

Leader's resignation sparks crisis in the Parti Québécois

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After less than a year at the helm of the Parti Québécois, media and telecommunications mogul Pierre-Karl Péladeau announced last week that he was resigning all his political functions effective immediately. This precipitate departure underlines the longstanding crisis of the Parti Québécois (PQ), a pro-Quebec independence party that for the past four decades has served as one of the Quebec capitalist elite's two parties of government.

Péladeau's resignation took the PQ leadership and the entire political establishment by surprise. Just the week before, Péladeau had reorganized his team and replaced his chief of staff.

Péladeau attributed his abrupt departure from politics to family problems. Press reports spoke of his fear of losing custody of his children following his recent, highly-publicized separation from his wife, the television producer Julie Snyder. In addition to their personal relationship, the two have an apparently stormy business relationship, with Snyder publicly charging that since her estrangement from Péladeau her production house has been spurned by Péladeau's Quebecor media empire.

But these personal difficulties can only have been the trigger. A notoriously intemperate man used to bossing his subordinates, Péladeau was visibly frustrated by his failure to gain political traction and power. As noted by several commentators, his brief reign as PQ leader was marked by many failures, above all, his inability to shore up the PQ's base of support, despite the massive popular opposition to the savage austerity measures being implemented by the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard.

Péladeau's reputation was further tarnished this year when a Radio-Canada report revealed that while he headed Quebecor from 1999 to 2012, the conglomerate had several subsidiaries in tax havens and likely engaged in tax evasion.

It has also been revealed that during his tenure as PQ

leader, Péladeau failed to place his controlling interest in Quebecor in a blind-trust. While temporarily handing his affairs to a company representative, he retained his 75 percent voting rights in Quebecor, an act that put the leader of the official opposition in a situation of blatant conflict of interest, especially given Quebecor's role as far and away the province's largest private sector media company. Many commentators speculate that Péladeau will now resume day-to-day operational control of Quebecor.

The leaders of Quebec's main political parties all expressed sympathy for the businessman after his resignation announcement and praised him for his "public service." What they were in fact saluting was the major role Péladeau has played, both as a businessman and politician, in pushing official Quebec politics sharply to the right. Péladeau, who will no doubt continue to exercise great influence in the PQ through his pocketbook and media interests, has promised to remain a committed activist for Quebec independence.

Former Bloc Québécois (BQ) leader Gilles Duceppe and former PQ Premiers Bernard Landry and Pauline Marois said they were "shocked" and "saddened" by Péladeau's resignation. They had all played a major role in the press baron's entry into the PQ in 2014 and his meteoric rise to head the party a year later.

The warm welcome accorded the ultra-rich, notoriously anti-worker businessman within the PQ exemplifies the bourgeois and right-wing character of the PQ and the whole *indépendantiste* movement, including the supposedly leftist forces that promote it.

Péladeau's elevation to PQ leader was seen by the party establishment as a way of reviving the party's fortunes, including countering the arguments of their federalist big-business opponents that independence would hurt the Quebec economy. Over the past fifteen years, the PQ and the BQ, its sister party in the federal parliament, have

suffered a series of electoral debacles, due to a hemorrhaging of their electoral support among working class people. The huge social cuts imposed in the late 1990s by the Bouchard-Landry government in the name of achieving a “zero deficit” and then by Pauline Marois, when the PQ formed a minority government between 2012 and 2014, gave the lie to the PQ’s demagogic claims to be a party of the left with a “favourable attitude toward the workers’ movement.”

Péladeau was unable to increase popular support for the PQ because workers and youth rightly recognized him to be an anti-working class, multi-millionaire. As Quebecor’s CEO, Péladeau imposed 14 lockouts in 15 years at various Quebecor subsidiaries, while presiding over the reduction of its workforce from 60,000 employees to 15,000.

Péladeau’s entry into the big business PQ was quite logical. The son of Pierre Péladeau, the founder of Quebecor and a fervent nationalist who at times voiced admiration for both Adolph Hitler and Karl Marx, Pierre Karl Péladeau inherited a vast fortune and media empire.

He is part of a significant section of the Quebec ruling class that sees the creation of a new capitalist state in North America as an opportunity to get richer at the expense of the working class and to play a bigger role on the world stage, including through participation in imperialist wars waged by the United States.

His various television channels and newspapers, such as TVA and *Le Journal de Montreal* have served as mouthpieces for the most reactionary elements in the ruling elite. Quebecor tabloids provided a platform for “*les lucides*” (“the clear-sighted”)—a group of right-wing politicians, journalists and academics headed by former PQ premier Lucien Bouchard, who demanded further tax cuts for the rich and an all-out assault on workers through the dismantling of public services.

Le Journal de Montreal has also fueled anti-immigrant chauvinism, denouncing tolerance of the cultural practices of ethnic minorities (“reasonable accommodation”) as a threat to Quebec’s “French culture.” Péladeau himself played a key role in the Marois PQ government’s unsuccessful attempt to impose an anti-democratic and Islamophobic “Charter of Quebec Values.” This was aimed at dividing the working class and diverting attention from the social spending cuts the PQ imposed after it came to power in the fall of 2012 on a wave of discontent with the Charest Liberals and their austerity measures.

The arrival of Péladeau at the head of the PQ threw the

union bureaucracy and the so-called “left” in Quebec into a brief quandary. For decades, one of the main functions of these forces has been to provide political support and cover for the PQ, by falsely promoting it as a “lesser evil” and even “progressive” alternative to the Liberals.

Despite the notorious anti-worker record of Péladeau and his role as spokesperson for the most rapacious sections of the ruling elite, the union bureaucracy quickly rallied round the “lockout king.”

Québec Solidaire (QS), and the various pseudo-Marxist groups that are integrated within QS soon followed suit.

To maintain its role as the “left” wing of the “Quebec sovereignty” or pro-independence movement and prevent being swallowed whole by the PQ, QS finds it politic to keep a certain distance from the big business PQ, even as it collaborates with it, overtly and covertly, in the name of their “common project” of an independent Quebec.

Péladeau’s entry into the PQ leadership somewhat complicated this. But it didn’t take long for the leaders of QS to relaunch their efforts at rapprochement with the PQ. Over the past 18 months they have strengthened their de facto alliance with the PQ through their participation in the United Organizations for Independence (YES-Québec) and welcomed Péladeau’s calls for a “convergence” of sovereigntist forces in the run-up to the 2018 provincial election.

Showing the close links between QS and the PQ, QS parliamentary spokesperson Françoise David reacted to the resignation of Péladeau by stating, “My thoughts are with my colleagues of the Parti Québécois,” and lamenting the loss to Quebec’s political life of a “genuine sovereigntist.”

On balance, the leaders of QS see the departure of the notoriously right-wing Péladeau as favourable to their reconciliation efforts with the PQ, including a possible electoral alliance in 2018. Amir Khadir, one of the three QS Members of the National Assembly, has already proposed holding a primary to choose a “common sovereigntist” candidate if a by-election is needed for an electoral seat currently held by the Liberals.



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