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PQ's Rightward Shift Opens Space for New Left Party in Quebec

Editors Note: This article was first published in *The Bullet*, an on-line bulletin of the Ontario-based [Socialist Project](#). The article looks ahead to the founding conference of a new left-wing and pro-independence party in Quebec, to be held in January, 2006. The conference is jointly organized by the *Union des forces progressistes* (Union of Progressive Forces) and *Option citoyenne* (Citizens' Choice). Together, these two parties number several thousand members.

The pro-sovereignty Parti Québécois has governed the province of Quebec for 18 of the past 30 years. It is presently the main opposition party in the National Assembly; later this month its members will elect a new leader to replace former premier Bernard Landry.

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by Richard Fidler

Ten years after the 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty, with its razor-thin victory for the No side, and 25 years since the first referendum, mass media and academics alike have been immersed lately in speculation on the likely result of a third such vote, which could occur as early as 2007.

This is not an easy exercise. For Quebec's political situation today is characterized by a number of paradoxes. Not the least of these is the contrast between popular support for Quebec sovereignty and the relative lack of enthusiasm for the main sovereigntist standard-bearer, the Parti Québécois.

Public opinion polls and surveys indicate that support for Quebec sovereignty is at the 1995 level, if not greater, with at least one recent poll indicating that more than 40% of Quebecers would support an "independent Quebec" unqualified by "association" or "partnership" with Canada.

This nationalist sentiment is much stronger now among the 18-24 age cohort, who didn't vote ten years ago, than it was among their counterparts in 1995. It holds firm among the Francophone working-class voters between the ages of 25 and 54, who opted by a substantial majority for sovereignty in 1995.

And support for sovereignty has increased substantially among the néo-Québécois "allophones"; it now stands at 27% among those in the labour force, according to a recent study.^[1]

Political impasse

Behind these demographic patterns there is the ongoing political impasse in Canadian federalism. Jean Charest's efforts to forge some new version of cooperative federalism more respectful of Quebec's constitutional jurisdictions have been rebuffed repeatedly, first by Chrétien and now by Martin. Bolstered by its huge budget surpluses, Ottawa keeps trying to impose "national standards" in areas of social policy that fall within provincial jurisdiction.

Most recently, the Supreme Court of Canada has reinforced the federal government position in a judgment overthrowing Quebec's attempt to spend employment insurance funds on its own parental leave program.

Quebec and federal ministers constantly wrangle in high-profile conflicts over issues ranging from responsibility for environmental policy to representation at international conferences. Ottawa turns a deaf

ear to Quebec's objections to the perceived "fiscal imbalance" between the provinces and the central government. It resists any suggestion for constitutional change to accommodate Quebec's concerns, even from some Quebec federalists.

The Gomery revelations have stoked Québécois anger over the federal "sponsorship" program, Ottawa's "plan A" response to the 1995 referendum results. Although the Gomery commission's focus was on misappropriation of public funds, mainly to the Liberal party, the program itself was motivated by the contemptuous belief that Quebec's national grievances could be countered by giving the federal flag greater prominence in the province, and an arrogant mindset that viewed the fate of the federal state as being inextricably bound up with the fortunes of the federal Liberal party.

The Clarity Bill, "plan B", which proclaims Ottawa's right to shape a future referendum question and to ignore the popular verdict if it wishes, remains a festering issue. Heading the best-seller charts in Quebec these days is Robin Philpot's new book, *Le Référendum volé*, an exposé of how the feds blatantly violated Quebec's election law through massive illegal spending on the No side and such tactics as fast-tracking Canadian citizenship to tens of thousands of immigrants who could be counted on to vote for the No side. The evidence is mounting that in 1995 Ottawa "stole" the referendum, as Philpot documents, through money and ethnic vote manipulation. Sounds familiar?

Lacklustre PQ campaign

Yet notwithstanding the mass support for a new constitutional setup, the campaign for the leadership of the Parti Québécois has evoked little popular interest and still less enthusiasm. The reasons for this indifference are not hard to find. After a total of 18 years in office, the PQ is burdened by its past — a past marked by some progressive reforms, it is true, but above all by its failure to convince a majority of Quebecers that a sovereign Quebec under its leadership would be worth the sweat, toil and tears its achievement would entail.

Only its support for Quebec sovereignty distinguishes the PQ from the other capitalist parties, Charest's Liberals and Dumont's ADQ. Yet those who look to sovereignty as a framework for resolving the growing inequalities and injustices in Quebec society increasingly see the PQ as part of the problem, not the solution.

Significantly, support for sovereignty dipped temporarily to its lowest level over the last 10 years between 2001 and 2003, when the socially devastating results of Lucien Bouchard's "zero-deficit" policy of austerity and cutbacks were becoming clear, and rebounded following the PQ's defeat.

And although the PQ now registers far ahead of Charest's PLQ in the polls, the party's support ranks well behind the popular support for sovereignty, prompting this comment by a candidate in the party's current leadership contest: "Thirty years ago, René Lévesque was more popular than the Parti québécois. The party was more popular than the option [sovereignty-association]. Today, the pyramid has reversed. The option is more popular than the party."

The PQ appears trapped by its neoliberal perspectives, which would allow very little leeway for a sovereign Quebec to carve out a distinctly progressive path amidst capitalist globalization. Its federal counterpart, the Bloc Québécois, has underscored the fundamentally pro-imperialist orientation of these sovereigntists, voting in convention in late October to support NATO membership, an EU free-trade (and investment) agreement, and the development of a Quebec army and air force that would participate actively in international "peacekeeping", as in Canada's occupation of Haiti.

The Bloc's support in the polls remains close to all-time highs, largely thanks to the unpopularity of the federal Liberals. But this doesn't necessarily translate into support for the PQ; the Bloc is not a contender for government and is viewed more as Quebec's insurance policy in Ottawa now that the illusions of "French power" fostered by Trudeau have dissipated.

The PQ is an ageing party; the majority of its members are more than 50 years old. Its feeble attempt at policy renewal, “La Saison des Idées”, launched in the wake of its election defeat, produced little in the way of creative thinking.

PQ leaders are usually chosen by consensus; Lévesque, Parizeau, Bouchard and Landry were all acclaimed. This time the party’s malaise is expressed in the presence of nine candidates, although most (judging from polls of the party members, each of whom has a vote) are far behind the leading contenders, former cabinet ministers André Boisclair (64% support) and Pauline Marois (18%).

Boisclair is campaigning on a platform that barely distinguishes him from the right-wing ADQ. (Although the revelations of Boisclair’s consumption of cocaine while a cabinet minister could reverse this lead, there is no evidence of this so far.)

The major difference that has emerged among most of the candidates concerns the timing of the next referendum, which all have pledged to hold at some point if elected premier. However, Boisclair in particular has come under fire for his apparent reluctance to put Quebec sovereignty at the centre of his program.

One candidate, Pierre Dubuc, editor of the left-wing newspaper L’*aut’journal* and founder of *Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre* (SPQ-Libre), now a recognized “club” of “progressives” and a few trade-unionists within the PQ, has tried to inject some support for more radical policies into the campaign, but without notable success. He is credited with the support of 2% of the members.

SPQ-Libre, launched with great fanfare in 2004, boasts only 500 members in a party with a current membership of close to 150,000. Its call for progressives and especially trade union members to join the PQ to form a broad pro-sovereignty coalition has met with little response among the unions, although both the TCA (the Quebec CAW) and the Montréal blue-collar civic employees are openly pro-PQ and pro-BQ.

Do Boisclair’s ascendancy, Dubuc’s rebuff, indicate that Quebec sovereignty is becoming a refuge for the Right? I think not. The conflicting trends within Quebec politics today were illustrated in a striking way by two recent events occurring within a few days of each other.

Conflicting trends

The first was the publication, on October 19, of a right-wing manifesto *Pour un Québec lucide* (For a clear-eyed vision of Quebec), by former PQ premier Bouchard and some other prominent péquistes but also by equally prominent Liberals. (See www.pourunquebeclucide.com for the text.) It castigates “big unions” and calls for lifting the freeze on university tuition fees, raising electricity rates and consumption taxes, focusing on debt reduction, opening the doors further to private sector investment in public infrastructures and ending the “unhealthy suspicion of private business that has developed in some sectors”.

Quebec society, it says, is obsessed with “resisting change” in the face of declining demographics and increasing global competition from Asia. Yet these are the important challenges facing Quebecers, not sovereignty, it proclaims.

Although its release was clearly timed to influence the PQ leadership race, neither André Boisclair nor Pauline Marois has expressed any criticism of this much publicized manifesto. In fact, Boisclair has indicated he agrees with it.

In a contrasting development on the left, on October 22, just three days after publication of the “lucides” manifesto, the 300 delegates at the convention of a new left-wing organization, *Option citoyenne*, voted overwhelmingly to support Quebec sovereignty and unanimously to join with the *Union des forces progressistes* (UFP) to form a new pro-sovereignty party.

These votes culminated a year-long process of negotiations between the two groups and a lengthy internal consultation on the national question among OC members, many of whom had originally been ambivalent about making Quebec independence a part of their program. "While not a guarantee, sovereignty represents one of the means to provide Quebec with the tools it needs to implement a progressive political and social agenda," the OC resolution states.

The OC's turn to sovereignty removed the major obstacle to unity with the UFP, which has been independentist since its founding in 2002.

The merger next January of the two groups will result in the formation of a new pro-sovereignty party with an initial membership of between three and four thousand. (For background on the UFP-OC fusion, see "Quebec: Toward a New Left Party in 2005?" in Relay, www.socialistproject.ca/relay.)

Thus, while the traditional pro-sovereignty parties are shifting further to the right and some prominent péquistes, like Bouchard and perhaps Boisclair, are retreating from their previous commitment to a sovereigntist perspective, there is a perceptible trend developing in the opposite direction on the left, which now tends overwhelmingly to see a sovereign Quebec as the framework for its social agenda.

Major challenges ahead

In the past, the PQ's support for sovereignty gave it a radical image. Deprived of direct support by big capital, which is unanimously opposed to Quebec independence, the PQ had to pitch its appeal to the unions and popular movements. Today, notwithstanding the hopes of Dubuc's SPQ-Libre, the unions, while generally sympathetic to sovereignty, are much more diffident about the PQ. This offers some important possibilities for the new left party, although there is little indication so far of movement within the labour movement toward a clear break with the PQ.

However, most of the Quebec left, including both OC and (to a lesser degree) the UFP, does not conceive of politics in class terms. Political debate is expressed in terms of conflicting "values", not class conflict. A current example of this is the Manifeste pour un Québec solidaire, a response to the Bouchard manifesto initiated by UFP and OC leaders, which was published November 1 under the signatures of a wide range of personalities including some PQ and BQ parliamentarians. (See www.pourunquebecsolidaire.org/index.php?manifeste for the text.)

While offering a compelling point-by-point rebuttal of each of the hot-button demands in the Bouchard manifesto, it does not explain the class basis of the program of the "lucides" or present a clear anticapitalist alternative perspective. Its acknowledged inspiration is Scandinavian social-democracy, not socialism. Our vision of Quebec, it says, is "humanist, watchful of the environment and sustainable development, the common good and collective rights". It sees the central economic issue as one of distribution of wealth, not control of its production.

It is noteworthy, however, that the manifestoes of both the "lucides" and the "solidaires", as they are being referred to in the media, present their case in a uniquely Quebec context, without reference to Canada and the federal state. This is now the common terrain of political discourse in Quebec, where the interests of the Quebec nation are the overriding consideration and the various social classes present their differing perspectives within that conceptual framework.

The national question, in fact, gives a populist cast to left politics in Quebec and no working-class politics can emerge in the province that ignores the need to address, front and centre, Quebec's status as a distinct national social formation.

At the same time, the focus on reaching agreement on the independence question as the basis for unity in the UFP-OC negotiations has tended to preclude a needed debate on the social content of the new party's program and the class forces which it should address.

But the party will soon be confronted with the need to go beyond trite expressions of “values” and to flesh out a program and strategic perspective that will ultimately enable it to build a strong militant presence in the labour movement and the working class as a whole.

Moreover, without a clear understanding of the need to ground support for Quebec independence within an anticapitalist perspective, the new party will have great difficulty resisting the siren calls for an electoral alliance with the PQ in the next election.

However, the PQ’s rightward trend and its declining ability to retain the universal allegiance of the sovereigntist milieu present the new left party that will emerge in January with some promising openings to build, as it anticipates, a mass party that can point the way forward to truly progressive social change in Quebec.

1. Gilles Gagné and Simon Langlois, “Les jeunes appuient la souveraineté et les souverainistes le demeurent en vieillissant”, Institut du Nouveau Monde, October 2005 (study prepared for L’Annuaire du Québec 2006).