

Pro-independence PQ to form Quebec's government after election dominated by right-wing appeals, popular disaffection

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The Parti Québécois (PQ), a right-wing chauvinist party that advocates Quebec's secession from the Canadian federal state, will form a minority government in Canada's only majority French-speaking province. It won 59 of the 127 National Assembly seats in Monday's provincial election.

Pledged to a program of austerity, corporate tax cuts, deregulation, a massive reduction in immigration and strident defence of chauvinist legislation targeting immigrants and minorities, the incoming government will quickly come into headlong conflict with the working class.

The outcome of Monday's Quebec election was a stunning reversal from the last provincial election held almost four years to the day. The Coalition Avenir du Québec (CAQ), the conservative-autonomist, "Quebec First" party that has governed Quebec for the past eight years and won 90 seats in the 2022 election, was wiped off the political map. The CAQ did not win even a single seat Monday and saw its share of the popular vote shrivel from 41 to 13.3 percent.

Meanwhile, the PQ, which in 2022 elected just three Members of the National Assembly, now stands only five MNAs short of a parliamentary majority.

The Quebec Liberal Party, the traditional federalist big business party, and the Parti Conservateur du Québec (PCQ) led by the far-right "libertarian" Eric Duhaime, also benefited from the collapse in support for the CAQ. The Liberals, with a 10-percentage point increase in their popular vote, won 19 more seats than 2022 for a total of 40. The PCQ, whose previous best-ever electoral showing was finishing second place in several predominantly rural constituencies, took 19 seats, and increased its share of the popular vote by 8 percentage point to 20 percent.

Although the 13-percentage-point increase in PQ support was the largest of any party, it was from an historic low. No government in Quebec history has ever come into office with a smaller share of the popular vote—barely 28 percent. When the 66.9 percent voter-participation rate is factored in, this means less than one in five Quebecers eligible to vote cast a ballot for the PQ.

Moreover, the PQ has little to no representation from Quebec's two main urban centres. While it did win a crush of seats in Montreal's outer, off-island suburbs, where many French-speaking workers have fled to escape high housing prices, the PQ won just two seats on the Island of Montreal, home to the poorest sections of the working class; none in Laval, the island suburb of Montreal that is Quebec's third largest city; and none in the Quebec City region.

That the CAQ was facing an electoral debacle was long evident, with the only question the scale of its defeat. Anger with the government over the collapse of healthcare and public education, the huge increase in homelessness and the housing and cost-of-living crises was palpable.

In Quebec, as across Canada, and internationally, recent years have seen a wave of militant workers struggles, including the 2023-24 Quebec

public sector struggle, which at its height saw more than half-a-million workers engaged in strike action, and more recently strikes by Canada Post, Air Canada and Métro Richelieu grocery workers. Last November 29, more than 50,000 workers took to the streets of Montreal to protest the CAQ government's sweeping attack on the right to strike.

But the working-class opposition to the CAQ government and more generally the ruling class's agenda of austerity, massive rearmament and war has been suppressed and politically derailed by the trade union bureaucracy in Quebec and across Canada. They have systematically isolated and betrayed workers' struggles and kept workers imprisoned within the straitjacket of official capitalist politics, while promoting respectively Quebec and Canadian nationalism.

With the working class politically muzzled and disenfranchised, the election campaign was dominated from start to finish by the capitalist ruling elite's lurch ever further right. The PQ, CAQ, PCQ and Liberals all sung different variations of the same austerity theme. The contest between them was to demonstrate to the bourgeoisie who could best increase worker exploitation, while suppressing social opposition and advancing its economic and geopolitical interests against its rivals within the Canadian federation.

Duhaime bellowed for cuts totaling \$47 billion over four years, while trying to outdo the PQ and CAQ in their chauvinist, anti-immigrant appeals, by pledging to expel 70,000 refugee claimants.

St. Pierre-Plamondon vowed that a PQ government would eliminate Quebec's \$7.7 billion budget deficit by fiscal year 2028-29, one year earlier than called for under the CAQ's balanced budget law. He further pledged the PQ would cut public sector payroll costs by 2.5 percent, or the equivalent of 16,300 full-time jobs; slash the tax rate on SMEs (small and medium-sized businesses) by 17.4 percent; and establish an agency, akin to Trump's DOGE, the Secretariat for Government Efficiency and Regulatory Relief (Secrétariat à l'efficacité gouvernementale et à l'allègement réglementaire) to gut environmental, occupational safety and other regulations and slash the workforce charged with enforcing them.

The Liberals, led by the former Quebec Federation of Chambers of Commerce President CEO Charles Milliard, declared themselves the only "responsible" party because they refused to join the other parties in peddling the gross lie that they could balance the budget without it impacting vital public services. In fact, *La Presse*, in a series of articles and editorials clamouring for budget cuts, has demonstrated that to meet the mandatory zero-deficit target in the CAQ balanced budget law, it will be necessary to impose cuts far deeper than those imposed by the hated 2014-2018 Couillard Liberal government.

The retrograde role of Québec Solidaire

The pseudo-left, pro-independence Québec Solidaire (QS) was the only party that claimed to oppose austerity. But it proved incapable of galvanizing broad support within the working class. In fact, it lost more than 100,000 votes from the 2022 election and saw its seat total reduced from 12 to 9. From its high-water mark in the 2018 election, when it polled 16.1 percent of the vote, support for QS has steadily declined. On Monday, it polled 12.4 percent of the vote—a 3-percentage-point decline from 2022.

A party of privileged sections of the upper middle-class, Québec Solidaire’s “oppositional” stance is not treated seriously by workers, and with good reason. QS has comfortably integrated itself into the political establishment and, with the aim of proving itself “gouvernable” (ready to assume the reins of power), it has repeatedly watered down its timid reform proposals. An opponent of class struggle, QS generally shuns the struggles of the working class. But when it does intervene, it is invariably to bolster the trade union bureaucracy.

In the name of getting “closer to the preoccupations of ordinary people,” QS is entirely silent on the wars being waged and support by Canadian imperialism and its massive rearmament drive. It is similarly conspicuously silent on the plans of its PQ sister sovereignist party to align with Trump, and for an independent Quebec to be an integral part of NATO and NORAD and spend 5 percent of its GDP on the military.

On election night, QS co-leader and candidate for Quebec premier Ruba Ghazal tried to portray her party’s continued representation in the National Assembly as a “great victory.” QS, she claimed, had successfully “resisted” a “right-wing wave.” Bubbling with enthusiasm, she exclaimed, “We are still here.”

This is both self-delusion and a conscious attempt to obscure the true role of QS. As the election results underscore, its political function has been to provide political cover for the PQ as it has morphed into an avowedly right-wing, anti-immigrant, chauvinist, exclusivist party, and help pave the way for its political revival.

Before, during and in the immediate aftermath of the election campaign, Ghazal reaffirmed Québec Solidaire’s readiness to support the PQ in reshuffling the borders of North America to create a third imperialist state, while pleading for St. Pierre-Plamondon to temper his anti-immigrant rants so as to project an “inclusive nationalism.”

No doubt fueling Ghazal’s election night excitement was the calculation that QS will be able—to use her words—to “chercher les gains” (seek gains) in parliamentary maneuvering with St. Pierre-Plamondon and his government, since it has sufficient National Assembly seats to provide the PQ with a majority on any given vote.

To be sure, the PQ will make use of QS, with which it negotiated an abortive election alliance in 2017, as needed, particularly in moving forward with its plans to hold a third referendum on Quebec independence.

But the PQ will also lean on the big business Liberals and particularly the far-right PCQ. During the election campaign, St. Pierre-Plamondon repeatedly went out of his way to stress that he shares many of the policy prescriptions of the PCQ, particularly in regard to “eliminating bureaucracy” and “reducing the size of the state”—code words for massive cuts to public services. So blatant was this, even the capitalist media began to speak of a “bromance” between the PQ leader and Duhaime.

As for the union bureaucracy, its universal response to the PQ’s return to power has been to call for the resumption of “social dialogue,” that is, the tripartite corporatist mechanisms through which the union bureaucracy has for decades suppressed the class struggle in exchange for a “seat at the table.”

At a press conference Tuesday, St. Pierre-Plamondon named his

government’s priorities for its first 100 days in office. These include setting up the Secretariat for Government Efficiency and Regulatory Relief; establishing an expert committee to advise the government on defending “Quebec’s interests” amid the Canada-US trade war; and, as a sop to popular concern over the explosion in homelessness, organizing a summit on homelessness.

He also reiterated that the PQ government will proceed with its plans to hold an independence referendum, including replacing the Intergovernmental Affairs Minister with a Minister Responsible for the Independence Process. But he added that the referendum was not an immediate priority, since the government only intends to hold it in the last two years of its possible four-year mandate.

War, trade war and the crisis of the Canadian federal state

Monday’s vote hardly constitutes a popular mandate for the PQ’s plans, outlined in its *Livre Blue* (Blue Book), to push for an independent, “entrepreneurial” Quebec, on an expressly pro-imperialist, anti-immigrant, ethno-chauvinist program.

That said, the return to power of a PQ government committed to holding a third referendum on Quebec independence by 2030, will further aggravate the crisis of Canadian imperialism, which is scrambling to assert its predatory global interests under conditions of a developing world war and an historic breakdown in relations between the imperialist powers. Among the sharpest expressions of this breakdown are the Canada-US trade war and Trump’s threats to annex Canada, which are themselves part of Washington’s drive to establish unbridled domination over the Western Hemisphere in preparation for war with China.

With the support of the most powerful sections of Canadian capital, the Mark Carney-led Liberal government has responded to the challenge coming from what has hitherto been Ottawa’s closest economic partner and military-security ally, by forging closer ties with the European imperialist powers, massively boosting military spending and intensifying the class-war assault on workers’ social and democratic rights.

For his part, PQ leader and now premier designate Paul St. Pierre-Plamondon has sought to portray a “sovereign” or independent Quebec as a better ally of a Trump-led US imperialism. This was exemplified by his tirade, laced with far-right anti-communist rhetoric, against the modest trade deal Ottawa reached with Beijing last January. He has also repeatedly attacked the Carney government’s “Team Canada” trade war strategy, accusing it of putting Ontario and Alberta “interests” ahead of those of Quebec.

Among the first to congratulate St. Pierre-Plamondon on election night and offer to collaborate with his government was Alberta Premier Danielle Smith. The head of the far-right United Conservative Party (UCP), Smith has called a referendum for October 19, with ten questions aimed at scapegoating immigrants for the ruinous state of public services after decades of austerity and providing a veneer of popular legitimacy for the demands of Alberta’s capitalist elite for both greater autonomy for the province and a larger say in the formulation of national policy. The tenth question on the referendum ballot asks whether the Alberta government should organize a binding referendum on independence.

Smith claims to support Alberta remaining within the Canadian federation, but she has also signalled her readiness to make a separate deal with Washington; and has manifestly encouraged the pro-Alberta separatist forces, who are prominent in her own party, as a means of exerting pressure on Ottawa and rival factions within the Canadian capitalist elite. Everything suggests that she is similarly ready to work with a PQ-led Quebec government to pressure Ottawa.

St. Pierre-Plamondon has himself boasted about the ties that he has forged with the Alberta separatists. The movement for Quebec separatism has always been associated with the far right, and its leaders make no secret of their support for the would-be dictator Trump and his fascistic MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement.

Polls have consistently shown that support for Quebec independence is currently gravitating around a decades-long low of 30 percent. There are multiple reasons for this. The PQ and its independence project were badly discredited by the party's repeated terms in government. While it initially claimed to have "a favorable prejudice to the workers' movement" and long enjoyed the open patronage of the trade union bureaucracy, from the early 1980s on, whenever in government, the PQ imposed savage austerity and criminalized strikes. Whereas once, the PQ tried to dress its push for the creation of a capitalist *République du Québec* in progressive colours, it has increasingly promoted it as the means to slash social spending and pursue anti-immigrant and exclusivist policies. Another factor in the diminished popular support for Quebec's secession are popular concerns about a sovereign Quebec's strength and viability amid the current global geopolitical and economic upheavals.

St. Pierre-Plamondon and the PQ intend to demand greater powers and funds from Ottawa, with the aim of casting the federal state as "anti-Quebec," so as to rally support for independence and deflect attention away from the savage austerity agenda they intend to implement, as demanded by all factions of Quebec's ruling elite, federalist and sovereignist alike.

The working class in Quebec and across Canada could exploit the crisis of Canadian imperialism and its federal state to assert its own class interests and prosecute the struggle for workers' power. But it can do so only in so far as it opposes all factions of the Canadian bourgeoisie, and their various political representatives, from the Carney government, and the Quebec sovereignists through Smith, her UCP and the Alberta separatists, and makes the program of socialist internationalism the axis of its struggles.

Otherwise, it will be subordinated by the pro-capitalist trade unions, the social democrats of the New Democratic Party and the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire to the predatory agenda of Canadian imperialism and its various factions, pitted against workers in the US, China and elsewhere in war and trade war, and against each other within the boundaries of the Canadian federal state.

Workers in Quebec, across Canada and internationally confront a common class-war assault rooted in systemic crisis of world capitalism. The only progressive answer to the evisceration of workers' social and democratic rights, rearmament and imperialist war is the forging of the unity of the working class across economic sectors and national boundaries in the fight for workers governments and the socialist reorganization of economic life, to put social needs before private profit.



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