

Parti Québécois selects third leader in three years

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Jean-François Lisée, a longtime party insider, was elected the leader of the big business, pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ) last month. Of the four candidates vying for the top position, Lisée is the most closely identified with the PQ's commitment to austerity and chauvinism.

Lisée's second-ballot victory in a months-long leadership race that culminated October 7 puts him at the head of a party in profound crisis. He is the third PQ leader in as many years.

The latest leadership contest was triggered by the sudden resignation of the media mogul and notorious right-winger Pierre Karl Péladeau, whose accession to the leadership had been hailed as a breakthrough in the party's efforts to rally support for independence from the wealthiest sections of the ruling elite. Péladeau managed to hold the position for less than a year. At the time of his resignation, he cited family pressures including a very public divorce, but there is no question the underlying reason for Péladeau's resignation was his frustration at his inability to rekindle support for the PQ and its sovereignty (i.e., independence) option.

The recent leadership contest generated little popular interest. Support for the PQ has been in freefall for over a decade. Despite mass popular anger with the brutal austerity policies of the provincial Liberal government of Philippe Couillard, support for the PQ continues to be at near record lows in the opinion polls. This is especially true among young people, with little more than 15 percent of 18-24-year-olds saying that they would vote for the PQ. Party membership, which at one time surpassed 300,000, now hovers around 70,000. The average age of a party member is 61.

Since 2003, the PQ has held office for just 18 months. In September 2012, it was brought to power on a wave of popular anger at the Liberal government of Jean Charest that had exploded onto the streets during the six-month, province-wide student strike of February to August 2012. During the 2012 election campaign, the unions, the student associations and the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire had presented the PQ

as a lesser evil, if not a "progressive" ally, in the fight against the Liberals and austerity. Once in power, the PQ quickly and predictably revealed its true nature. Under Premier Pauline Marois, the PQ imposed higher tuition fees, slashed welfare benefits and public services, criminalized a strike by construction workers, and sought to implement a xenophobic "Charter of Quebec Values."

The PQ's leading role in imposing austerity, including between 1995 and 1998 when it implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, has shattered its traditional working-class electoral base.

The crisis of the PQ and the sovereignty movement has also been accentuated by the reactionary and bellicose positions of its sister party at the federal level, the Bloc Québécois (BQ). The BQ, which from 1993 until 2011 held the majority of Quebec's seats in the Canadian parliament, supported Canada's leading role in the imperialist wars waged by the US and NATO in Afghanistan and Libya and strongly supports its participation in the current Mideast war. During last fall's federal election, the BQ joined the Harper Conservatives in demagogic attacks against the social democratic NDP for opposing a prohibition on Muslim women clad in the niqab taking the Oath of Citizenship.

The PQ has responded to its drop in popularity by turning markedly to the right, emphasizing identity politics and a toxic anti-immigrant discourse.

Lisée made these issues the center of his successful campaign to become PQ leader.

At the campaign's launch last spring, Alexandre Cloutier was by far the favored candidate of the party establishment, receiving the support of many prominent PQ leaders and senior "statesmen," including former Premier Bernard Landry. At 39, Cloutier was promoted as a young and charismatic figure who could revive interest in the PQ among younger voters. Cloutier tried to some extent to present himself as more open to immigrants, including by distancing himself from the anti-minority Charter of Values.

In the final weeks of the race, however, Lisée brought discussion on the Charter to the forefront. He committed to

lowering the number of immigrants admitted to Quebec in a year (the current threshold is 50,000) and promised to ban the wearing of religious symbols by public officials in “positions of authority,” while stressing that he is open to prohibiting the wearing of all “symbols of conviction”—political, social and environmental—in the public sphere. He also expressed readiness to ban the burqa and the niqab in all public places to “ensure the safety of Quebecers.”

During the leadership contest, all the candidates advanced policy prescriptions entirely in line with the right-wing, pro-capitalist program that the PQ has defended for decades. The victory of Jean-François Lisée (with 50.6 percent against 31.7 percent for Cloutier) confirms the further turn of the PQ to Quebec chauvinism and divisive appeals to identity. Significantly, Bernard Landry called the Lisée victory “good news,” stating that the winning candidate had managed to “put forward the major themes that stir the soul of the PQ.”

Despite a feeble attempt to pass for Quebec’s answer to Bernie Sanders, by hypocritically declaring his support for the trade unions’ campaign for a \$15/hour minimum wage,” Lisée is associated with capitalist austerity. Before becoming Minister of International Relations and La Francophonie in the Marois government, he was a close adviser to Premier Lucien Bouchard in the late 1990s, when he imposed massive social cuts in the name of achieving a “zero deficit.”

During the campaign, Lisée defended right-wing economic nationalism. The son of a businessman, who is proud to have “grown up in a business milieu” and to be close to the business “world,” Lisée advocates the deregulation of small and medium-sized enterprises to increase their profitability.

He also wants to transform the *Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec*, the financial institution that manages public pension funds, into an investment fund. According to Lisée, the fund could be broadened to draw in mutual-fund-type investments from individuals and use its increased financial heft to attract more corporations to Quebec and to maintain their corporate headquarters in Quebec—that is to say, to work with the government in offering them cheap loans, tax cuts and other incentives.

These measures are in line with Lisée’s attempt to woo supporters of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ—the Coalition for Quebec’s Future), a right-wing populist party founded in 2011 from the merger of the ADQ (Action démocratique du Québec) and a group of dissident *Péquistes* led by former PQ cabinet minister and current CAQ leader François Legault. Quebec’s third party, the CAQ, has a base of support in sections of the middle class in suburban and rural communities.

Another prominent theme in the campaign for the

leadership was the issue of Quebec independence.

Both Lisée and Cloutier opposed calling a referendum on separation from Canada in the foreseeable future. Former PQ cabinet minister Martine Ouellet ran as the only candidate willing to hold a referendum during a PQ government’s first term. Ouellet, who had the support of a large section of the union bureaucracy, won 17.6 percent of the vote. She argued that only the issue of independence could rally the population behind the PQ, admitting unwittingly that otherwise there are no major differences between the PQ, Liberals, and CAQ.

Emerging from a split from the Liberal Party in 1968, the PQ articulates the interests of a section of the ruling elite that sees the creation of a new capitalist state in North America as a way to better position itself in the global economy and assert its own imperialist interests.

It was only thanks to the assiduous efforts of Quebec’s trade unions and pseudo-left that the PQ was able for decades to successfully market itself as a “progressive” and “worker-friendly” party. But after its repeated stints in power, marked by the imposition of brutal austerity measures, the PQ’s support has hemorrhaged.

It is in this context that the trade unions, Québec Solidaire (QS) and the rest of the pseudo-left are redoubling their efforts to save the PQ and revive the Quebec sovereignty movement. QS is a pro-independence party that orbits around the PQ and is formally aligned with it through the United Organizations for Sovereignty (YES-Québec). It tries to maintain a facade of keeping its distance from the PQ, but is currently holding discussions on a “convergence” of sovereignist forces in the lead-up to the 2018 Quebec election.

Lisée has already reached out to Québec Solidaire for collaboration in working to “defeat the Liberals” in that election. QS spokesperson Françoise David has responded by saying QS members will be voting on the matter at its 2017 congress, thus demonstrating that QS is open to an alliance, in one form or another, with the big business PQ.



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