

Rival right-wing appeals dominate Quebec election campaign

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The Parti Québécois (PQ) has responded to a spate of opinion polls that indicate it will fall from power in next Monday's provincial election by even more aggressively promoting its anti-democratic "identity agenda."

To drum up support for its chauvinist Quebec Charter of Values (Bill 60), the big business, pro-Quebec independence PQ is ever more explicitly targeting Muslims. In recent days Quebec's PQ Premier, Pauline Marois, has repeatedly invoked a bogus Muslim fundamentalist threat to Quebec, trumpeting the Charter as a "rampart against fundamentalism."

She has also encouraged private sector employers to follow the PQ in threatening members of religious minorities who wear "ostentatious" religious symbols—including the Muslim hijab, Sikh turban, and Jewish kippah—with dismissal. And on Monday, she vowed that the PQ will invoke the Canadian constitution's "notwithstanding clause" so as to ensure Bill 60 is not struck down by the courts. The "notwithstanding clause" is a seldom used anti-democratic provision of Canada's constitution that empowers the national parliament and provincial legislatures to adopt legislation that violates the rights guaranteed in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Marois is exaggerating the PQ's differences with the three other parties in the National Assembly, claiming that only the election of a majority PQ government can ensure "Quebecers have their Charter." In fact, the Liberals, Coalition Avenir Quebec, and Quebec Solidaire have all repeatedly voiced their support for the Charter's reactionary premises—i.e., that immigrants and Muslims constitute a potential threat to Quebec society. They also support many of its specifics, including the ban on fully-veiled Muslim women receiving health care and other public services, except in the case of emergencies. What differences there are between the parties largely revolve around the scope of the ban on state employees wearing "ostentatious" religious symbols. The PQ is insisting on a blanket-ban covering all 600,000 public and para-public workers—including civil servants, teachers, transit and other municipal workers, nurses, doctors and hospital workers.

In the final days of the election campaign, the PQ has also been railing against Liberal leader Philippe Couillard for wanting to "bilingualize" Quebec. "The leader of a party that

seeks to lead the only francophone nation of North America would like us to set aside what distinguishes us," declared Marois. "For him diversity is a plus as long as it is not our own difference that we are talking about."

The PQ has loudly proclaimed its intention to strengthen Bill 101, the PQ's flagship 1977 legislation that was designed to make French the language of work and education in Quebec. It is promising to revive legislation for which it failed to win approval in the last National Assembly that would extend Bill 101 to all businesses with more than eleven employees, restrict access to English language CEGEPs (technical and pre-university colleges), and weaken guarantees to provide health care and other services in English.

The PQ came to power in September 2012 with the support of the trade unions and the pseudo-left who had together channeled the militant, six-month long Quebec student strike and the broader opposition to the Charest Liberal government's austerity program behind the Quebec elite's alternate party of government.

Within a matter of weeks of taking office, the PQ imposed the steepest social spending cuts in a generation and it has been rampaging to the right ever since. Just prior to calling the April 7 election, it tabled a budget imposing still further spending cuts and sharply increasing electricity rates and public daycare fees. As a further guarantee to big business of the PQ's determination to intensify the assault on the working class, Marois unveiled as her party's star recruit and election candidate Pierre-Karl Peladeau—a media mogul notorious for his rightwing views, including the need for massive tax cuts for big business and the rich and the "marketization" and "privatization" of public services.

The PQ's "identity" agenda is a transparent ploy to divert attention away from the government's big business austerity program and whip up animosity against immigrants and religious minorities so as to split the working class.

If the opinion polls are correct, next Monday the Liberals will win a plurality, and quite possibly a majority, of the seats in the National Assembly.

The Liberal campaign has been no less duplicitous than that of the PQ. While the federalist Liberals claim that the economy, not the Charter, is the "real issue", they have focused their

campaign on mobilizing popular opposition to another referendum on Quebec independence. The uncertainty surrounding a referendum would, they argue, imperil the economy.

The PQ's response—that they won't call a referendum unless Quebecers “want one” and that, in any case, independence would change little (Quebec would still belong to NAFTA and NATO and use the Canadian dollar)—has only underscored that the dispute between the federalists and Quebec sovereignists is a wrangle between rival factions of the bourgeois elite, both utterly hostile to the working class.

By focusing on the referendum issue, Couillard and his Liberals have sought to avoid discussion of the record of the Charest government in which he long served and of his own rightwing policy prescriptions.

As Quebec's Health Minister from 2003-2008, Couillard presided over a vast expansion of private health care, then quit to take a high-paying job with a private equity fund with major investments in for-profit health-care providers. He and the Liberals continue to stand fully behind the Charest government's campaign to break the student strike using unprecedented police violence and the authoritarian Bill 78.

Like the PQ, the Liberals are promising to balance the budget in the 2015-16 fiscal year, which they acknowledge will require further austerity, including \$1.4 billion in additional cuts to health care and education.

However, the Liberals are pulling punches, so as to avoid spelling out the rightwing measures they will implement should they return to power. Their spending and revenue projections are based on the fanciful claim that Quebec's economy will grow on average by 4.5 percent per annum for the next five years.

The Liberals' position on the PQ's Charter is utterly two-faced. While claiming to oppose firing people for their religious beliefs, Couillard has also argued for imposing a ban on religious symbols but via administrative rules rather than legislation. The Liberal leader has also competed with the PQ for the support of the Catholic right, denouncing the PQ for favoring the removal of the crucifix that hangs in the National Assembly and reputedly otherwise seeking to “erase” Quebec's Catholic heritage.

Led by former Air Transat boss and PQ cabinet minister Francois Legault, the Coalition Avenir Quebec is hoping to capitalize on the widespread popular dissatisfaction with the traditional governing parties so as to shift politics further right. But it has had much of its thunder stolen by the ever-rightward march of the PQ and Liberals. It is proposing to attack workers' rights—including new restrictions on strike votes—and claims it will both balance the budget in the current fiscal years and reduce taxes by \$1000 per family, measures that would require billions in additional social spending cuts.

Quebec Solidaire (QS) played a major role in assisting the union bureaucracy in smothering the eruption of working-class

support for the striking students in May 2012 and channeling the opposition to the Charest Liberals behind the big business PQ.

In June 2012, QS offered the PQ an electoral alliance and just days before the September 2012 election it publicly declared that if it held the balance of power it would sustain a PQ minority government in power for at least a year, no questions asked.

With the PQ hurtling to the right, QS has made a show of opposition. Its parliamentary leader Francoise David has vowed she will never sit in the same government as Peladeau, while heaping praise on Rene Levesque, the ex-Liberal cabinet minister who founded the PQ and led the first PQ government, which came into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing wage cuts and threatening striking teachers with PATCO-style mass firings.

In an interview this week, David enthused over the prospect that the QS could hold the balance of power in the National Assembly. QS would, said David, support Marois and her big business PQ “every time they want to pass a bill that goes in the sense of social progress, social justice and ecology.”

David also once again added legitimacy and muster to the PQ's chauvinist and diversionary Charter campaign, telling *Le Devoir*, “I look forward to seeing a secular charter adopted by Quebec, I wish that it will be as consensual as possible.”

The QS—in which virtually the entire pseudo-left in Quebec, including the Pabloite organizations, are now submerged—props up the PQ and seeks to breathe life into the reactionary, discredited *indépendantiste* project of a section of the Quebec bourgeoisie, quarantining the struggles of Quebec workers and spreading the lie that have more in common with capitalists like Pleadeau than workers in the rest of Canada.

Whatever party or combination of parties form Quebec's next government, the coming period will see an enormous intensification of the class struggle. To defeat big business's drive to make them pay for the world capitalist crisis, workers in Quebec—French and English-speaking and immigrant—must join forces with workers in English Canada and around the world in a common struggle against the capitalist profit system.



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