THE QUEBEC ELECTION: SPRING UPSURGE ECHOES, BUT FAINTLY

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Quebec students and environmental activists won important victories in the immediate aftermath of the province’s 4 September 2012 general election. At her first news conference as premier, Pauline Marois announced that her Parti Québécois (PQ) government had cancelled the university tuition fees increase imposed by the previous Liberal government, and would repeal the repressive provisions of Law 12 (formerly Bill 78) that defeated-Premier Jean Charest had introduced in his efforts to smash the province’s massive student strike. Among other things, this will remove the restrictions on public demonstrations and the threat of decertification of student associations. In addition, Marois has ordered the decommissioning of Gentilly-2, Quebec’s only operating nuclear reactor, and will cancel a $58 million government loan to reopen the Jeffrey Mine, Quebec’s second-last asbestos mining operation. (Both mines are now shut down.)

The new Natural Resources minister, Martine Ouellet, followed up by announcing an indefinite moratorium on shale gas exploration and development in Quebec: “I do not see the day when there will be technologies that will allow their safe development,” she said. Residents of dozens of Quebec communities have been mobilizing against shale gas. As of March, there were 31 wells already drilled, and 18 had been fracked. The shale gas industry, which has spent some $200 million to date in Quebec, had plans to dig up to 600 wells each year by 2015. Ouellet has also declared that Charest’s Plan Nord, the northern development (mainly mining) scheme that was a centrepiece of the Liberal campaign, is now “buried.” A former president of Eau Secours!, a water protection group, Ouellet is one of three new ministers with strong environmentalist credentials. As of 8 October 2012, the other two are Environment minister Daniel Breton, a co-founder of Eau Secours!
of the Parti Vert (Green Party) and his deputy Scott McKay, a former Montreal city councillor and one-time leader of the Greens.

Student leaders were jubilant at the cancellation of the tuition fees increase, which was the minimum objective of the united front of associations that sustained the strike movement. “Bravo to the striking students,” tweeted Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, the former co-spokesman for the CLASSE, the most militant of the student groups. “It’s a total victory!” said Martine Desjardins, president of the FEUQ, the university students’ federation. “Sept. 20 will be etched in the annals of history in Quebec” tweeted the FECQ, the college students’ federation. The students also welcomed Marois’s announcement that her government would maintain the $39 million boost to financial assistance introduced by the Liberals to offset their tuition increase.

The PQ government is committed to holding a summit on education in the fall of 2012 to debate and propose new arrangements for funding higher education in Quebec. Marois says she will defend her party’s proposal to index future tuition fee increases. Although the CLASSE is now dormant, its leaders have pledged to continue the fight for free tuition through their permanent association, the ASSÉ.¹

Maois also announced cancellation of the $200 per person health tax imposed by Charest, which would have brought almost one billion dollars into government coffers. She said that the loss of this user fee will be made up by tax increases on incomes that are higher than $130,000 a year and decreases in the capital gains exemption and dividend tax credit. But she also confirmed her determination to bring in a balanced budget by 2014, which means that these popular decisions, if implemented, will no doubt be followed by major cutbacks in spending in other areas, yet unspecified.

**Fragile Electoral Victory** These initial PQ moves, all promised in the party’s election platform, reflect the new government’s need to shore up its popular support quickly because it faces the prospect of another election before long. With only 54 seats in the 125-seat National Assembly, the PQ is vulnerable to parliamentary defeat by the Right-wing, federalist Liberals (PLQ), and Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ).
The PQ won more than half of its seats thanks to the riding-by-riding vote being divided between the PLQ and the CAQ. The PQ share of the popular vote did not increase during the five-week campaign. To obtain only 32 percent support when running against one of the most unpopular governments in recent Quebec history, in the wake of the massive student upsurge of the printemps érable, is hardly a ringing endorsement. The Liberals, while chastened by the defeat of their government and the personal defeat of Charest in Sherbrooke followed by his resignation, can congratulate themselves on winning 50 seats and 31 percent of the popular vote, just one percent behind the PQ and three or four points above their standing in pre-election polling. As usual, the PLQ retains its solid federalist base, especially in the 30 or so ridings with significant Anglophone and Allophone (immigrant) populations. The CAQ, a new Right-wing party, won 27 percent of the votes, but elected only 19 members. Founded by former PQ cabinet minister François Legault and business magnate Charles Sirois, the CAQ had absorbed the populist neoliberal third party Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), and campaigned against sovereignty in the hope of replacing the Liberals as the hegemonic federalist party. Although it failed in this attempt, the CAQ retains its relatively solid adéquiste base and it can look for future gains against the Liberals as new revelations of the Charest government’s corrupt practices emerge in the Charbonneau Commission hearings, now resumed; the presiding judge had adjourned the proceedings for the summer, thus allowing Charest to hold his early election.

Overall, the Quebec Right scored a solid victory, the PLQ and CAQ winning close to 60 percent of the vote. Despite minor differences, both parties stand for rebalancing the budget and paying off the debt at the expense of working people; privatizing and dismantling public sector institutions and programs inherited from the Quiet Revolution; weakening unions; and keeping Quebec firmly within the Canadian state and subject to neoliberal fiscal and monetary policies largely determined by Ottawa. The Harper government can be pleased with the election result; in addition to its reliable agent, the PLQ, it now has the CAQ as a “Plan B” party of federalist alternance to the Liberals if required. And this, with a voter participation rate of almost 75 percent, the highest turnout since 1998.
There is a prospect of political instability in the coming months. The government will be under pressure in the National Assembly to move to the right to win CAQ (or Liberal) support. In terms of its electoral prospects, however, the pressure will also come from the Left. Predictably, business interests reacted indignantly to the prospect of higher taxes on incomes and capital, but more recent government announcements may have reassured them. In early October, following a private briefing by Quebec negotiator (and former PQ premier) Pierre-Marc Johnson, Finance Minister Nicolas Marceau and International Relations and External Trade Minister Jean-François Lisée announced that the new government agreed “in principle” with the free-trade agreement between Canada and the European Union now in the final stages of secret negotiations. This agreement will open up the public contracts of provincial governments, municipalities, hospitals, and school boards to competitive bidding by European-based capital, a further incentive to privatize social services.

**Challenges from the Left** The relatively low PQ vote reflected, in part, a growing tension within the pro-sovereignty camp. In recent months and years, new parties have emerged to the Left of the PQ and in this election they captured more than eight percent of the popular vote. Since most Left and progressive opinion in Quebec tends to be sympathetic to Quebec sovereignty or independence, they merit attention by socialists elsewhere.³

Québec solidaire (QS), the Left-wing, pro-independence party, managed to elect co-leader Françoise David in Montreal’s Gouin riding (electoral constituency), where she handily defeated a sitting PQ member, and to re-elect QS’s other co-leader Amir Khadir in neighbouring Mercier. The party’s 124 candidates—half of them women—increased its share of the province-wide vote to 6.03% from its 3.78% in the previous election, in 2008. This score was well below the 9 or 10% it was getting in some pre-election polling, although in another three Montreal ridings QS scored well above 20% of the vote, and in a dozen or so other ridings more than 10%.

However, this Left vote is concentrated in central Montreal and remains marginal in the regions. Moreover, with the partial exception of Laurier-Dorion, where QS candidate Andres Fonticella scored 23.34%, QS support
is weak in non-Francophone communities. As discussed below, there was little evidence in the campaign that QS has established solid roots among the social movements, which, for the most part, either persisted in non-partisan abstention from elections or oriented opportunistically towards the PQ as the sovereignist party best positioned to defeat the Liberals. But the QS campaign attracted thousands of new recruits; party membership now stands at 13,000, twice the number from a year ago.

A fifth party, the pro-sovereignty Option nationale (ON), which was formed during the last year by former PQ member of the national assembly (MNA) Jean-Martin Aussant, fielded 120 candidates but won only 1.9% of the vote and failed to elect Aussant or any other candidate. However, it boasts 5,000 members, the majority of them under the age of 35. Both QS and ON have recruited heavily from the student upsurge this spring.

**PQ Crisis Stalled—but for How Long?** Only a few months ago, the PQ was struggling to surmount the existential crisis that was tearing it apart in the wake of the crushing defeat of the Bloc Québécois (BQ) in the May 2011 federal election. Six PQ MNAs had defected from the party, and others were publicly speculating about whether it had a future. The party’s membership was declining, especially among youth. Since her election as leader in 2008, Marois had been courting the ADQ electorate around a neoliberal approach consistent with the party’s orientation since the 1980s, when it embraced free trade with the United States and later the “zero deficit” strategy. Marois refused to commit to any schedule for holding another referendum on sovereignty, promising instead to seek “winning conditions” through “sovereignist governance,” a gradualist tactic of pursuing exclusive Quebec jurisdiction over matters of language, culture, and international representation in the hope that, eventually, popular frustration at Ottawa’s resistance would open the way to a future referendum victory.

The ADQ leaders’ December 2011 decision to merge their party with the CAQ forced Marois to look instead to the Left for support. Her Left turn coincided with the February onset of the student strike against the Liberal government’s university tuition fee increases. After a few weeks of hesitation, Marois and her parliamentary caucus decided to sport the students’
carrés rouges, the red felt flashes signifying support of the students’ struggle. When the election was called, she recruited a student leader, 20-year-old Léo Bureau-Blouin, as a PQ candidate. (He was elected.) Marois now favoured electrification of rail and road transportation, nationalization of wind power, and reform of the antiscab law. She even embraced a proposal from some party militants, adopted at the party’s April 2011 convention, to allow a “referendum on popular initiative” (RIP) on sovereignty if 15 percent of the electorate signed a petition to that effect. She also shifted the PQ towards a range of positions focused on reinforcing Law 101, the Charter of the French language, through making French the mandatory language of firms with 10 or more employees and barring attendance in the Anglophone CEGEPs (professional and technical colleges) by Francophones and Allophones.

During the campaign, however, Marois made it clear that she adamantly opposed a key demand of many, if not most of the striking students: free tuition. She played down the PQ promise to limit attendance at English-language CEGEPs to native English speakers (a proposal that Bureau-Blouin admitted was deeply unpopular among many Francophone students). And she declared that her government would not be bound by any RIP petition calling for a referendum on sovereignty. However, she stuck to the party’s well-trodden identity issues, such as restricting Quebec citizenship to those with reasonable fluency in French (a position criticized by First Nations leaders), and adoption of a charter on laïcité (secularism) that, among other things, would ban the wearing of “ostentatious” religious insignia such as the Muslim hijab or scarf by government and public services employees. To reinforce the party’s opposition to “reasonable accommodation” of religious minorities, a position it shares in common with the CAQ, she recruited Djemila Benhabib as the PQ candidate in Trois-Rivières. Benhabib, a refugee from Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria, has authored a number of provocative books warning that Islamic jihadists threaten Quebec.5 (She was narrowly defeated by the sitting Liberal on 4 September.)

The PQ’s rigid interpretation of secularism, which sometimes verges on Islamophobia, has stirred unease among some party supporters. For example, Jean Dorion, a former BQ member of parliament (MP) and president of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society, explained publicly after the election that he had not voted for the PQ on these grounds.6
PQ Campaigns against Québec Solidaire  On the whole, the PQ’s slight-shift to the Left echoed themes reminiscent of the party’s program in its formative years, when it still sought to continue Quebec’s “Quiet Revolution” of the Sixties. But the party is stamped with the legacy of its record in office, especially under the leadership of Lucien Bouchard (1995–2000), himself now a paid lobbyist for the shale gas industry and opponent of sovereignty. During the last decade, disillusioned péquistes; former far-Left militants; and activists in the labour, women’s, and other social movements have worked to build QS, the new Left-wing pro-sovereignty party, as an alternative to the PQ that could challenge neoliberalism both in the streets and at the ballot box as a party “resolutely of the left, feminist, ecologist, alter-mondialiste, pacifist, democratic and sovereigntist.”7 QS also favours a policy of “open secularism” that promotes the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities within an “inter-culturalist” perspective that differs sharply with the PQ’s ethnic exclusivity.

A major concern of the PQ in this election was to prevent QS from siphoning votes on its Left flank, especially in Francophone working-class ridings on Montreal island, where sovereigntist sympathies are highest. The PQ ran some of its strongest candidates against leading QS candidates. In Mercier, it sought to defeat Amir Khadir by nominating Jean Poirier, former president of the machinists’ union local fighting the closure of AVEOS (a company that handled Air Canada’s aircraft maintenance). In Sainte-Marie–Saint-Jacques, the PQ ran Daniel Breton, Environment minister as of 8 October 2012, although Manon Massé of QS came second with more than 25 percent of the vote. In Rosemont, Jean-François Lisée, now the minister of International Relations and External Trade, ran against QS’s François Saillant, a prominent social housing advocate. Thus the PQ posed a major obstacle to QS in this campaign—on top of the to-be-expected hostility of the Quebec mass media, which is basically monopolized by two big families of oligarchs, the Desmarais and Péladeaus.8

A particularly virulent campaign was waged against QS by the leaders of a small but influential group of péquistes, the Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre (SPQ Libre).9 Its leaders, Pierre Dubuc and Marc Laviolette, published article after article in Dubuc’s L’aut’journal and
occasionally in the daily *Le Devoir* questioning QS’s legitimacy as a sovereigntist party. They also argued that if QS (and Option nationale) did support sovereignty, then they should be supporting the PQ and not fighting to replace it.

Major differences between these Left péquistes and QS concern the strategy for achieving a sovereign Quebec. The former see the PQ as the essential political vehicle for a broad multiclass “national coalition” that alone can successfully mobilize Québécois in support of sovereignty. They criticize QS for not putting the national question and independence at the centre of its politics, and see QS’s criticism of the PQ as evidence of its lack of strategic sense.

**What Strategy for Independence?** On the other hand, QS argues that the majority support needed to achieve an independent Quebec requires the concerted mobilization of public opinion around a project of social as well as national emancipation. Its election platform called for the formation of a democratically elected constituent assembly “made up of an equal number of women and men and representative of tendencies, different socio-economic backgrounds, and the cultural diversity present in Quebec society,” which would “conduct a far-reaching democratic process to consult the population...on values, rights and principles...the political status of Quebec, the definition of its institutions and their delegated powers, responsibilities and resources” and only then develop “one or more proposals which will be put to the population in a referendum.” This platform did tend to leave the process on the level of a democratic consultation. QS, it said, “will advocate for creating a sovereign Quebec state, without assuming what the outcome of the debates will be.” QS leaders underscored this ambiguity in statements that they made during the campaign—as when spokesperson Amir Khadir, addressing a largely non-Francophone audience, spoke of “independence if necessary, but not necessarily independence.”

This apparent readiness to accept a democratic verdict of the Assembly whatever the state form chosen was seized on by PQ and ON supporters to question the QS commitment to a sovereign Quebec. Offsetting these charges, a detailed four-page memorandum for QS candidates—published only on
the party’s intranet, unfortunately—explained how Quebec independence could offer a new framework in which to fight for progressive change, and why it is necessary to build a mass base of support for independence. It noted as well that “since the Quebec people cannot deny to other peoples what they demand for themselves, Quebec’s sovereignty will be achieved in close partnership and collaboration with the indigenous nations. Their decisions and orientations, whatever they are, will be respected.”

The QS election platform may have reinforced the impression that the party was less than fully committed to Quebec independence. The format—specific demands, addressed to current issues, that are “responsibly” realizable within a four-year mandate and within the provincial context—reflects the party’s approach to elections. It does not contest elections solely to make propaganda for its overall program, as do so many small Leftist sects. QS seeks to elect members to the legislature with the goal of forming a government. At a pre-election convention in April, QS delegates debated and selected which demands in the party program were especially pertinent to immediate issues and struggles and thus should be highlighted in this campaign. Unfortunately, the topics addressed were published in alphabetical order, following the French text (from Agriculture to Democratic Life (Vie démocratique)), without prioritizing any of them. Thus “sovereignty” became just one topic, and not the first.

In fact, a clearly anticapitalist alternative could be realistically posed only in the context of an independent Quebec state that could nationalize banking and finance, determine its international policy, have its own military defense force, and so on — all of these being federal jurisdictions. As page 11 of the party’s Plan Vert states: “for the time being, Quebec does not have mastery of all its economic levers because it is still stuck in the Canadian federation....” Outside the context of an independent Quebec, however, the platform as a whole lacked a key dimension of the party’s politics and could not indicate a clear break from subordination to Canadian and global capital.

**Debate on Electoral Alliances** The appeal to close ranks behind the PQ had broad appeal, however, to many sovereignty supporters who were aware that it was the only sovereigntist party with the resources and potential
support — and status as the long-standing party of alternance — to dislodge the Liberals. Adding to this pressure was the undemocratic first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system; because it results in the election of any candidate winning a plurality in a multicandidate contest, FPTP discriminates against smaller parties and produces a legislature that does not reflect the full range of parties and programs.

An initial response to the pro-PQ advocates by QS co-leaders Khadir and David, published in the 14 June edition of Le Devoir, reflected the position taken by a QS convention in March 2011, which had rejected proposals for alliances with the PQ and Parti Vert following an extensive debate on the question. The QS co-spokespersons explained why QS did not view the PQ as a party of progressive social change, noting for example that it had taken Marois 11 weeks during the student upsurge to even come up with a party policy on tuition fee increases. They also pointed to the procapitalist record of PQ governments in the past. QS, they proclaimed, stood for solidarity with the students then mobilizing in the streets and all those who supported them, and offered the perspective of another kind of government in the interests of the vast majority:

The meaning to be given to the political awakening and social metamorphosis that is under way lies, in our opinion, in a massive rejection of a system controlled by a minority that never stops enriching itself on the backs of the 99 percent. The political and economic elites, hand in hand, have produced a world of unprecedented inequality. They have also pushed the planet to its outermost limits…

When an online petition urging the sovereigntist parties to negotiate a mutual non-aggression pact gathered more than 10,000 signatures, however, the QS leadership, in a formal statement, retreated somewhat. They agreed to meet with a designated mediator to examine the possibilities. They did not categorically reject “a united front to govern with the Parti Québécois,” while affirming that “it seems extremely difficult to us” for the reasons given in David and Khadir’s 14 June article. They suggested instead that “isolated and limited arrangements” be explored—a thinly veiled appeal to the PQ in particular that it agree not to oppose certain QS candidates in return for QS
desistance in some ridings the PQ hoped to win—provided that each party undertake, if elected, to reform the electoral system to include, *inter alia*, some form of proportional representation as of the next general election; repeal of Law 12 and amnesty for those arrested and charged under it; abolition of the tuition fee increase and the health-care fee imposed by the Liberals; higher taxes on the rich, etc. “Almost all of these points are already commitments by the parties” concerned, QS maintained. In the end, the PQ refused to negotiate with QS and the only agreement reached was with Option nationale: QS would not run against ON leader Aussant (he lost anyway) and ON would not run against David. It is worth noting that the QS leadership’s manoeuvres, which, at face value, ran counter to the decision of the March 2011 convention, were not endorsed by the party membership nor even by its National Council (NC), its governing body between conventions. The NC has not met for some years now. Important policy decisions are made vertically and unilaterally by co-spokespersons David and Khadir in collaboration with the dozen or so members of the QS National Coordinating Committee. The election experience should put the issue of party democracy back on the agenda in any QS balance sheet of the campaign.

Predictably, the election result led to attacks on QS (and ON) for splitting the sovereigntist vote. Within hours of the election, Pierre Dubuc listed 22 ridings in which he said the votes of QS and ON, either separately or combined, deprived the PQ candidate of victory, thus depriving the PQ of a potential majority government with 76 seats.¹⁶ The arrogant (and mistaken) assumption, of course, is that the QS and ON supporters would have voted PQ if their own parties were not on the ballot. With similar logic, QS and ON could argue that the PQ’s presence on the ballot had deprived them of election in a number of ridings, too. As it is, the PLQ and PQ took more seats than their share of the popular vote would warrant, while QS, with 6% of the vote, took only 1.6% of the seats.

Asked why Québécois had denied her the majority she wanted, Marois told a post-election press conference that the two-party system was a thing of the past and that we were now in a multiparty environment. But she continues to be adamantly opposed to any electoral system reform that would reflect this reality. After all, the PQ can argue, without the FPTP
rule, we could now be facing a Liberal-CAQ coalition government. However, the PQ has additional concerns in mind. As QS member Paul Cliche pointed out, for 40 years the PQ program has called for proportional representation, but the party failed to enact it during the 18 years it has held office. The PQ dropped this demand at its April 2011 convention, with Marois’ support. “It’s no secret,” writes Cliche, “that the real reason the PQ blocks reform is to keep the progressive milieu, including QS supporters, captive as long as possible in order to retain its hegemony over the sovereignist movement. Hence the appeals to vote strategically that come from all sides each election.”

Friend or Foe? While the PQ was eager to attack QS, the QS leadership’s quest for some sort of electoral alliance with the PQ illustrated a problem that became more evident as the campaign developed. QS leaders seemed uncertain as to whether the PQ was friend or foe. Françoise David, for example, sought to fend off the “strategic voting” assault on QS by emphasizing the Left party’s willingness to work with the PQ in the National Assembly—in support of “progressive” measures, of course. And in an interview with Le Devoir on the eve of the election, David and co-leader Khadir said they hoped for a PQ minority government with a few QS MNAs holding “the balance of power,” pulling the PQ “toward the centre left.” They even appeared to offer the PQ a blank cheque for its support over the next year:

“Québec solidaire,’ wrote the reporter, summarizing their argument, ‘will count on ‘responsible and reasonable negotiations’ with the next government, dismissing any notion of bringing it down, if it is a minority, within the coming year’. ‘It is irresponsible to try to overturn a government one month after the election!’ exclaims Françoise David.”

Have the QS leaders thought through the implications of these statements of virtually unconditional support? What if there is another showdown between the government and the students, or a big public sector strike, or a corruption scandal significantly involving the PQ?

Celebrating her personal victory on election night, David again repeated several times how eager she was to work with the new government—as if
QS, and not the PLQ or CAQ, now held the balance of power. During his swearing-in at the National Assembly on 26 September, Amir Khadir was reported as attributing the PQ decisions on such issues as shale gas and asbestos mining to pressure from Québec solidaire—overlooking the massive citizens’ mobilizations that were primarily responsible.

Other QS members and supporters were more successful in differentiating their party from the still fundamentally neoliberal PQ. An example was Presse-toi-à-gauche, an online journal that generally reflects the views of the Left in QS, which published many articles exposing how the PQ, over the years, had undermined the movement for national independence through its Right-wing course, answering the péquistes’ criticisms of QS, and arguing forcefully for QS to mount a more aggressive campaign in opposition to the PQ as well as the other capitalist parties. Moreover, an internal memorandum for QS election candidates, published on the party intranet, was quite frank in its cogent critique of the PQ:

Everything we hate today about the Liberal party, the Parti Québécois has already done: anti-democratic special laws, closure of debate in the National Assembly, increases in tuition fees, cuts in social programs, reduction in trade-union powers, privatization in health care, reform of social assistance, reduced taxes on the wealthiest, reduced business taxation, generous subsidies to Québec Inc. and participation in secret funding of political parties. Under the veneer of change lurks the same vision of the world as that of the Liberal party.

In fact, the QS election platform did demark the party in the main from the PQ on many important questions. To cite some examples (in addition to the proposed constituent assembly, discussed earlier):

• Free tuition from preschool to university, and improved financial assistance to students to bring them within the proposed guaranteed minimum income of $12,000 (indexed);
• An end to government funding of all private schools (currently 20 percent of Quebec elementary and secondary enrolment), integration of private schools into the public system;
• Consideration of progressive alternatives to current free-trade agreements, such as NAFTA, and opposition to the pending Canada-EU FTA;
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- Nationalization of strategic natural resources, a veto on mining permits to affected communities;
- Targeted reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40 percent compared to 1990 levels by 2020 and by 95 percent by 2050, and a ban on fossil fuel exploration and production throughout Quebec territory;
- Aiming for free public transit within 10 years;
- 40,000 new childcare spaces, and 50,000 new universally accessible social housing units (public, cooperative or communal);
- Affirmative action hiring in public services for members of ethnic and immigrant communities, and in private companies with 50 or more employees;
- Multi-employer union accreditation, a ban on lockouts, and an end to injunctions to allow secondary picketing;
- A universal public pension plan that would also cover the self-employed and the invisible work done by women;
- A nationalized drug acquisition and production agency, Pharma-Québec, and a universal public drug insurance plan;
- Electoral reform including a compensatory mixed voting system in which 60 percent of MNAs are elected by the FPTP system and 40 percent divided between regions with proportional representation of parties according to their respective percentage of the popular vote, with a minimum threshold of two percent of the vote.

Support from Ecologists, Trade Unionists The QS campaign attracted interest and significant support from activists in a number of social movements. Six major ecology groups, in a comparative evaluation of the environmental commitments in the party platforms, ranked QS first with a score of 83 percent, well ahead of the PVQ (Greens) at 42 percent. The PQ scored 73 percent, the Liberals 33 percent, and the CAQ came last with 31 percent.

The major trade union centrals were officially neutral in the campaign, even the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), which has often endorsed the PQ and its federal pendant, the BQ. (The FTQ is annoyed with the PQ for its support of Charest’s Law 33 banning the union hiring hall in the construction industry.) The Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) called on
its members to vote for the “progressive” candidate with the best chance of defeating the Liberals and the CAQ—meaning, in most cases, the PQ. *L’Aut*journal reported that the FTQ’s Montreal regional council endorsed three QS candidates—trade union militants André Frappier, Alexandre Leduc, and Édith Laperle, but not Amir Khadir in Mercier. However, this support was not indicated on the council’s website. The Montreal Central Council of the CSN endorsed David and Khadir, and called for a vote for QS candidates where it would not result in the election of a Liberal or CAQ candidate. The lack of union engagement with the QS campaign underscored, once again, the failure of QS to organize and give direction to the many party members who are union militants.

**And the Students?** QS was the only party supporting free education from kindergarten to university. But leaders of this spring’s massive student strike either placed their hopes in a victory for the PQ, or, in the case of the more militant wing of the movement, chose not to intervene in the election. There was ample evidence that this extraordinary summer election was part of Charest’s strategy to break the student movement. He hoped to take advantage of any continuation of the strike to campaign as a champion of law and order. Alternatively, if the students ended the strike he could claim success for his hard line resistance to their demands.

The students were facing some difficult decisions. The government’s Law 12, imposed in late May, made continuation of the strike illegal and threatened the student associations with decertification and heavy fines that would bankrupt them. On the other hand, it effectively blackmailed the students by offering them the possibility of completing their semester with full credit in late August and September if they ended the strike. If convicted, more than 3,000 students arrested during the spring protests are facing serious criminal and civil charges and heavy fines. Many were unable to get summer jobs, and most are financially extremely vulnerable. Moreover, there were signs that the movement was flagging, notwithstanding some impressive mass mobilizations on 22 June, July, and August. Most importantly, there was no indication that major new social forces—especially the unions—were prepared to mobilize to extend the strike movement into the broad “social strike” that
was needed for victory.

Faced with these obstacles, the FEUQ and the FECQ opted to participate in the election campaign in an effort to defeat the Liberals and CAQ at all costs. Activists in both associations went door-to-door in targetted Liberal ridings to spread their message, and picketed Charest in his public appearances. FECQ leader Léo Bureau-Blouin agreed to run as a PQ candidate, although none of the associations endorsed any particular party. The CLASSE, after an intense discussion, rejected any intervention in the election campaign, although an internal strategy document\(^2\) that included a critical analysis of each party’s positions found, in part, that QS is “by far, the party that is most responsive to the demands of the students.” It noted that QS “proposes, inter alia, to establish free tuition and a wage for students during their first term in office,” adding “We could hardly ask for more.” But it concluded that voting for QS could not suffice as a strategy for winning the current struggle because the party could not possibly become the government in this election. The CLASSE saw no option but to try to continue the strike, although it left the decision to its member associations.

Student assemblies held on university and college campuses during August, most of them poorly attended, voted in most cases to end the strike at least until 4 September. Following the election, they voted for a return to classes. “If the PQ yielded so quickly on the tuition fee increase, it is because there was an historic student movement,” CLASSE co-spokesperson Jeanne Reynolds told the media after a leadership meeting on 6 September. The CLASSE “had called for continuation of the strike. However, we note that the student association voted instead for a return to class, and we respect their decisions.”

**Big Challenges Ahead** By winning the government, Marois has, provisionally at least, deflected the crisis gnawing at the PQ from within. But the contradictory dynamics facing the party in the legislature and in the streets now assume a higher form. The PQ’s fundamental adherence to capitalist imperatives will be evident in the coming months as it grapples with a mounting financial and fiscal crisis in a largely hostile legislature that threatens early parliamentary defeat and new elections in which the party has no assurance of winning, let alone gaining a majority government.
Although the massive student mobilization, in the end, achieved only a restoration of the status quo ante regarding tuition, there is little perception that the students were defeated. Their struggle could quickly re-ignite, especially if the hopes that many people place in the PQ’s promised summit on education are frustrated. A renewed upsurge may build on the lessons learned in this year’s rich experience of struggle, and help to draw broader layers of the population into the fight. Similarly, the environmental movement, encouraged by its shale gas victory, faces ongoing challenges in the fight to ban uranium mining and oil and gas development in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, as well as its campaign for massive conversion to alternative energies. Other social movements as well are looking for significant advances in this context of a slightly modified political relationship of forces.

In the legislature, the Left opposition (the two QS deputies) will have to find ways to project a progressive alternative agenda to the PQ’s compromises with capital. More importantly, the election result demonstrated anew the need for QS to link up with the social movements “in the streets,” to help revive a (temporarily?) dormant student movement, to clarify the party’s strategic understanding of the fight for Quebec independence, and to turn, at long last, towards developing a strong and coordinated presence in the labour movement that can help to build the antibureaucratic alternative class-struggle leadership that is so sorely needed in this period of increasing international capitalist crisis.

Notes

1. The CLASSE was a broad coalition formed to fight the tuition increase and coordinate the students’ general strike around the demand for free tuition. Its central component was the Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSE), a militant association that encompasses students in both universities and colleges. At the height of the struggle, the CLASSE had about 100,000 members, 60,000 of them members of the ASSE.
4. The ON platform (<http://www.optionnationale.org/images/Option%20nationale%20-%20Plateforme.pdf>) had parallels with the platforms of both the PQ and QS, especially the latter. The party criticizes the PQ for its reluctance to fight for sovereignty since the narrow defeat of the 1995 referendum.
5. Sample titles, in translation: “Allah’s soldiers assaulting the West,” “My life against the Koran.” See <http://www.edvlb.com/soldats-allah-assaut-occident/djemila-benhabib/livre/9782896493135> (accessed 8 October 2012). On a less frenetic albeit debatable note, Benhabib argues that freedom of conscience should not accommodate unfettered expression of individual religious belief, a position strongly influenced by French republicanism. Oddly, those campaigning for greater secularism do not object to Quebec’s exemption of churches and other religious institutions from all municipal or school property taxes.


8. QS was excluded from the three one-on-one debates among party leaders sponsored by the private TV network TVA, which is owned by Péladéau’s Quebecor Media. The Desmarais family, through its Power Corporation, controls the Gesca newspaper chain, which has long supported the federalist Liberals and Conservatives in Quebec City and Ottawa. Quebecor, once sympathetic to the PQ, was a prime promoter of Legault and the CAQ. The only TV debate with a QS presence was Radio-Canada’s in which François David represented QS and garnered much praise for her effective presentation of the party and its platform.

9. SPQ Libre (“Trade unionists and progressives for a Free Quebec”), once a recognized club within the PQ, was expelled as an organized presence in the party by Marois, but its members (at most a few hundred) continue to support the PQ: <http://spqlibre.org/default.aspx?page=20> (accessed 8 October 2012).

10. In all, QS published 13 such memoranda on its intranet. On its public website, it published a detailed “budgetary framework” (<http://www.quebecsolidaire.net/budget/> ) and a “green plan” (Plan Vert, <http://www.quebecsolidaire.net/publications/le-plan-vert/> ), the latter as a response in part to Charest’s Plan Nord and its projection of rampant development of private mining activity in northern and rural Quebec.


14. Ibid.


21. Under the parliamentary regime inherited from Britain, the government in Quebec may choose any date within a five-year mandate on which to hold a general election. 4 September 2012 was more than one year shy of the legal end of the Charest government’s term of office.