

# Parti Québécois to form minority government, after narrow election win

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The Parti Québécois, the Quebec elite's alternate party of government, won 54 of the 125 National Assembly seats in Tuesday's provincial election—enough to form a minority government and end nine years' of Liberal rule.

In terms of the popular vote, the Liberal's recorded their worst-ever result, 31.2 percent. Premier Jean Charest went down to personal defeat in Sherbrooke, Quebec's sixth largest city, and on Wednesday resigned as Liberal leader. Due to many three- and several four-way races and the tepid support for the Parti Québécois (PQ), the Liberals nevertheless captured 50 seats, just four less than the incoming government.

Mass opposition to the Liberals' big business austerity agenda erupted last spring in the form of a militant province-wide student strike. Following the Liberals' imposition of Bill 78—anti-democratic legislation that criminalized the student strike and placed sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue—the strike threatened to trigger a mass movement of the working class.

But the trade unions systematically isolated the striking students, pledging to obey and enforce Bill 78 as soon as it was adopted. Along with their student association allies, the unions sought to divert the popular opposition to the Liberals behind the PQ as exemplified by the slogan that the Quebec Federation of Labour adopted at the very point when the students' defiance of Bill 78 was galvanizing mass working class support—“After the street, to the ballot box.” Prominent among the new crop of PQ members of the National Assembly is Léo Bureau-Blouin, who headed FECQ (the Quebec College Students' Federation) until June.

CLASSE, the student group that led the strike, capitulated before the unions' opposition to its call for

a broader protest movement involving limited worker job-action, abandoning its demand for a “social strike.” It also lent support to the claim that the defeat of the Liberals at the hands of the PQ would represent a victory for students.

Tuesday's election results indicate widespread alienation from and distrust of the entire political establishment. Close to 30 percent of the electorate did not vote. Despite the popular hostility to the Liberals, the PQ captured just 31.9 percent of the popular vote, a loss of three percentage points from the 2008 election.

While the unions and the petty bourgeois pseudo-left promote the PQ as a “progressive” alternative to the Liberals, large sections of the working class rightly view it as an establishment party, which when it last held office carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

During the course of this year, the PQ sought to refurbish its tattered “left” credentials in the hope of exploiting the mounting opposition to the government. It cast itself as an opponent of several high-profile Liberal austerity measures, including the Liberals' tuition fee hikes and a \$200 per adult health care tax. During the election campaign it called for a modest roll-back of some of the tax concessions that PQ and Liberal governments alike have lavished on the upper middle class, rich and super-rich over the course of the new century.

At the same time, they sought to reassure big business that they would balance the budget and otherwise pursue its austerity agenda. This included a vow to limit the growth in public spending to 2.4 percent a year during the mandate of a majority government. When inflation and population growth are taken into account, this constitutes a pledge to impose significant real-dollar spending cuts each year for the next five

years.

In the name of defending “Quebec values” and the French-language, the PQ placed at the center of its campaign a series of chauvinist pledges. These included: stripping certain political rights from newcomers to Quebec who fail to prove French-language proficiency after three years’ residence, adopting a “secular charter” that targets symbols of minority faiths while exempting Catholic ones, and barring native French-speakers and the children of persons born outside of Canada from attending English-language CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges).

While the PQ’s trumpeting of “identity” issues no doubt pleased sections of the Quebecois petty bourgeois, starting with its own party cadre, it clearly helped the Liberals to rally minority voters. The PQ won only 6 of the 28 seats on the Island of Montreal.

The Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), a new party former by ex-PQ cabinet minister and millionaire businessman François Legault and that incorporates the right-wing populist Action-démocratique du Québec, elected 19 MNAs and won 27.1 percent of the vote.

The CAQ was massively promoted by the corporate media over the past year as a means of pushing Quebec politics still further right. Although Legault has been a prominent political player in Quebec for close to 15 years, he promoted himself as an outsider, railed against the corruption of the Liberals and PQ, and promised he could cut taxes, while improving health care and education. Support for the CAQ tapered off in the last days of the campaign, precisely at the point when Legault became more forthright in presenting some of his party’s key right-wing policy planks, including favoring privatization and granting municipalities the right to lock out their workers.

Québec Solidaire (QS), a “left” pro-Quebec independence party to which the Pabloites and most of the Quebec pseudo-left adhere, increased its representation in the National Assembly from 1 to 2 and raised its share of the popular vote from 4 to 6 percent. In June, QS urged the PQ to join it an electoral alliance and during the course of the campaign the QS made clear that its fondest hope was that the elections would place it in the position to prop up a minority PQ government. Indeed, the co-leaders of the QS, Françoise David and Amir Khadir, publicly declared

last week that they were prepared to guarantee in advance that QS would prop up a PQ minority government for at least a year, effectively giving this right-wing big business party a blank cheque.

In her victory speech Tuesday night, however, PQ leader and Premier-elect Pauline Marois announced her eagerness to collaborate not with the QS, but with the Liberals and the CAQ—the parties she had derided during the election campaign as right-wing twins.

Marois’ speech was interrupted by an apparent assassination attempt. A 62-year-old anglophone small businessman shot and killed a worker for a company hired to help stage the PQ post-election party and critically injured a second worker, while seeking to get onto the stage from where Marois was speaking. Videotape of the arrest of Marois’ assailant shows him urging the English to “rise up.”

While Marois’ assailant was evidently deranged, this does not mean that there was no political motivation to his attack, nor that it is without social significance.

Following the 1995 referendum on Quebec independence, the federal Liberal government and the English-Canadian media made what was in effect a veiled threat of civil war by promoting a movement calling for the partition of Quebec on ethnic-linguistic lines in the event Quebec ever seceded from Canada.

Speaking Wednesday Marois reiterated her call for collaboration with the Liberals and CAQ, while announcing she would cancel the Liberals’ tuition fee hike and convene a conference on university funding—a conference the PQ will use to defreeze university fees. As in the past, the PQ will use their right-wing opponents to try to intimidate the working class, while enlisting the unions to assist it in imposing the austerity program of the ruling class.



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