

Parti Quebecois stumbles through Quebec election campaign

By Guy Charron
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On February 21, 2007, when Quebec Premier Jean Charest called a provincial election, the approval rate of his Liberal government, as measured by the opinion polls, was under 50 percent. Nonetheless, Charest considered this a favorable moment to seek re-election, as the approval ratings for his government had hovered in the 30 to 40 percent range for most of the past four years. Over the past month, the government's approval ratings have again sagged, falling to about 40 percent.

In years past, this profound dissatisfaction with the Liberals would have translated into a surge in electoral support for the Parti Québécois (PQ), the *indépendantiste* party, led today by Andre Boisclair, which has alternated with the Liberals as Quebec's government since the mid-1970s.

The PQ, however, has proven just as unpopular as the Liberals. Polls predict that the PQ could do even worse this election than it did in 2003, when it garnered only 33 percent of the vote, its worst showing since 1973. While pollsters say 40 to 45 percent of the population supports Quebec independence, support for the PQ is 10 to 15 percentage points lower.

This popular disaffection with the PQ is all the more significant in that its traditional allies in the trade union bureaucracy are demonstrably supporting the PQ, unlike in the 2003 election where worker hostility to the PQ, which had been in power for the previous nine year, forced the union officialdom to somewhat disguise their support for the PQ's re-election.

Why has Boisclair not been able to gain from the popular opposition to Charest? The answer is that the PQ shares the same positions as the Liberal Party on the most basic issues. They both seek to attack workers' rights in defense of boasting investors' profits. They both seek to better position the Quebec elite internationally in the scramble for cheap labor, raw materials, and profits. And they both support using the military to defend and promote big business' global interests and ambitions.

The other important aspect in the collapse of support for the Parti Quebecois is that workers are more and more dissatisfied with the idea of Quebec independence. The brutal attacks the PQ carried out against the working class when it held power have greatly contributed to breaking the illusion that a sovereign Quebec would be more just, more egalitarian, and more free.

The PQ itself is less and less inclined to hide the predatory class interests that animate its sovereignty or independence project. During the 1995 referendum on Quebec independence, which the proponents of sovereignty lost by only a slim margin, then PQ leader Jacques Parizeau put forward an explicitly pro-business platform for an independent Quebec. He explained that a sovereign Quebec state would be better placed to support Quebec companies on the world markets. In addition, the reorganization of the state apparatus required by secession would facilitate the dismantling of "big government," i.e., public expenditure cuts.

During the current election campaign, the PQ has advanced a right-wing program, attacking the Charest government for not keeping its promise of reducing taxes by a billion dollars in each year of its tenure.

Just like his opponents, the Liberals and the right-wing populist Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), Boisclair supports an ever-greater role for private, for-profit companies in the provision of health care and a reduction in the "size of government," that is, privatization and the establishment of public-private partnerships to manage public services and public infrastructure.

Boisclair has reiterated that he will not make major changes to the seven-year contracts that the Liberal government imposed by decree on half a million public sector workers in late 2005. Under the Liberals' decrees, public sector salaries were frozen for 3-1/2 years and will increase in subsequent years less than the rate of inflation. Trade union rights have also been severely restricted so as to permit the government to eliminate jobs and transfer services to private subcontractors.

Since the start of 2007, Boisclair has declared that his party would dedicate itself to "comforting capital." "Quebec must become that place in the world where capital is most openly welcomed," Boisclair declared. Several weeks later, in order to further curry favor with big business, the PQ leader pronounced that the era when the unions and PQ were "buddy-buddy" was at an end.

As the election campaign has progressed, the PQ has ever more openly adapted to the chauvinist campaign of the ADQ and the media over the so-called "reasonable accommodation" issue. Putting forward the crude idea that immigrants benefit from great privileges, this campaign has two principal purposes. First, it seeks to turn the attention of workers from the real causes of societal distress and directs them towards scapegoating immigrants. Second, this campaign seeks to use anti-Islamism to justify Canada's military intervention in Afghanistan and future wars, especially against Iran.

Initially, the PQ rather timidly opposed the most blatant manifestations of anti-Islamic bigotry, like the expulsion of a 12-year-old girl from a soccer match because she was wearing a headscarf.

But by the end of the campaign, Boisclair was putting himself forward as the chief of the intolerance movement, by whipping up opposition to the decision of Quebec's General Director of Elections (GDE) to permit the estimated fifty women in Quebec who wear the *niqab* (face-veil) to identify themselves on election day without showing their faces.

"To handle this type of thing requires leadership," proclaimed Boisclair. "I am capable of exercising that leadership... of saying frankly what we think about it."

After first refusing Boisclair's demand that the women not be allowed to vote unless they removed the *niqab*, the director of elections made a volte-face. Bowing to what he said were numerous threats of violence against himself and his electoral staff and a campaign mounted by right-wing talk-radio stations to encourage people to show up at the polls in masks, the director of elections used his special powers to change the

law and prevent veiled women from voting. The three principal parties, led by the PQ, welcomed this decision by the GDE, taken in the face of a campaign of racist intimidation.

The right-wing trajectory of the sovereignists finds expression in the federal arena in the support of the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the federal *indépendantiste* party, for the minority Conservative government of Stephen Harper. In Canadian politics, there are no two political formations which are closer either organizationally or politically than the PQ and the BQ led by Gilles Duceppe.

The BQ announced that it would support the Conservative government as soon as the Conservatives presented their budget a week Monday. The vote over the budget will be the third time in little over a year that the minority Conservative government will be at serious risk of falling. (Under Canada's parliamentary tradition money-bills are always deemed matters of confidence.) And, as on the two previous occasions, the BQ has guaranteed that it will provide the right-wing Harper government the votes its needs to remain in office.

More importantly, the BQ, with the support of the PQ, has given full support to the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan. This military intervention is opposed by the majority of workers in Quebec as well as in all Canada, but is fully supported by the Canadian elite and media. Since the end of 2006, the Canadian Armed Forces are stationed in Kandahar Province in southern Afghanistan, where they are playing a leading role in the bloody military operation to suppress opposition to the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai. BQ leader Duceppe has held up his party's support for the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan as an example of the type of foreign policy that an independent Quebec would pursue.

In order to gain a degree of maneuverability vis-à-vis Canadian capital, the Quebec independence movement has courted Wall Street and Washington. Duceppe is an ardent supporter of Canada adopting the US dollar. The *indépendantiste* leaders insist that their Republic of Quebec would join multinational military organizations such as NATO and NORAD and would take part in the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The PQ has said very little on the question of independence during the election campaign, despite the fact that its program promises a third "sovereignty" referendum in the months after the election and commits a PQ government to using the resources of the state to promote Quebec independence even before a referendum victory.

The sovereignty issue—the PQ's purported *raison d'être*—in fact divides the PQ into different factions. The factions closest to big business want a larger decentralization of federal powers, summed up in the demand for "Sovereignty-Association" within Canada. The factions based more exclusively on the petit-bourgeoisie—the *pur et durs* or hardliners—demand independence without any agreement with the Canadian bourgeoisie.

The PQ leadership is very aware that important sections of Canadian and Quebec capital are firmly opposed to another referendum. For the last decade, these forces have floated the idea that Quebec's separation from Canada could engender the partition of Quebec and thereby threaten a civil war. These disputes are a sure sign that tensions between different sections of the bourgeoisie are taking a more and more explosive form, a fact which has not passed unnoticed by the PQ.

The working class must draw the lessons of its bitter experience with the PQ. Because it has been presented by the trade union bureaucracy as a party to the left of the Liberals, workers have sometimes thought it possible to defend themselves against right-wing policies by voting for this party of big business, only to find the PQ imposing savage anti-working policies.

The PQ was founded in 1968 out of a split within the Liberal Party of Quebec. It quickly benefited from the support of the union apparatus,

which sought to turn a veritable industrial rebellion of the Quebec working class in the early 1970s into safer political channels and to divide Quebec workers from the Canadian and international working class.

In 1976, the PQ formed a government for the first time. After the defeat of the first referendum on sovereignty in 1980, the PQ turned sharply to the right. It responded to the economic crisis of 1981-1982 by voting to cut public sector workers' pay by as much as 20 percent and by adopting a battery of anti-union laws. In 1984 the PQ allied with the federal Conservative Party led by Brian Mulroney and helped give this right-wing party, which sought to model itself after Margaret Thatcher's Tories and Reagan's Republicans, one of the greatest parliamentary majorities in Canadian history. Two future right-wing Quebec premiers served as ministers under Mulroney, the Péquiste Lucien Bouchard and the current premier, Jean Charest.

The PQ was defeated in 1985. Nine years later it won re-election by appealing to popular discontent over chronic unemployment and the deterioration of public services. Once in power, however, the PQ launched a program of closing hospitals, including seven in the metropolitan region of Montreal.

After its defeat in a second sovereignty referendum in 1995, the PQ declared it necessary to regain Quebec's "financial independence" by eliminating within five years the annual budget deficit. This program received the seal of approval of the trade union leaders, who elaborated, in economic summits held jointly with government and business representatives, a savage plan of social spending cutbacks, the "zero deficit" plan.

The budgets of the healthcare and education systems were slashed. The hardest hit by the cuts were those on social welfare and the chronically sick. Union leaders insisted that pension surpluses be used to finance an early retirement scheme which resulted in the permanent elimination of tens of thousands of public service jobs.

During the first decade of the new century, the PQ has undergone a profound crisis, as business and much of the party leadership seek to push the party further and further right.

This is the context in which Andre Boisclair, at the age of 39, was chosen to head the PQ in late 2005. Boisclair, who is openly gay, was elected on the first ballot, as a representative of a new generation far-removed from the social-welfare policies the PQ promoted in the early 1970s.

Boisclair is allied with the PQ's most ardent pro-business faction grouped around Lucien Bouchard. A minister during the PQ's vicious assault on the working class in the late 1990s, he has fought within the PQ for the abandonment of the "Quebec Model" and the adoption of an openly right-wing program, based on the 2006 Manifesto authored by Lucien Bouchard.

All of this does not stop the trade union leaders and the official Quebec "left" from pretending that the PQ is fundamentally different from the Liberals, because it stands for the sovereignty of Quebec.

Québec Solidaire, a recently formed party which calls itself left wing, has repeatedly signaled its willingness to work with the PQ to prevent the election of the Liberal Party and the ADQ. During the 1995 Referendum, the forces which later formed Québec Solidaire allied with the "Yes" camp of the PQ, BQ, and the ADQ in favor of sovereignty.

Despite the bitter tensions between federalist and sovereignist, both the Quebec independence project and the existing Canadian federal state uphold fundamentally the same interests, that of big business and the financial world.

Contrary to the illusions which the official left encourages, the working-class has no interest in assisting a faction of the Quebec bourgeoisie in rearranging the capitalist nation state-system in North America and erecting further national borders through which to divide the working class.

The two bourgeois factions, Canadian and Québécois, have pursued a common assault against the working class, slashing social spending, redistributing through tax cuts wealth to the most privileged sections of society, attacking the unions, and promoting deregulation and privatization.

This is the form taken within Quebec and Canada of the attack by international capital on all the conquests of the working class. As part of this international assault, business and political elites in every country promote the development of militarism to defend their interests abroad, and pit workers from one country against those of another.

Workers in every country must counter the resurgence of imperialism and the global corporate offensive by adopting an internationalist strategy. There exists no other avenue than that of developing a socialist movement, rejecting all national solutions, to unite the international working class against capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system in which it is historically rooted. It is for this that the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party fight.

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