

Éric Duhaime, the Quebec Conservative Party and the ruling class' turn to social reaction

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2 June 2022

Since his election as leader of the Parti conservateur du Québec (PCQ—Quebec Conservative Party) in April 2021, right-wing libertarian Éric Duhaime has received a great deal of coverage in the mainstream media and increasing attention from big business.

With four months to go before the Quebec provincial election, some polls place the PCQ ahead of the two parties that until 2018 had alternated as Quebec's government for almost a half-century, the Quebec Liberal Party and the Parti Québécois (PQ).

PCQ leader Duhaime has been hosted, along with other party leaders, by business associations, including Quebec's largest employer group, the Conseil du patronat du Québec. The television networks have already announced that he will be invited to join the official leaders' debate in the run-up to the October 3 Quebec election.

Yet the PCQ—which was founded in 2009 and is separate and distinct from the federal Conservative party, the official opposition in Canada's parliament—has never won a single National Assembly seat, nor won more than 1.5 percent of the vote in a provincial election. Currently, the PCQ has a lone Member of the National Assembly (MNA), a defector from the ruling Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) who has said she will not be running in the coming election.

The media craze for Duhaime can best be understood by examining the very right-wing agenda he advocated for years as a trash- or shock-radio host in Quebec City and is now projecting with equal virulence as leader of the PCQ. This is not the first time the ruling elite has used an ultra-reactionary figure to push the entire axis of politics firmly to the right.

Duhaime has vehemently opposed all mandatory public health measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic that has wreaked havoc and mass death in Quebec, the rest of Canada and around the world. Having denounced all efforts to curb the pandemic from the start, he enthusiastically welcomed the "Freedom Convoy," a group of far-right trucker-owners, supported by the Conservative Party of Canada and much of the corporate media, who terrorized Ottawa residents for

weeks to press their demand for the scrapping of all anti-COVID measures. Duhaime said at the time, "My goal is to bring these ideas into the National Assembly."

Duhaime is a long-time friend and close associate of Pierre Poilievre. The front-runner in the current federal Conservative Party leadership race, Poilievre began his campaign by reaffirming his support for the far-right Convoy, the abandonment of all anti-COVID measures, and a massive assault on public services in the name of eliminating the federal budget deficit. Adopting the language of Margaret Thatcher to advocate for capitalism at its most predatory, Poilievre vowed to make Canada the "freest" country in the world.

The PCQ, now under Duhaime's control, also advocates massive cuts in social spending; accelerated deregulation; increased privatization, especially in health and education; and steep tax cuts for the wealthy, including the introduction of a single tax rate or flat tax.

Duhaime has long been active in right-wing circles. A political advisor to the leader of the Bloc Québécois from 1993 to 1999, he began his career with the Quebec *indépendantistes* when they were massively cutting social spending.

From 2000 to 2002, he was an advisor to Official Opposition Leader Stockwell Day of the Canadian Alliance, a party that was used to push Canadian politics further to the right and was the dominant element in the merger with the rump of the federal Progressive Conservatives that created the Stephen Harper-led, hard-right new Conservative Party.

In 2003, Duhaime was a candidate for the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), with a young Poilievre actively campaigning for him, before becoming a political advisor for the ADQ from 2003 to 2008. The ADQ, which ultimately became part of the right-wing populist CAQ, played a leading role in stirring up anti-immigrant chauvinism in Quebec, particularly around the phony issue of "unreasonable accommodation."

Duhaime worked for the National Democratic Institute (NDI)—a US imperialist-sponsored agency associated with

the Democratic Party that works closely with the US State Department and CIA—in Morocco from 2005 to 2007 and Iraq from 2008 to 2009. The NDI's board of directors has included such leading figures of US militarism as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Paul Wolfowitz, Madeleine Albright and Elliott Abrams.

Like the rest of the Quebec political establishment and elite, Duhaime has supported Canada's participation in US-led wars of aggression, from the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia, to the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the 2011 regime-change war in Libya. In a tweet at the outset of the US-NATO instigated war with Russia over Ukraine, he rushed to label Moscow the aggressor and salivated over the opportunity the war presents to develop Quebec's hydrocarbon resources.

In 2010, Duhaime founded the Réseau-liberté-Québec to bring together people anxious to be rid of what remains of the social concessions made to the working class as a result of the mass struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Dr. Roy Eappen, one of the members of the network and now a PCQ candidate, is a prominent anti-abortion activist and climate-change denier. Encouraged by Quebec Premier François Legault's reckless profits-before-lives response to the pandemic, which has included the promotion of the reactionary pseudo-scientific "herd immunity" policy, the PCQ promotes all sorts of anti-scientific nonsense—on vaccinations, abortion, and climate change.

For a decade starting in 2010, Duhaime was a commentator in the press and in particular on the radio, where he was given ample opportunity and latitude to spew his reactionary, libertarian and xenophobic ideas. In a generally sympathetic article about him published in April, Duhaime boasted that he had the "microphone for four hours a day for 10 years."

This included downplaying the hateful, Islamophobic acts that preceded the Jan. 29, 2017 terrorist attack on the Grand Mosque in Quebec City, which left six Muslims dead and some 20 injured. Duhaime dismissed the leaving of a bloody pig's head on the mosque steps as a "silly joke," comparing it to someone delivering a pizza to a neighbor's house.

In a 2017 radio debate, Duhaime defended the aristocratic principle that voting rights should be modulated according to taxes paid, with the rich given weighted votes that would count more than those of the poor.

Duhaime unabashedly champions far-right positions, but it need be added that so far to the right has the entire political establishment moved over the course of the past decade-and-a-half, his policies on many issues are not so different from those advanced by the other ruling class parties.

Duhaime says that immigrants should be selected on the basis of their "civilizational compatibility." But how is this

chauvinism different from the CAQ's Bill 9, which selects immigrants according to their "values?" Or its Bill 21, which denies health care and other vital public services to devout Muslim women wearing the niqab or burqa. The latter law was itself inspired by the previous Liberal government's Bill 62. And what about the PQ's "Charter of Values," which aimed to ban more than half a million public sector workers from wearing "conspicuous" religious symbols, while making an exception for "discreet" crucifixes?

Duhaime has become a darling of the bourgeois media and is being promoted by it as a means of pressing the CAQ to intensify its assault on the working class. Editorialists regularly speak of the "difficult decisions" that the government will have to make after the elections, i.e., renewed attacks on wages, working conditions, living standards and public services.

The "Eric Duhaime phenomenon" is taking place in the context of an immense crisis of global capitalism, characterized by galloping inflation, rising social inequality, catastrophic management of the pandemic, and NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens to turn into a nuclear conflict.

The main responsibility for the threat from the far right facing the working class lies with the trade union bureaucracy, which has suppressed the class struggle for decades.

As support for the traditional ruling class parties has steadily eroded, the unions have isolated and run workers' struggles and strikes into the ground. When governments have imposed anti-democratic back-to-work laws to break militant strikes, the unions, led by highly paid bureaucrats who fully accept the capitalists' "right" to make profit, have policed them.

As for Québec Solidaire, the pseudo-left party representing affluent sections of the middle class, it never criticizes the treacherous role of the union bureaucracy and spares no effort to integrate itself even more deeply into the ruling establishment.

It is in this political climate of bourgeois reaction, which is growing in intensity as the social opposition of the working class mounts, that extreme right-wing figures like Duhaime are being promoted by big business in an attempt to divert workers' anger into the most reactionary channels.



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