

Quebec: PQ welcomes right-wing billionaire as star candidate

Laurent Lafrance

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Media and telecommunications magnate Pierre-Karl Péladeau made a sudden, unexpected entry into official political life last Sunday, when Quebec Premier Pauline Marois announced that he is standing for her Parti Québécois (PQ) in the April 7 provincial election.

Péladeau is a notorious right-winger who has helped spearhead the Canadian elite's assault on the working class. Prior to joining the PQ last weekend, he had been closely associated with the federal Conservative Party, both as the proprietor of the hard-right, pro-Conservative *Sun* newspaper chain and TV channel and as the longtime employer of former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and several of his cronies.

Péladeau's emergence as a "star" candidate for the PQ and presumptive heir apparent to the party leadership represents a further, sharp lurch to the right on the part of the big business, pro-Quebec independence PQ. Marois was quick to lavish praise on Péladeau's business experience and to hold up his support for Quebec independence as proof that it would "enrich" Quebecers.

One of no more than two dozen Quebec-based billionaires, Péladeau owns more than a quarter of all shares and 74 percent of all voting-shares in Quebecor—a telecommunications conglomerate whose holdings include two of the province's three largest French-language dailies, its largest private television network, the Sun media group in English Canada, and Quebec's largest cable TV-internet provider (Vidéotron).

Péladeau has used his media empire to campaign against "government waste" and champion massive tax cuts for big business and the rich and the privatization of health care and other public services.

His *Journal de Montréal*, *Journal de Québec*, and other tabloids have been instrumental in drumming up support for the PQ's "Charter of Quebec Values" (Bill 60)—chauvinist legislation the PQ has brought forward with the aim of diverting public attention from its big business austerity program and splitting the working class. (See: Quebec's Bill 60—a chauvinist attack on democratic rights.)

Péladeau has also long fulminated against "union power" by which he means the popular resistance to the dismantling of what remains of the social rights workers won through the militant mass struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. He has repeatedly used lockouts to impose massive wage, benefit and job cuts at his newspapers and Vidéotron—a stratagem that has invariably proven successful because of the pro-capitalist unions' adamant opposition to mobilizing the power of the working class. The 2009-10 lockout of *Journal de Montréal* reporters and office staff was the 14th lockout at a Quebecor subsidiary in as many years. To facilitate Péladeau's entry into the PQ leadership, the PQ at its National Council meeting last Saturday voted to excise from the party platform a call for strengthening the province's "anti-scab" law to include offsite operations. This plank, it should be added, had been a dead-letter in the 18 months since the PQ returned to power.

Speaking alongside Marois last Sunday, Péladeau justified his entry into politics by saying that "there are no easy solutions" to Quebec's trade deficit and that "audacity" is needed to increase innovation and productivity. He also trumpeted his support for Quebec's secession from the Canadian federal state. "My adherence to the PQ is adherence to my deepest values," declared the billionaire businessman. "That is, to make Quebec a country."

Not without reason, some reporters have compared Péladeau to the three-time Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who used his media empire to push Italian politics sharply right and grease his own rise to power, and in turn used his political career to further his business empire.

No one believes Péladeau, who has a reputation as a demanding bullying boss, will long remain content to be a mere cabinet minister. And while he has formally severed all connection with Quebecor's management, he has proclaimed that he will not sell his controlling stake in Quebecor.

Péladeau has long benefited from close ties to both the federalist and Quebec sovereignist political establishment.

Particularly important to his business fortunes was the support that the PQ government of Bernard Landry gave Quebecor in 2001. At Landry's insistence, the *Caisse de Dépôt et Placement* (the Quebec Pension Fund) provided Péladeau with \$3 billion in financing so as to secure control of Vidéotron. The takeover was critical to Quebecor's media convergence strategy.

Since his leap into official politics, Péladeau has been trumpeting his *indépendantiste* convictions, prompting the press to begin speaking of his leading or co-leading the pro-independence forces in a third referendum on Quebec's secession from Canada. In an interview with *La presse*, Péladeau enthused at the prospect of an independent Quebec state, saying it would be good for business because "power wouldn't be shared between two orders of government."

The emergence of the Quebec CEO and capitalist who has served as the spokesman for the most voracious anti-working class sections of big business as a champion of—and poster-boy for—Quebec independence underscores the utterly reactionary class character of the *indépendantiste* movement. For decades the union bureaucracy, the pseudo-left and other privileged sections of the middle-class have sought to camouflage the striving of sections of the Quebec bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie to strengthen their class position by portraying the project for a capitalist République du Québec (that as the PQ loudly proclaims would be a member of NATO, NORAD and NAFTA) as a struggle for "national liberation." In so doing they have lent legitimacy to the PQ's chauvinist politics and worked systematically to divide workers in Quebec from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and internationally.

In a further demonstration that the unions have become utterly hostile to the workers they purport to represent, large sections of the trade union bureaucracy have welcomed Péladeau's entrance into the leadership of the party that they have patronized for more than four decades.

"I don't agree with the way Pierre-Karl Péladeau managed his labor relations," said Marc Laviollette, the former president of the CNTU (Confederation of National Trade Unions) and the current head of the SPQ Libre (Trade Unionists and Progressives for an Independent Quebec). "But what's involved here is not negotiating a collective agreement. We want to build a country. So (Péladeau's) arrival (in the ranks of the PQ) is a big plus."

Françoise David, the parliamentary leader of the ostensibly left-wing Québec Solidaire, was for her part indignant that the PQ was renouncing its "progressive" past. "It's a day of convulsions, of soul-searching," said David, adding that it is now clear the PQ "isn't a workers' party" and people "must mourn for the party of René Lévesque."

David's remarks only serve to illustrate the extent to

which QS operates in the orbit of the PQ, and works assiduously to promote illusions in it and harness the working class to the big business and chauvinist *indépendantiste* movement.

The PQ—which was formed by a split-off from the big-business Liberal Party—has always been a capitalist party dedicated to suppressing any challenge to the profit system and at striking a better deal for the Quebec elite with its rivals in English Canada and Washington. For the past four decades, it has alternated with the Liberals as Quebec's government and each time it has held office it has come into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing brutal social spending cuts and criminalizing strikes. David's hero Lévesque threatened teachers with mass firings when they rebelled against government-imposed wage-cutting contracts. Yet QS has always sought to provide the PQ with progressive credentials, presenting it as a "social-democratic party" or at least "a lesser evil" as compared to the Liberals and the Coalition Avenir Québec (the former ADQ).

While David and QS are now lamenting the PQ's embrace of Péladeau—just as they have lamented its austerity budgets (which they invariably condemned as "Liberal budgets")—they played an important role in bringing the Marois government to power in September 2012 and should by rights be held politically responsible for its actions.

With the assistance of the unions, QS and the entire pseudo-left that the bourgeoisie employed in the 2012 elections to defuse the political crisis provoked by the six-month-long Quebec student strike and the mass opposition to the Liberal government's draconian Bill78, a PQ government was brought to power that rescinded the Liberals' university tuition fee hikes, then predictably pivoted to imposing austerity measures—including tuition fee hikes.

While the unions isolated the striking students, QS worked to burnish the PQ's progressive credentials. In June 2012, it formally proposed an electoral alliance with the PQ and a week before the election it publicly pledged that if it held the balance of power in a hung parliament, it would sustain a PQ minority government in office for a year without any conditions.

And for all their denunciations of Péladeau, the QS is committed by its history, program and right-wing class orientation to working with him and the PQ in realizing Quebec's secession.



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