

# PQ suffers debacle in Quebec election

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After barely eighteen months in opposition, the Quebec Liberal Party has returned to power with a parliamentary majority by capitalizing on popular disaffection with the austerity measures imposed by Pauline Marois's minority Parti Québécois (PQ) government and its antidemocratic "identity" agenda.

Even Canada's corporate media, which strongly backed a Liberal victory because of opposition to the PQ's pro-Quebec independence stance, conceded that the results of Monday's provincial election were a repudiation of the PQ, not a positive endorsement of the Liberals.

Marois called the election on the expectation that she would win a parliamentary majority by trumpeting the PQ's Charter of Quebec Values (Bill 60), which attacks the democratic and employment rights of religious minorities. Touted by the PQ as a measure to advance secularism and women's rights, the Charter was aimed at diverting popular attention away from the PQ's austerity measures and channeling mounting frustration and anxiety over falling incomes and increasing economic insecurity against immigrants and minorities, especially Muslims.

This cynical ruse failed. In Monday's vote, the PQ suffered a debacle that places a serious question mark over its future as a cohesive political force and the Quebec elite's alternate party of government.

The PQ's vote fell by 320,000 or 23 percent from the 2012 election. With just a 25.4 percent share of the overall popular vote, the PQ had far and away its worst result since 1970, the first election it ever contested.

The PQ suffered a net loss of more than twenty seats, capturing just 30 seats in the 125-member National Assembly. The majority of PQ MNAs (Members of the National Assembly) now come from rural or more remote regions, such as eastern Quebec and Lac Saint-Jean. On the Island of Montreal, the PQ won just four seats, and in Laval, Montreal's largest suburb and Quebec's third largest city, none. In Quebec City, the province's other major metropolitan region, it took just one seat.

The defeated PQ candidates included Marois—who announced her retirement from political life in her concession speech—and five other cabinet ministers. Also going down to defeat were Martine Desjardins, the former head of FEUQ (the Quebec University Students' Federation), standing in her first election, and Léo Bureau-Blouin, the former president of FECQ (the Quebec College Students' Federation), who had been elected as a PQ MNA in September 2012.

Working under the patronage and political direction of the trade unions, FECQ and FEUQ spearheaded the drive to end the 2012 province-wide student strike, which at its height threatened to

provoke a mass movement of the working class, and to corral the opposition to the austerity measures of the Charest Liberal government behind the big business PQ.

On taking office in Sept. 2012, the PQ canceled the university tuition fee hikes imposed by Charest and suspended the application of Law 12 (Bill 78), the Liberals' draconian antistrike legislation. Having defused the political crisis provoked by the student strike, the Marois government promptly pivoted to implementing big business's austerity agenda. In November 2012, it tabled an emergency budget that imposed the biggest social spending cuts in a generation. Three months later it introduced its own schedule of annual university tuition fee hikes and in July it joined with the Liberals and the rightwing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) to criminalize a strike by 75,000 construction workers.

Just prior to calling the April 7 election, the PQ brought down another austerity budget that further slashed public services and substantially hiked electricity and public day care fees. In a further move aimed at demonstrating to big business the PQ's determination to impose its agenda, Marois began the election campaign by introducing the billionaire media and telecommunications mogul Pierre-Karl Péladeau as her party's new "star" candidate. Péladeau is an arch-rightwinger who has long used his media empire to clamor for further tax cuts for big business and the rich, the privatization of health care, and fresh attacks on worker rights.

According to press pundits, the turning point in the campaign was Péladeau's vow, fist thrust in the air, that he was entering official politics to make Quebec independent.

The Liberals and the entire pro-federalist Canadian establishment responded with a barrage of warnings and threats that a third referendum on Quebec sovereignty would trigger uncertainty, scare off investors, and damage the economy. There is no question that this campaign cut into the PQ's popular support, especially among the conservative middle-class layers (many of them CAQ voters in the last election) whom the PQ was targeting with its chauvinist Charter campaign.

Recognizing the lack of enthusiasm for a referendum among the big business elite or the populace, the PQ had taken a deliberately ambiguous position on whether it would call one during its next term in office. In response to the federalist attack, it emphasized the rightwing, pro-imperialist character of the Quebec independence project: a *République du Québec* would be a partner in NAFTA, NATO and NORAD, retain the Canadian dollar as its currency, and be a haven for entrepreneurs like Péladeau. But under conditions of international economic upheaval and with Quebec's economy ever more globally integrated and dependent,

Marois's blithe assurances that a move toward independence would entail no uncertainty or risk were hardly credible.

Masses of Quebecers, it must be added, are fatigued with the reactionary, sterile squabble between the federalist and *indépendantiste* politicians over the constitution. And the PQ's Charter, by underscoring the exclusivist character of the Quebec sovereignty movement, served—in the absence of a socialist working-class political alternative—to incite Quebec's English and allophone minorities to support the Liberals.

What the press commentary conceals is that Péladeau's entry into the PQ leadership also had a visceral impact among layers of workers who rightly see him as personifying the assault on the working class. This undoubtedly also contributed to the sudden hemorrhaging in support for the PQ and its loss of votes on April 7, whether to other parties or because of abstention. At 71.4 percent, voter turnout was down more than 3 percent from the 2012 election, but in many predominantly French-speaking working-class electoral districts the decline in voter participation was bigger.

With a 10.3 percentage point increase in their share of the popular vote, the Liberals captured 70 seats Monday. By focusing on the referendum threat, Philippe Couillard and his Liberals were able to avoid substantive discussion of their own rightwing socio-economic agenda and record.

Couillard opposed the PQ's Charter, casting the Liberals as staunch defenders of democratic rights and proponents of an inclusive Quebec. In reality, the PQ's chauvinist Charter campaign had thrown the Liberals into crisis. After almost six months of infighting, they brought forward their own proposal for a more limited ban on religious head coverings, but one that more explicitly targeted Muslims. And, the Liberals continued to defend their Law 12 and the unprecedented campaign of police violence directed against the 2012 student strike.

As Liberal Health Minister from 2003-2008, Couillard presided over a huge expansion of private health care in Quebec, supported the Charest government's gutting of restrictions on the contracting out of work, and voted for legislation imposing a seven-year concessionary contract on half a million public sector workers.

It is highly likely that the Liberals—whose election platform was based on the fanciful projection of 4 percent per annum growth in Quebec's economy for the next five years—will now claim that the economic situation is much worse than the PQ let on, so as to provide them a pretext for the immediate imposition of unpopular measures.

Big business, for its part, is already pressing the Couillard Liberal government to continue and broaden the PQ's austerity drive.

"Painful adjustments are necessary to free the Quebec government from the structural deficits that condemn it to increased debt and arbitrary spending cuts," declared *La Presse*, Quebec's most influential daily, in its Tuesday morning editorial welcoming the Liberal victory. "Mr. Couillard didn't campaign on this theme—that was the battle horse of the CAQ."

The editorial's reference to the CAQ underscores that the corporate media, which lavished praise on the CAQ during the latter stages of the campaign when it was clear that the PQ was

heading for defeat, intends to continue to use it to push politics further right. Led by former PQ cabinet minister and Air Transat boss, Francois Légaault, the CAQ called for both immediate tax cuts and a balanced budget in the current fiscal year—a formula that would require unprecedented cuts in public services and mass layoffs. The CAQ saw its share of the vote fall by 4 percentage points in Monday's election, to 23 percent. Nonetheless, it was able to increase its representation in the National Assembly from 19 to 23, more than making up for seats lost to the Liberals in the Quebec City region, with gains at the PQ's expense in Montreal's off-island suburbs.

The pseudo-left Québec Solidaire increased its share of the popular vote from 6 to 7.6 percent and captured an additional seat, giving it three—all in east-central Montreal.

Along with the unions, QS played a major role in promoting the PQ as a "progressive" alternative to the Liberals during the 2012 student strike. When the strike was at its height in June 2012, QS offered the PQ an electoral alliance, and on the eve of the September 4 election it announced that if it held the balance of power it would keep a minority PQ government in office for at least a year, no questions asked.

As the PQ shifted ever rightward during its 18 months in office, QS sought to put some distance between itself and the Marois government. Invariably, this involved lamentations that the PQ was carrying out "Liberal" measures. Led by and oriented to privileged sections of the middle class, including the trade union bureaucracy, QS seeks to resuscitate the discredited PQ-led Quebec independence movement so as to prevent Quebec workers and youth from joining with workers in English Canada and internationally in a common struggle against the capitalist profit system. In her televised leader's speech Monday night, QS leader Francoise David spoke as a compatriot of the PQ saying that the sovereignist (pro-independence) movement had to reflect on the election results and urging it to return to its supposed "progressive" traditions.

In fact *indépendantiste* Quebec nationalism and its principal exponent, the PQ, were the instrument used to quarantine and politically neuter an explosive movement of the Quebec working class in the late 1960s and 1970s. The government led by PQ founder René Lévesque, whose praises David is always singing, made minor concessions to the working class in its first term in office, then initiated a bourgeois counteroffensive, imposing wage-cutting contracts on public sector workers by government decree and threatening striking teachers with mass firings.



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