

Bogus debate on “decline of French” in Montreal fuels Quebec chauvinism

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In the midst of Canada’s raging COVID-19 pandemic and as Quebec, Ontario, and other provinces have registered record numbers of infections, provincial and federal politicians in Quebec have been absorbed in a manufactured controversy over the decline of French in Montreal.

On November 13, the *Journal de Montréal* published a report sensationally titled, “Incapable of being served in French.” It reported that during a visit to 31 stores and restaurants in downtown Montreal, 16 had greeted customers/journalists in English.

The *Journal de Montréal* is a daily tabloid published by Quebecor, a media and telecommunications empire that owns newspapers and television and radio stations. It is owned by Pierre-Karl Péladeau, a billionaire whose fortune is estimated at US\$1.8 billion and who briefly served as leader of the pro-independence Parti Québécois (PQ) in 2015-16.

The November 13 “exposé” was quickly followed by a chorus of op-eds from leading *Journal de Montréal* columnists, including Mathieu Bock-Côté, Richard Martineau, Mario Dumont, Josée Legault and Denise Bombardier. A fabricated controversy, this furor was aimed at promoting Quebec nationalism and pushing the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ, Coalition for the Future of Quebec) provincial government even further to the right.

Quebecor’s media outlets have long played a major role in stoking Quebec chauvinism. After supporting the CAQ and its right-wing nationalist platform in the 2018 elections, Quebecor applauded and encouraged it as it passed two chauvinist laws during its first year in office.

The first, Bill 9, slashed the number of immigrants admitted to Quebec annually and introduced knowledge of “Quebec values” into the selection criteria. The second, Bill 21, prohibits the wearing of religious symbols by state employees, including public school teachers, deemed in “positions of authority,” while reaffirming Quebec’s Catholic “heritage.” It also bans Muslim women who wear a face-covering veil from receiving vital public services, including health care and education.

Virtually the entire Quebec establishment welcomed Bill 21’s attack on the basic democratic rights of religious and cultural minorities. It was hailed by *Le Devoir*, a daily newspaper close to Quebec’s *indépendantiste* circles, as well as by *La Presse*, which speaks for the federalist sections of big business. In other words, the *Journal de Montréal*’s anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim

agitation is only the most vulgar expression of a policy that is being supported and pursued by the ruling elite as a whole.

However, the *Journal de Montréal* and other hardline Quebec nationalists remain dissatisfied. In recent months, Quebecor’s flagship tabloid has published several editorials criticizing the CAQ, with headlines such as “Should the nationalism of the CAQ be taken seriously,” “The nationalist veneer of the CAQ is cracking” and “Is the nationalist credibility of the CAQ starting to wane?”

This campaign culminated in a series of articles published to mark 25 years since the October 1995 referendum on Quebec independence. The articles combined calls for the Quebec “people” to “awaken their souls” and “fight for their survival,” with hysterical attacks from Mario Dumont, who as leader of Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) co-led the campaign in 1995 in favour of a “Yes” to independence, on the ostensible “left wing” of the contemporary independence movement. One after another, the *Journal de Montréal*’s columnists urged Quebec Premier François Legault and his CAQ government to adopt further ultranationalist measures attacking minority rights. Summing up their arguments, the right-wing ideologue Bock-Côté declared, “It is through the question of identity that we will achieve our independence.”

The CAQ government’s response was given by Simon Jolin-Barrette, who currently doubles as Minister of Justice and Minister for the French Language, and who was the minister principally responsible for drafting and winning parliamentary assent for Bills 9 and 21. In an interview with a television channel owned by Quebecor, Jolin-Barrette said he was “shocked” by the *Journal de Montréal*’s revelations about the “decline” of the French language. In Quebec, he thundered, “It has to happen in French,” adding that the CAQ government will do more to ensure the “francization” of immigrants.

A few weeks later, Jolin-Barrette announced that the government will introduce amendments to strengthen Bill 101 this spring. He was referring to a law passed by the Parti Québécois (PQ) in 1977 to curtail the rights of Quebec’s linguistic minorities in the name of defending the French language and making French the “public language” of Quebec. Its aim was to secure a larger share of executive and management positions for the francophone petty bourgeoisie.

Premier Legault, for his part, called the linguistic situation in Montreal “unacceptable.” A former CEO and multimillionaire,

Legault began his political career in 1998 as a minister in the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard, at a time when it was making savage cuts in health, education and culture in the name of “balancing the budget.”

After leaving the PQ, Legault founded the CAQ in 2011, with the help of the billionaire Charles Sirois, to promote austerity, privatization and corporate tax cuts. At its founding, the CAQ absorbed what was left of Dumont’s ADQ, which had fuelled Quebec chauvinism with its campaign against the supposed “excessive” accommodations granted to minorities. Legault led the CAQ to power in 2018 after an election campaign which included virulent attacks on immigrants and religious minorities.

When multimillionaire Legault and billionaire Péladeau talk about “defending the French language,” they are not talking about investing billions to rebuild dilapidated schools in working-class neighbourhoods, ensure free and quality education for all at all levels, or fund the arts so as to make culture accessible to working people.

For Quebec’s ruling class, this demand serves rather to promote the fraudulent nationalist notion that the primary divide in Quebec and Canadian society is between the French and the English, not that between the working class and the capitalist elite, as if a French-speaking worker in Quebec has more in common with a francophone billionaire like Péladeau than with an English-speaking worker in Ontario or Alberta.

In Canada, the ruling class uses language differences to undermine class consciousness and divide the working class, just as the bourgeoisie elsewhere manipulates racial, ethnic, cultural or gender differences.

In this, a pernicious role is played by the supposedly “left-wing” Quebec Solidaire (QS), which has criticized the CAQ on this issue from the right. After Jolin-Barrette announced that the government was preparing a plan to “protect French,” Québec Solidaire Member of the National Assembly Sol Zanetti condemned the CAQ’s “soft” nationalism and rejected its plan as inadequate.

On November 24, Québec Solidaire voted in favour of a motion passed unanimously by Quebec’s National Assembly that called on the federal government to work with the province to bring federally regulated companies under the antidemocratic Bill 101.

QS thus found itself in the company of the six living former Quebec premiers, all of whom publicly supported the motion: Philippe Couillard, Pauline Marois, Jean Charest, Lucien Bouchard, Daniel Johnson and Pierre-Marc Johnson. Whether leading PQ or Liberal governments, every one of them pursued austerity policies and came into bitter conflict with the working class.

QS’s endorsement of a plan to restrict minority language rights is just the latest example of its long-standing efforts to integrate itself into the ruling establishment by supporting its turn to ever more strident forms of Quebec chauvinism.

QS called the ADQ-spearheaded, anti-immigrant “reasonable accommodation” debate “necessary”; welcomed the PQ’s chauvinistic campaign for a “Quebec Charter of Values” as “legitimate”; and has endorsed Quebec attacking the democratic rights of religious minorities under the guise of “state secularism.”

The latest bogus controversy over the French language also

found an echo in the federal parliament. On November 14, Emmanuella Lambropoulos, a Liberal Party MP for the Montreal riding of St-Laurent, was forced to apologize for “questioning” the claim that French is in decline in Quebec.

The leader of the Bloc Québécois, Yves-François Blanchet, used this incident to attack federal Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in the House. A sister party to the PQ dedicated to the promotion of Quebec nationalism, the Bloc adopted a particularly chauvinistic, even racist tone in the last federal election. Since then, it has worked with the Conservative Party to attack the Liberals from a right-wing perspective, notably over Trudeau’s allegedly weak response to the murder of a French teacher by a Muslim terrorist and the Liberals’ allegedly insufficiently aggressive policies towards China.

Adapting to the rise of the chauvinistic right, Trudeau and his Liberals have encouraged Quebec nationalists at every turn in this fabricated scandal. The federal Minister of Official Languages rebuffed Lambropoulos and announced that the Official Languages Act would be modernized. Trudeau responded to opposition attacks by supporting Bill 101. “Quebec must be first and foremost francophone,” he said, “and that’s why we support Bill 101 in what it does for Quebec.”

A proponent of Canada’s official multiculturalism policy, supposedly “progressive” and open to diversity, Trudeau speaks for those sections of the Canadian ruling class that promote identity politics and the division of the population into distinct ethnic and religious groups. Their ultimate goal is to strengthen Canadian nationalism, camouflage Canadian imperialist violence and divide the working class.

Workers and youth in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada must reject Quebec nationalism (as well as western Canadian regionalism, which foment anti-Quebec sentiment by claiming that Quebec is out to kill Alberta’s oil industry). They must also reject Canadian nationalism, which includes Trudeau-style multiculturalism as one of its essential ideological components.

Quebec nationalism and Canadian nationalism are two sides of the same chauvinist coin. Although they are promoted by different sections of the ruling class, they share the same objective: to pit workers against each other along linguistic, racial, ethnic or cultural lines; divide workers in Canada from their international class brothers and sisters; and prevent a unified struggle of the working class across Canada—French- and English-speaking, immigrant, and First Nations—against capitalist austerity and militarism.

What is required is an independent political struggle by the working class for a workers’ government to secure democratic rights, reject imperialist war and establish social equality.



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