up the PQ’s political domination of the working class. It was a tireless promoter of the PQ and supported the PQ’s shift ever rightward. Nevertheless Marois and the PQ leadership struck out against it so as to demonstrate to big business that the days when the PQ claimed to have “a favourable prejudice” for the labor movement were truly long gone.

In her opening remarks to the March 2010 colloquium, Marois announced that “it is no longer the state that must be the heart of our national enrichment, but the individual men and women of Québec who must be the spearhead of wealth creation.”

In its programme, adopted at a party congress held this April, the PQ confirmed that it embraces the concepts of personal enrichment and economic austerity. “The wealth of nations rests upon that of individuals,” declares the PQ program, “and the state has the duty to bring about conditions that permit the individual to enrich his or her self.”

These conflicting pressures, those of the bourgeoisie which demands a settling of accounts with the working class, and those of the population that is more and more alienated from the official parties, are having a profound destabilising effect upon the traditional parties of the bourgeoisie.

Recently François Legault, who served as the Ministers of Education and Health in the last PQ government, founded a new rightwing grouping, the Coalition for the Future of Québec (CAQ), to promote the austerity, tax-cutting and privatization agenda of big business. This movement, until now little-known by the public, presents itself demagogically as the bearer of “change,” ready to fight against the “immobilisme” of Quebecers—that is their resistance to the elite’s claims that Medicare and other vital public services are unsustainable.

Constantly presented in glowing terms by the corporate media, the CAQ currently polls higher both than the PQ and the Liberals, despite it not having even constituted itself as an official political party. Far from demonstrating any real popular support, the “success” of the CAQ testifies to the profound disillusionment of the population with the political establishment and the intense desire of the bourgeoisie to find a viable tool for dramatically intensifying the assault on the social rights and historical gains of the working class.



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