

Quebec state yields to right-wing provocation on eve of provincial election

A warning to workers

By Richard Dufour
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Confronted, on the eve of the March 26 Quebec election, by a new eruption of xenophobia whipped up by the media and the major political parties, Quebec's Director General of Elections (DGE) yielded Friday to the chauvinist demand that Muslim women be prevented from voting if they come to the polls wearing a *niqab* (face veil).

This decision represents at once a reflection and the culminating point of an election campaign dominated by a turn toward outright social reaction on the part of Quebec's ruling elite. It is also a warning that the next Quebec government, whatever party or combination of parties holds office, will greatly intensify the assault on the social conditions and democratic rights of working people.

On March 23 the *Journal de Montréal*, a subsidiary of Canadian publishing and cable giant Quebecor, published a provocative article under the title "Voting in disguise, it's legal."

The *Journal's* editors' hopes that their anti-Islamic diatribe would cause a sensation were quickly realized. The leaders of Quebec's major parties rushed to criticize the DGE's legally flawless ruling that women wearing the veil ought to be permitted to vote since the election law—one of whose stated purposes is to encourage voter participation—provides for several means other than photo identification to ensure that individuals who fill out a ballot on election day are legal voters.

"The Director General should assure that everyone is correctly identified," declared Liberal Premier Jean Charest. As for André Boisclair, the head of the Parti Québécois (PQ), Quebec's other traditional big business party, he went even further. He completely distorted the meaning of the electoral law, saying that "these [Muslim, veiled] women must identify themselves with an identity card and . . . have a photo on their card."

Facing pressure from the established parties and from radio jockeys who incited their listeners to go to the polls wearing all sorts of masks, and having received "a multitude of emails" described as "aggressive," the DGE invoked a section of the electoral law that authorizes him to make last minute rule-changes. Electors, declared DGE Marcel Blanchet, must "have their faces uncovered in order to exercise their right to vote." Blanchet conceded that "personally" he "would have preferred not to do it," but the "agitation makes me fear things will possibly boil over."

A spokesperson for the Council on American-Islamic Relations Canada, Sarah Elgazzar, decried the about-face of the DGE, declaring her fear that veiled Muslim women (there are an estimated fifty in Québec) will not go to the polls for fear of being mocked, not to speak

of verbally or physically abused.

The significance of this episode is not limited to the fact that the democratic rights of a segment of the population have been violated. The deeper implications are revealed if one considers the sequence of events: backwards social elements employing threats of violence demand that the rules governing the right to vote be rewritten; the most prominent provincial political personalities take up their battle-cry; and the organ of the state charged with ensuring that the voting is free and fair falls into line citing fears of violence.

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that within the political establishment there does not exist any substantial constituency committed to the maintenance of traditional, democratic norms.

It is not by chance that the 2007 Québec elections should end on such a disturbing note. The distinguishing feature of this electoral campaign has been the rise of the right-wing populist Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ).

For months, its leader Mario Dumont has been trying to whip up anti-immigrant and xenophobic prejudices by denouncing the legal principle known as "reasonable accommodation," established in order to combat discrimination on the basis of disability, gender, religion, race or culture.

According to this principle, an employer or public organization is obliged to take reasonable measures, without incurring any large expense or violating the rights of others, to favour the social integration of an individual or group of individuals while respecting their differences.

A virulent campaign was launched in the mass media over the past six months to denounce supposed "overzealousness" in the application of this principle—"overzealousness" that Dumont claims has put "Québec culture" in peril and amounts to officially-mandated groveling ("à-plat-ventrisme") on the part of the majority.

This campaign rests on monstrous amalgams and distortions. Various incidents without any relation to the reasonable accommodation legislation, such as the moderate frosting of the windows of a gym at the request of a neighbouring Hassidic synagogue, are mixed up with others containing legitimate demands, such as the right of Sikh truck drivers working for the Port of Montreal to wear their turbans instead of a safety helmet when the risk is minimal to themselves and nil for others.

A public furor has been instigated over such isolated and benign episodes as a clinic's decision to treat a Jewish patient before others so he wouldn't be forced to break the Sabbath and the demand of a Muslim man that his wife be examined only by female doctors.

The transparent goal of this campaign is to create the impression that Quebec society is besieged by “new arrivals” bringing with them religious obscurantism. Entire religious and immigrant communities are thus stigmatized.

The chauvinism being stoked up against immigrants and religious minorities, and against Muslims in particular, plays the same role in Québec society that it is playing internationally—the prejudices of the most backward sections of the population are being encouraged by the media and political establishment in an attempt to develop a social base for the most reactionary measures.

Washington, for example, presents its war of plunder for Iraqi oil as a crusade against Islamic fundamentalism. In France, the ruling class condemns hundreds of thousands of French young people of North and sub-Saharan African origin to live in dilapidated, poverty- and unemployment-stricken suburbs, then points the finger at young Muslim girls and women who are wearing Islamic headdress and prevents them from attending public school on the fallacious pretext of defending secularism.

In Canada, the federal Conservative government, which has intensified the neo-colonial Canadian Armed Forces intervention in Afghanistan with the aim of promoting the geo-political interests of the ruling class, presents this turn toward militarism as a response to “Taliban terror” and a blow for women’s liberation.

The repeated *sorties* of ADQ leader Mario Dumont against “unreasonable” accommodation, which have played such a large role in the 2007 Quebec elections, are similar attempts to manipulate the popular anger, fear, and anxiety produced by a social and economic crisis that continues to deepen and under conditions where the traditional political establishment is completely deaf and hostile to popular aspirations and interests.

With its traditional parties of government, the Liberals of Charest and the Parti Québécois of André Boisclair, less and less capable of obtaining the support of the population for their shared program of dismantling social programs and reducing taxes on the rich, Québec ruling elite’s views the right-wing populism of Dumont as a useful tool for manipulating social tensions and pushing public debate even further to the right.

This is the reason for the extremely favourable coverage given Dumont by the corporate media. Some sections of the media—the *Journal de Montréal* and various radio stations—have amplified Dumont’s chauvinist appeals. Others closer to the traditional political establishment have on occasion criticized Dumont for “going too far” in his anti-immigrant tirades, while welcoming his contribution to public debate as a breath of fresh air. And all the while, both sections of the media downplay the radical character of the ADQ’s neo-liberal program.

It has been the ADQ’s proposals for tighter controls on social spending and the complete privatization of the public health-care system that have animated the electoral debate as far as social and economic matters go. Throughout the campaign Charest and Boisclair have responded by proposing like measures: to further reduce taxes on business and the rich, to further reduce social spending, and to continue down the road to a health-care system focused on profit.

If the ruling elite does not yet consider the ADQ a tested political force ready to assume the reins of power, it nevertheless has embraced Dumont and his party as a means of preparing the political terrain for a sharp turn to the right, by pushing for and giving legitimacy to chauvinist, socially conservative, and neo-liberal policies.

Thus *La Presse*, the principal daily of the Quebec elite, declared in

an editorial last week, “To the extent that it does not result in the ADQ becoming the government in the short-term, the renaissance of the ADQ is welcome. This party represents a deep nationalist and conservative current . . . This current, fed by an evident and often justified popular anger, must have a place [in Quebec politics] commensurate with its real strength.”

From the standpoint of the establishment, another useful function of the ADQ is to serve as a political scarecrow—aiding the two traditional parties in their desperate efforts to convince workers and the middle class to continue to vote for them, under the pretext that they represent a “lesser evil” when compared with Dumont.

Popular disgust with the traditional parties is such that the outcome of Monday’s votes remains highly uncertain. The dream scenario of the most powerful sections of the ruling class—a Liberal majority government with a strong presence of the ADQ in the National Assembly so as to maintain pressure on Charest from the right—is far from guaranteed.

A serious warning must be delivered to workers and to all those who are concerned with the defence of democratic rights. The right-wing populist ideas advanced throughout the election by Mario Dumont, and to which Boisclair and Charest have increasingly adapted themselves, have brought into the foreground of political life the most backward social elements.

Responsibility for this dangerous turn of events falls entirely on the traditional leadership of the working class—the trade union bureaucracy—and the middle class protest groups that are tied to the bureaucracy’s apron-strings. Defenders of the capitalist system, which is the source of their own privileges, the union bureaucrats in Quebec have historically subordinated the working class to the big business PQ.

The repeated attempts of the working class in the past period to challenge the big business assault on wages, working conditions and public services have been systematically suppressed by the unions in the name of “social peace.” The Charest Liberal government, whose attempts to take a wrecking ball to what remains of the welfare state provoked a wave of social unrest in December 2003 and the spring of 2005, owes its survival to the unions’ sabotage.

The union bureaucracy and its nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective have led the working class into a blind alley.

The bourgeoisie’s patronage of the chauvinist ADQ, the Liberal’s and PQ’s support for changing the voting rules in accordance with a right-wing provocation., and the DEG’s capitulation before threats of racist violence demonstrate the indifference of the entire bourgeois establishment to democratic rights and give a preview of the deeply reactionary nature of the government that will emerge from the 2007 election whatever its composition.

To prepare for the battles ahead, workers in Quebec consciously repudiate the union bureaucracy’s alliance with the PQ and join hands with their class brothers and sisters across Canada and around the world in developing a socialist-internationalist challenge to the profit system.

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