

Crisis of Parti Québécois regime heralds coming political upheavals

By Guy Charron
15 August 2002

A series of by-elections have revealed a dramatic drop in popular support for the Parti Québécois, the pro- *indépendantiste* party that has formed Quebec's provincial government since the fall of 1994.

Quebec's governing party won just one of seven by-elections held in April and mid-June, although five of the seats at issue had been held by the PQ, four of them by cabinet ministers. Among the defeated candidates was "star recruit" David Levine who was named to the PQ cabinet last winter, although he did not have a National Assembly seat—a rare occurrence in Quebec, as in other jurisdictions which operate under a British-derived parliamentary system.

Were the by-election results to be repeated in a provincial election, the PQ would be reduced to third-party status in the National Assembly behind both its traditional federalist rivals, the Liberals, and a right-wing nationalist grouping, the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), which in two previous provincial elections has never won more than 12 percent of the popular vote. Political pundits have drawn parallels between the PQ's electoral prospects—the next provincial election must be held before the end of 2003—and the historic routs the federal Conservatives suffered in 1993 and the British Columbia New Democratic Party in 2001. After two terms in office, both of these parties saw their parliamentary representation slashed to just two seats.

Quebec Premier and PQ leader Bernard Landry has publicly conceded his perplexity at the string of by-election defeats and adverse opinion polls. At different times he has blamed the PQ's plunging fortunes on his party's communications strategy, the media, and public complacency. According to Landry, Quebecers have forgotten what life was like prior to the Quiet Revolution of the early 1960s, when the Quebec provincial government took responsibility for administering education and health care from the hands of the Catholic Church and greatly expanded public and social services.

Landry's comments only serve to underscore his and the PQ's isolation and estrangement from the mass of working people. The PQ first came to office in 1976, promising a "favourable prejudice toward the labor movement," but by the early 1980s it was slashing public spending and imposing a battery of anti-union laws.

Returned to provincial office in 1994, after a decade in opposition, the PQ has dismantled public services, closing hospitals and eliminating thousands of health care and education jobs, and presided over growing poverty and social polarization. In per capita terms, the PQ has cut spending on public services and social programs even more drastically than Ontario's Tory government, which has boasted of being a Reagan- or Thatcher-style, right-wing government, stigmatized the poor, and baited the unions.

The *indépendantistes* portray Jean Chrétien and his federal Liberal government as their worst enemies. But like the federal Liberal government, the PQ regime imposed massive public spending cuts in the name of eliminating the budget deficit; then, when the deficit disappeared, rejected calls for the restoration of public spending, implementing tax cuts

for big business and the well-to-do instead.

The right-wing, big business policies of the PQ account for its dramatic slide in support among the population at large. But the PQ government, again like the Chrétien Liberal government, has come under increasing pressure from big business to intensify the assault on the working class, through further tax cuts, the gutting of environmental and workplace regulations and the reorganization of public services so as to subjugate them more directly to the imperatives of the market.

In the case of the PQ, this has taken the form of increasingly strident demands from big business that it should scrap the "modèle Québécois"—the name given to the Quebec state's activist role in promoting economic development and the corporatist collaboration it has fostered between the government, big business and the union bureaucracy. Since the 1960s, the modèle Québécois has been the consensus strategy of the Quebec elite and underpinned the policy of all Quebec governments, PQ or Liberal.

In a transparent attempt to rally the support of big business, a section of the PQ leadership has responded to the party's by-election defeats by urging the government to heed the corporate calls for "downsizing" the state. Speaking on June 20, the day after the PQ had lost three of four by-elections, André Boisclair, minister of state for the environment and water, declared, "Ordinary people in everyday life require that the Parti Québécois situate itself more towards the centre." The PQ, he said, must take note of "a very big concern on the part of the ordinary people of the middle class, who demand more freedom in the relations that they are able to have with the Québécois state."

"There is no need to be afraid of challenging the modèle Québécois, without throwing overboard the gains of the Quiet Revolution," added Health Minister and former corporate boss François Legault.

The next day the president of the Treasury Board, Joseph Facal, considered a Landry confidant, weighed in with the observation that the PQ has a program that "gives the impression of having been written in 1978." The PQ "has erected as a dogma the sacrosanct modèle Québécois, refusing to look at its failings—the corporatism, rigidity, dependence on the state it engenders; the astronomical debt it has produced."

In a veiled attack on the PQ's close ties to the union bureaucracy, Facal added that his party "assigns too much importance to the spokespersons of certain lobby groups, and urgently requires to reconnect with the middle class, the silent majority that is the vertebral column of society." Making clear his support for further tax cuts, the Treasury Board president observed that 44 percent of Québécois pay no tax. "Imagine the pressure on the others."

Facal's broadside against the program of his own party was duly noted and applauded by the big business media. "One can almost hear the cry: 'Yes!' raised in response to the way out orchestrated by Facal," wrote Don MacPherson, a prominent columnist at the *Montreal Gazette*, an English-language daily traditionally opposed to the PQ. Only *Le Devoir*,

the pro-nationalist journal of the Québécois intellectual elite, failed to endorse Facal's comments.

The cabinet calls for the PQ to take up the banner of deregulation and privatization raise the prospect of a major split within the PQ cabinet over the government's orientation. Other ministers, who are closer to the party's petty-bourgeois nationalist cadre and to the trade union bureaucracy, like Louise Beaudoin, who holds the quixotically-named post of "Minister responsible for the Observatory Committee on Globalization," have been urging the government to refurbish its "sovereignist and social-democratic" credentials.

Landry himself has claimed to be governing along the lines of French Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, a claim that has taken on ominous tones for his government given the rout of Jospin and the Socialists in the recent French presidential and parliamentary elections.

In keeping with this pretence, the PQ announced in June a new "anti-poverty program." Like similar programs pioneered by Jospin, this program, while packaged in left-wing rhetoric, is in fact a right-wing measure. Businesses will receive government subsidies to employ welfare recipients in low-wage jobs, thus providing them with cheap labor and the government with a new means of threatening the poor with the loss of their subsistence benefits.

By emphasizing its sovereignist or pro-independence credentials, the PQ is trying to mobilize its "radical" and generally more chauvinist hard-line cadre, as well as to capitalize on the fact that opinion polls show separation to be more popular than the government. This finding, however, points to the crisis of the PQ, for the same polls show little support for another referendum on Quebec's secession from the Canadian federal state. In January 2001, Lucien Bouchard resigned as Quebec premier and PQ leader, citing his inability to increase support for Quebec sovereignty, which has fallen from almost 50 percent in the October 1995 referendum to about 40 percent.

The Quebec trade union bureaucracy remains a principal pillar of the PQ. Last winter, when Landry was toying with the possibility of a spring or fall 2002 election, unions representing 400,000 Quebec public sector workers engineered a one-year extension of contracts set to expire in June 2002, so that the PQ could be spared labor disruptions and troubling evidence of the deterioration of public services during an election campaign.

It is only with the active assistance of the leaders of the Quebec Federation of Labor (FTQ), Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) and the Quebec Trade Union Federation (CSQ) that the PQ has been able to survive in office while dismantling public and social services.

In the name of building the Quebec nation, the union leaders endorsed the program of budget cuts—the making of a "zero deficit" the principal government objective—during a series of tripartite summits in 1996. Then in 1997, they themselves proposed to the government an early retirement plan that enabled it to permanently eliminate tens of thousands of public sector jobs. In the summer of 1999, when nurses rebelled against their increased workload and the deterioration of patient care, mounting a militant strike in spite of a draconian anti-strike law, the unions suppressed it.

No small part of the PQ's crisis is the increasing rank-and-file disaffection with the unions' cozy relationship with the government. Fearing that their own position is increasingly compromised, a small section of union bureaucrats have joined with middle-class groups like the Parti de la Démocratie Socialiste and the Parti Communiste du Québec to form a new electoral front, the Union des Forces Progressistes (UFP). Although the UFP employs socialist rhetoric, its orientation is to pressure the PQ not to further marginalize the trade union officialdom

The recent by-elections were a shock not only for the PQ, but also for the Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ), its principal competitor for office for the

past three decades. As in the France, Canada's establishment and its media outlets were caught unawares by the deep sentiment of alienation that has developed among the population, as all governments, federal and provincial, have pursued the same right-wing, big business agenda. Thus they were flabbergasted when the plummet in support for the PQ did not translate into a like rise in the fortunes of the Opposition Liberals.

Four of this spring's seven by-elections were won by the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), which prior to April had only ever succeeded in electing its leader, Mario Dumont.

A right-wing breakaway from the Liberals, the ADQ advocates "free market" policies, patterned after those of the Ontario Tories and the Canadian Alliance. The surge in ADQ support cannot, however, be interpreted as signifying a major increase in support for such a program amongst the working class and broad sections of professional and small business people. In the absence of any serious working class opposition to the PQ and the PLQ—the result of the unions' systematic suppression of the class struggle—the ADQ has become a means for Quebec voters to express their anger and disgust with the traditional parties.

Whilst big business is keen to use the ADQ in order to pressure the PQ and the PLQ further right, just as they have made use of the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance to press for tax and spending cuts at the federal level, the more astute recognize that this situation is highly contradictory and potentially explosive.

The loss of popular support for the traditional parties and institutions bespeaks an extremely volatile political situation, which, under conditions of deepening economic crisis, could quickly find expression in sharp social conflict and the eruption of working class struggles. What is urgently required is that workers in Quebec and across Canada repudiate the unions' program of subordinating the working class to capital, by circumscribing its struggles to collective bargaining and politically harnessing it to the social-democratic NDP and the petty-bourgeois nationalist Parti Québécois. Workers will only be able to put an end to the past two decades of reversals and defeats when they make a socialist internationalist program that challenges the subordination of economic life to the profits of the capitalists and is based on the common objective interests of all workers, whatever their nationality, the axis of their struggles.

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