

Quebec's political elite mounts hysterical anti-immigration campaign

Hugo Maltais, Richard Dufour
31 May 2023

A new stage has been reached in the Quebec ruling elite's promotion of an explicitly chauvinist and xenophobic Quebec nationalism. In recent weeks, the corporate media and all four parties in the National Assembly have lent support to hysterical claims of a "federalist plot," supposedly spearheaded by Canadian Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to destroy the "Quebec nation" through "mass" immigration.

This is the continuation, albeit in an even more virulent form, of the chauvinist agitation the Quebec ruling elite has been mounting for years, with the support of the trade unions and the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire. Highlights of this agitation include:

- The manufactured 2007-08 controversy over the allegedly "excessive accommodations" granted the province's religious minorities;
- The Charter of Quebec Values put forward in 2013 by the then-Parti Québécois (PQ) government to prohibit any of the more than half-million public sector workers from wearing "ostentatious" religious symbols (such as the hijab), with "discreet" Catholic crucifixes exempted;
- The adoption by the current CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government of a series of anti-democratic laws such as the state "secularism" law (Bill 21) which targets religious minorities and Muslim women in particular, and Bill 96, which reinforces the privileged status of the French language in Quebec and curtails the linguistic rights of minorities.

The current hysteria, which depicts immigration as an existential threat to the "Quebec nation," is a provocation of a far-right character. It was instigated by the *Journal de Montréal* (JdM) of the billionaire, media and telecommunications magnate and former PQ leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau, and soon echoed by Quebec's entire political elite.

It is packaged as a response to a proposal by a big business lobby group, the Century Initiative, to build a "bigger, strong Canada" by increasing Canada's population from around 40 million today to 100 million by 2100 through immigration.

This proposal reflects, it is true, the reactionary aspirations of corporate Canada to gain access to a larger pool of labour to boost profits, and to increase Canadian imperialism's geostrategic weight in world affairs. But it dates back many years, and has never been officially endorsed by the Trudeau

government.

Quebec nationalists are now seizing on it to manufacture a "cause célèbre" to feed their alarmist narrative—based on lurid exaggerations and outright lies—of a "nation" in peril and threatened by a tidal wave of immigration.

In a thick dossier introduced under the front page banner headline "Quebec caught in a trap" (*Le Québec pris au piège*), the JdM suddenly "discovered" the Century Initiative proposal and portrayed it as a plot sponsored by Trudeau and the federalists with the aim of "drowning" Quebec "in a sea of 100 million [English-speaking] Canadians." The right-wing tabloid would have its readers believe that what is at stake is "the survival of the French language in North America."

This is a Quebec version of the fascistic "Great Replacement" theory advocated by far-right figures such as Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour in France, and supporters of Donald Trump in the United States. This theory presents "mass" immigration as a plot hatched by "elites"—often implied to be Jewish—to replace the "white," Christian population with African and Arab immigrants in Europe, or Latin American and Asian immigrants in the United States.

The JdM has reported extensively on the supposedly dire consequences for Quebec of the boost in immigration called for by the Century Initiative. Its aim is to create a sense of fear among its readers by presenting them with "catastrophic scenarios" of a radically different Quebec as a result of "mass" immigration encouraged by the federal government to "assimilate" Canada's only majority French-speaking province.

Quebec, it argues, would be faced with the choice of either maintaining its demographic weight in Canada by accepting more immigrants at the risk of losing its "cultural and linguistic identity" or sacrificing its demographic weight to preserve its identity at the risk of becoming an insignificant province unable to influence the federal government and national policies.

Among the columnists prominently advancing this "dual trap" argument is Mathieu Bock-Côté. A far-right ideologue, Bock-Côté is often favourably cited by Quebec Premier François Legault and known for his explicit endorsement of the "Great Replacement" theory in Europe.

The prospect of an increase in Quebec's immigration targets

to 110,000 per year—more than double the CAQ’s current threshold of 50,000—is used by leading columnists of the JdM to fuel a hysterical campaign against immigrants and, more generally, anyone in Quebec who doesn’t speak French or just doesn’t use it as their primary language at both work and home.

Many of the columns in the phony JdM “exposé” explicitly promoted the independence project of the big business PQ—the creation of a *République du Québec* tied to NATO, NORAD and the revised NAFTA trade bloc—as the only one viable means of defending the “Quebec nation” and preventing the extinction of the French language in North America.

This outpouring of anti-immigrant chauvinism quickly found an echo in political circles. On May 8, Quebec’s National Assembly unanimously adopted—with the support of the pseudo-left, pro-Quebec independence Québec Solidaire—a motion put forward by the PQ. The motion denounced the Century Initiative and called on the Legault government to “officially oppose” it in order to prevent the decline of the French language, the “marginalization” of Quebec and a “diminishing of its political power” within Canada.

Quebec Solidaire’s support for this motion, which effectively translated the chauvinist ravings of the JdM into parliamentary language, illustrates once again how it uses its bogus “progressive” image to legitimize the most reactionary and chauvinistic forms of Quebec nationalism.

The necessity to defend Quebec’s “French character” through chauvinist language laws has long been promoted by Quebec’s trade unions as a key element in their incessant promotion of Quebec nationalism. The notion that Quebec workers should identify with their French-speaking bosses—and not with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the US and overseas—has served for decades as the ideological cement of the trade unions’ corporatist policy. That is, for their deepening integration into corporate management and the state to help boost Quebec and Canadian capitalism through a frontal assault on jobs, wages and public services.

Legault was quick to express his opposition to the Century Initiative, essentially echoing the nationalist-chauvinist rhetoric of the JdM and the PQ. The groundwork had already been laid by his immigration minister, Christine Fréchette, in an article published in the JdM. In it she reiterated that Quebec would not let the federal government dictate its immigration policy, and would exercise strict control to ensure that a “radical” increase in the intake of immigrants did not jeopardize Quebec’s French language and culture.

To reaffirm its own chauvinism, the CAQ also let it be known that it might require all temporary immigrants wishing to stay permanently in Quebec to prove they were capable of working in French. In a crude phrase, obviously designed to stir up anti-immigrant prejudice, Economy Minister Pierre Fitzgibbon warned that “they’ll have to learn French or go back home.”

For its part, the Bloc Québécois, the PQ’s sister party at the

federal level, tabled a motion in the House of Commons calling on Ottawa to “reject the objectives” of the Century Initiative. The motion was defeated by Liberal and NDP MPs, who together hold a majority of seats in parliament and form a Liberal-led coalition government in all but name. But the motion was supported by the Conservative Party and its ultra-right leader Pierre Poilievre, who is courting Quebec nationalists in his efforts to replace the Trudeau Liberals with an even more right-wing government.

As part of its own efforts to promote Canadian nationalism, so as to bind workers to the Canadian capitalist elite and its predatory global agenda, the Trudeau government postures as pro-immigrant and pro-refugee. This is a monstrous fraud. This has been highlighted by the agreement Trudeau struck with US President Joe Biden at their recent Ottawa war summit to extend the reactionary Safe Third Country Agreement to cover the entire Canada-US border.

Class-conscious workers in Quebec must steadfastly oppose the nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism being whipped up by Quebec’s political elite and media. The hysterical nature of this campaign reflects the fear of the ruling class that it is losing its political-ideological grip on the working class under conditions of a profound economic and social crisis that is provoking a resurgence of class struggle in Quebec, Canada and internationally.

Workers across Canada—French- and English-speaking, immigrant and First Nation—must forge their class unity, for whatever their differences in language, religious faith or ethnic origin, they face common problems rooted in the crisis of global capitalism. These problems can only be overcome in a common class struggle based on socialist internationalism against imperialist war, capitalist austerity, the persecution of refugees and the violation of democratic rights.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact