Canadian elections: Bloc Québécois champions Quebec chauvinism, law targeting religious minorities

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"*You can choose women and men* **who look like you**, *who share your values, who share your concerns and who work and will work for your interests"*

These words spoken by Bloc Québécois (BQ) leader Yves-François Blanchet at the end of a televised leaders' debate, while he stood just a few meters from NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, a Punjabi-Canadian who wears a Sikh turban, exemplify the chauvinist and racist nature of the BQ's campaign for Canada's October 21st federal election.

The Bloc is the federal sister party of the Parti Québécois (PQ), which advocates Quebec's secession from the Canadian federal state. Its election campaign has focused on defending Bill 21, or the State Secularism Act, a chauvinist law recently adopted by Quebec's right-wing nationalist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government.

Bill 21 prohibits the wearing of religious symbols by public sector employees deemed in a position of "authority," including primary and secondary school teachers, and bars Muslim women wearing a face-covering veil (the burqa or niqab) from providing or receiving public services. Its aim is to exclude religious minorities, in particular Muslim women wearing Islamic headscarves, from public sector jobs, and to condemn the handful of Muslims who wear the full veil to live as outcasts.

These two provisions are largely inspired by similar chauvinist measures proposed by previous Liberal and PQ provincial governments, whether it be the PQ's "Charter of Values" aimed at banning so-called "ostentatious" religious symbols (but not "discreet" Christian crucifixes) from the entire Quebec public sector, or the Quebec Liberal Party's Bill 62, which introduced the notion of denying public services to those wearing a face-covering veil.

Another key measure adopted by François Legault's CAQ government and endorsed by the BQ, Bill 9, adds new "cultural" criteria to the selection of immigrants, throwing the door wide open to multiple forms of discrimination.

The CAQ invoked an anti-democratic provision of Canada's constitution, the "notwithstanding clause," in order to preempt any constitutional challenge to Bill 21. The clause permits governments to ignore the rights "guaranteed" in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms in order to run roughshod over democratic rights. When Legault demanded that the leaders of all the major federal parties disavow support for any legal challenges to Bill 21, all seventy-eight candidates of the Bloc Québécois quickly signed a declaration pledging to uphold the chauvinist law.

The Bloc has also endorsed the other key demands that Legault is making of the parties contesting the federal election. These include: more power for Quebec in immigration matters; ceding to Quebec the collection of federal income tax; and expanding the reach of Bill 101, legislation adopted by the PQ in 1977 that violates the rights of the province's linguistic minorities in the name of defending the French language.

While the BQ continues to work in tandem with the PQ, both parties are eager to associate themselves with the CAQ and the explicitly rightwing "autonomist" nationalism championed by Legault, himself a former PQ cabinet minister. Gilles Duceppe, the former Confederation of National Trades Union bureaucrat and ex-Maoist who led the Bloc Québécois for nearly 15 years, ending in 2015, recently gave the Legault government an "A" grade for its first year in power.

In addition to promoting Quebec chauvinism and attacking the rights of minorities and immigrants, Legault and his CAQ have signaled their intention to mount an across-the-board attack on the working class. In the final months of the 18-month lockout of 1,000 ABI aluminum smelter workers, Legault, a multimillionaire and former Air Transat CEO, repeatedly condemned the "excessive" demands of the ABI workers, assisting the majority Alcoa-owned ABI in extorting major contract concessions. Legault coupled this with statements denouncing wages in Quebec's "entire manufacturing sector" as being "too high."

The Bloc's enthusiasm for the CAQ's deeply chauvinistic and anti-worker program exposes the monumental fraud of its claim to be the only representative of "Quebeckers" in the current election campaign.

When the Bloc insists in its election slogan that "*Le Québec, c'est nous*" ("We are Quebec"), it is speaking for corporate Quebec, which demands the destruction of jobs, the abolition of pension plans and the dismantling of public services in order to increase its already huge profits, and for their hangers-on and juniors partners in the Quebec petty bourgeoisie and upper middle-class. The political representatives of Quebec's ruling elite and their trade union bureaucrat allies have deployed such nationalist demagogy for decades, so as to subordinate Quebec workers to

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their "own" ruling class and divide them from their Canadian and international class brothers and sisters.

Like the CAQ, and the PQ before it, the Bloc is trying to conceal the full extent of its right-wing program. The BQ claims to be pro-environment based on hypocritical denunciations of the huge carbon-footprint of the western Canadian-based oil industry—not coincidentally an industry which Quebec's ruling elite views as peripheral to its interests and ambitions. Additionally, it makes criticisms of some federal cuts, while waging a chauvinistic campaign that implies immigrants and religious minorities are to blame for the economic and social ravages caused by bankrupt capitalism.

Lizabel Nitoi, a Bloc candidate in a Laval riding, shared an article on social media in 2016 that referred to "massive inbreeding in Muslim culture" and its effects on "their intelligence, their mental health, or their health as a whole." In recent years, at least three other Bloc candidates have made similar posts containing Islamophobic statements or promoting extreme right-wing groups, such as France's neo-fascist, Marine Le Pen-led Rassemblement or the far-right Quebec-based, *La Meute* (Wolf-pack). A Bloc spokesperson downplayed these comments and ruled out asking any of the four to step down on the grounds that they have pledged to "share the values and program of the Bloc Québécois."

The Bloc's embrace of far-right positions is part of an international trend. Not only under Trump in the United States or Bolsonaro in Brazil, but all over the world, the ruling class is stirring up chauvinism and directly encouraging extreme right-wing forces. In so doing, it seeks to divert attention from its austerity policies that have led to a massive increase in social inequality; to divide the working class along ethnic lines; to justify imperialist wars of conquest abroad; and to combat the growing international upsurge of the working class and spread of anti-capitalist and pro-socialist sentiment.

The Bloc is far from alone in embracing the CAQ government and its anti-Muslim chauvinism. As previously noted, Bill 21 is based on similar legislative measures proposed by the CAQ's predecessors in office. The Quebec media has lavished praise on Legault and his ostensible "solution" to the furor that it itself manufactured, beginning in 2007, over so-called "excessive" accommodations to minorities. Columnists at *Le Journal de Montréal*—the right-wing tabloid of the media mogul Pierre Karl Péladeau, himself a former PQ leader who juggled with the idea of running for the Bloc–have hailed Legault for leading a "resurgence" of the "Quebec nation," while urging him to go still further in asserting Quebec's "national identity."

As for the supposedly "left-wing" Québec Solidaire (QS), it has played a pernicious role for more than a decade in facilitating the growing xenophobia of the Quebec and Canadian ruling elites. QS described as "legitimate" the fraudulent "excessive accommodation" debate, while working to rehabilitate the reactionary and widely discredited program of Quebec separatism, including by aping the BQ-PQ in promoting the absurd claim that the creation of an independent capitalist Quebec will be a blow against climate-change.

The federal parties, while initially feigning indignation at Bill 21 to curry support from the majority of Canadians who oppose the discriminatory law, also defend chauvinistic policies, along with austerity measures. Andrew Scheer's Conservative Party and Singh's New Democrats have ceded to the joint demand of the Bloc and the CAQ and pledged not to challenge the law in court if they form a government.

As for the Trudeau Liberal government, its verbal opposition to the law and its suggestions that it might support a court challenge if re-elected are full of hypocrisy. Its four years in power have been marked by a massive increase in military spending, Canada's increased participation in Washington's predatory wars in the Middle East under the pretext of fighting "Islamic terrorism," and complicity in the Trump administration's witch-hunt against refugees and immigrants.

The Bloc Québécois has strongly supported Canadian imperialism's prominent role in US-led wars over the past two decades, including the Yugoslav, Afghan, and Libyan wars. It has repeatedly accused the NDP of being insufficiently supportive of Canada's wars, although the New Democrats have in fact endorsed all of them since 1999. The BQ's promotion of anti-Muslim sentiment, it need be added, has provided ideological cover for the re-emergence of Canadian militarism.

According to polls, the Bloc may emerge from the elections holding the balance of power in a minority parliament. If so, it is more than likely it will help bring the Conservatives to power. Indeed, Blanchet has already started signaling this.

There are significant differences between the Bloc and the Conservatives, particularly on their attitude toward the oil industry, whose interests the Conservatives have long championed. Nevertheless, the Bloc has a long history of bargaining and maneuvering with the Conservatives, the Canadian ruling class' alternate and explicitly rightwing party of government.

Under Andrew Scheer, who has links to the far-right through the *Rebel Media* website, the Conservatives have vowed to slash tens of billions in government spending and ally Canada even more closely with US imperialism, especially against China. Between 2006 and 2011, when Stephen Harper's Conservatives formed a minority government, the Bloc regularly voted in favor of its austerity budgets, confidence motions and throne speeches.

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