

Quebec election campaign dominated by anti-immigrant agitation

Hugo Maltais
3 October 2022

Quebec's provincial election has been used by the ruling class to intensify a pronounced anti-immigrant campaign that has been underway for nearly two decades.

At the outset of the campaign for the Oct. 3 election, Premier François Legault, who heads the province's right-wing "Quebec First" Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, proclaimed immigration a key ballot issue. He implored voters to give him a clear majority so he would be in a strong position to demand the federal government cede to the province all but exclusive control over immigration.

This set the tone for a reactionary campaign, filled with rival chauvinist appeals, that culminated last week with three of the five main political parties mired in controversy over anti-immigrant statements.

In a speech to the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal, Legault said it would be "suicidal" for the Quebec "nation" to increase its intake of immigrants since they are responsible for the "decline of French." This followed earlier remarks in which the premier associated immigrants with crime and violence, and suggested they were a threat to "Quebec values."

CAQ Immigration Minister Jean Boulet was forced to apologize after stating in a radio debate "80 per cent of immigrants go to Montreal, do not work, do not speak French or do not adhere to the values of Quebec society."

These statements are blatantly false and, coming from the minister responsible for immigration, transparently calculated to whip up xenophobia. Despite difficulties in getting their foreign educational qualifications recognized, immigrants have an unemployment rate similar to that of people born in Quebec and more than 80 percent of them do speak French.

Legault responded by saying Boulet had "disqualified" himself from the position of Immigration Minister if the CAQ retained power. However, the premier retained him as a candidate in the riding of Trois-Rivières and left open the possibility that he could hold another ministerial portfolio. It was in this context that Legault made his remark that "too much" immigration would be "suicidal."

The other parties seized on these odious statements, which were widely presented in the media as mere "mistakes" or "gaffes," to posture as supporters of an "inclusive" Quebec.

In the case of the Parti Québécois (PQ), which advocates the reactionary project of creating a separate capitalist *République du*

Quebec, the fraudulent character of these claims was quickly exposed.

Media reports exposed that four PQ candidates had made Islamophobic or racist comments in the recent past. PQ leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon came to the defense of two of the candidates who, in one case, had cavalierly dismissed the widespread evidence of racial profiling by police and, in the other, made gross Islamophobic comments. Absurdly, St-Pierre Plamondon claimed that candidate Lyne Jubinville was not being Islamophobic when she asked, "Why are hijabs increasingly invading our public landscape?" or when she affirmed "Islam is not us."

Then, on Friday, it was revealed that a couple running for the PQ in two different electoral ridings had said in Facebook posts that Muslim women are not intelligent, and that Islam is incompatible with democracy. To save face, St-Pierre-Plamondon excluded them from the party.

Till recently, the PQ was one of the Quebec elite's two traditional governing parties at the provincial level. But after repeated terms in office during which it imposed brutal capitalist austerity measures, the PQ's electoral support hemorrhaged, and it has responded by promoting a virulent strain of Quebec nationalism and chauvinism.

Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, co-leader of the ostensibly left-wing Québec Solidaire (QS), was coy in his comments on the statements by Legault and Boulet, merely accusing them of portraying immigration in a "negative" way. Nadeau-Dubois, who has shed his "radical" past as a leader of the massive 2012 Quebec student strike to gain acceptance from the capitalist establishment, was careful not to use the words "chauvinism," "anti-immigrant" or "racism" in his "criticisms." In response to similar remarks made by Legault in 2018, QS co-leader Manon Massé insisted that the premier is not "a racist man."

The Roxham Road furor had also been stoked during the Quebec election campaign. Since 2017, thousands of migrants have crossed the US-Canada border at this unofficial crossing near Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle to escape deportation threats from the Trump and Biden administrations and seek asylum in Canada.

The Quebec political establishment, which is demanding that Justin Trudeau's federal government "close" Roxham Road, reacted with hostility to a recent Radio-Canada investigation that revealed that Ottawa has spent half a billion dollars on infrastructure at the crossing and services to accommodate refugees.

Taking his cue from the aspiring billionaire dictator Donald Trump, Quebec Conservative Party leader Eric Duhaime condemned “illegal immigration” and raised the idea of building a wall along the border. Although expressed in a particularly blunt manner, Duhaime’s condemnation of “illegal” immigration is shared by the entire establishment, which refers to the Roxham Road migrants, asylum seekers exercising a right recognized by international conventions, as “illegal migrants.”

This agitation is not a new phenomenon that emerged during the 2022 election campaign. It is part of a pronounced shift on the part of the entire Quebec ruling class towards chauvinism over the last 15 years.

Beginning in 2007, sections of the political elite and corporate media seized on alleged “unreasonable accommodations” for religious minorities to launch an aggressive campaign targeting immigrants and Muslims that was soon taken up by all the parties. This included QS, which has always maintained that this was a “legitimate” and needed debate. Both Quebec’s Liberal Party, which was in power during the “crisis” over “unreasonable” accommodation, and the PQ for 18 months in 2012-14 subsequently enacted or proposed various chauvinistic laws in the name of “secularism” or defending “Quebec values.”

After winning the 2018 election, the CAQ pushed through several reactionary laws, including Bill 21 on the “secularization of the state,” which bars public school teachers and government officials “in positions of authority” from wearing religious signs. The law also denies fully veiled Muslim women access to health care and other vital government services.

The very first major piece of legislation passed by the CAQ on coming to power drastically reduced the number of immigrants admitted to Quebec and requires them to provide evidence that they have “learned democratic values and Quebec values.”

These are not the only barriers to immigration imposed by the CAQ during its mandate. Last week, the Montreal daily *La Presse* revealed that Quebec’s immigration ministry amended its guidelines and procedures in December 2021 to remove the right of immigration applicants to be accompanied by a lawyer during their selection interview, unless they request one and demonstrate “convincing reasons that justify the presence of a lawyer.” Thus far, the immigration ministry has denied all such requests.

The right to counsel is a fundamental democratic right and an essential component of due process. It has been recognized for immigration applicants since 1984.

The Quebec ruling elite uses xenophobic agitation to divide workers along ethnic and linguistic lines, scapegoat immigrants for the capitalist crisis, and divert attention away from the crucial issues facing the working class—inflation and the assault on wages, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the dismantling of public services, the US-NATO war on Russia and the threat of world war.

This is part of an active promotion of the far right by the ruling class internationally. Trump’s fascist movement in the United States, Marine Le Pen’s *Rassemblement National*, and Mussolini’s heirs in Italy, who under Giorgia Meloni will now head its government, are all examples of movements that place noxious anti-immigration agitation at the heart of their ultra right-wing

agenda.

By demanding the repatriation of immigration powers and attacking the federal government’s handling of Roxham Road, the Quebec political establishment is also seeking to provoke a conflict with Ottawa. Such disputes with the federal government serve to stroke the Quebec nationalism that is an essential ideological pillar of its political hold on the working class.

The Trudeau government’s attitude towards immigration is essentially the same, as demonstrated by the issue of the “guardian angels,” the migrants who responded to the call of provincial governments to assist health care workers at the height of the pandemic. In response to the public support that their courage generated, Ottawa and Quebec City announced with great fanfare in August 2020 an agreement that was supposed to regularize their status. In reality, the agreement was conditional and highly restrictive, covering a small portion of the “guardian angels.” Two years later, very few have had their status regularized, and many have been deported or are threatened with deportation.

Trudeau’s attempts to portray himself as “pro-immigrant” are hypocritical. Canada bears considerable responsibility for the sharp increase in refugees internationally. Ottawa has participated for over two decades in US-led imperialist interventions and wars that have destabilized entire societies, whether in Haiti, North Africa or the Middle East. Additionally, Canadian imperialism backs austerity programs dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for impoverished countries.

In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trudeau government deported a record number of refugees, and tried to negotiate changes to the reactionary Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement so it could send the Roxham Road migrants back to the US on arrival, arbitrarily denying them their right seek asylum.

Under a mask of openness to refugees, Canadian imperialism benefits from several natural and political “walls” to avoid having to deal with, let alone provide sanctuary to, the tens of millions of people uprooted by wars, environmental devastation and IMF-style restructuring programs. These include three oceans, Washington’s border wall with Mexico, and its relentless pressure on Mexico to stem the flow of migrants from Central America.

Trudeau is using the immigration issue to give a “progressive” gloss to his right-wing policies, which include a vast increase in military spending, inflation-driven real wage cuts and other pro-big business economic measures, massive military spending hikes, and unconditional support for the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.



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