

The March 26 Quebec elections and the Canadian elite's turn to the right

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Canada's minority Conservative government and the most powerful sections of the Canadian ruling elite are seeking to use the March 26 Quebec provincial election as a means of shifting politics sharply further right in Quebec and across Canada.

It is common knowledge that the federal Conservatives—who have expanded the Canadian armed forces' participation in a colonial-type counterinsurgency war in southern Afghanistan, vowed to expand the Canadian military to the point that the world's major powers take notice, and aligned Canada even more closely with the Bush administration's predatory global ambitions—view the re-election of Quebec's Liberal government as pivotal to their own plans for winning a parliamentary majority in the next federal election.

The Liberal government of Jean Charest, which won a five-year mandate in April 2003, could have waited till spring 2008 to go to the polls. But after consultations with Stephen Harper's federal Conservatives, Quebec Premier Jean Charest decided to call early elections in hopes of taking advantage of a spurt in popular support as measured by the opinion polls and, thereby, delivering a major blow to their common Quebec *indépendantistes* political rivals, organized in the Parti Québécois (PQ) and, at the federal level, the Bloc Québécois (BQ).

In 2003 the Liberals ousted a nine-year-old PQ government by making vague and hypocritical appeals to popular anger over a dramatic deterioration in the quality of healthcare, education and other public services and by rallying the support of big business and the corporate media with promises to slash taxes on business and high-income earners, amend the labour code to facilitate the contracting out of work, and "scale back the size of the state."

The Liberals' right-wing agenda soon brought them into headlong conflict with the working class and for most of the past four years the Liberals and Charest have registered the lowest or among the lowest-ever popular support recorded for a sitting Quebec government and premier.

Although the Charest Liberal government proved unable, due to popular opposition, to fulfill its pledge to slash income taxes by \$15 billion over five years, it did succeed in imposing a raft of right-wing measures.

Especially important was legislation establishing a mechanism for the dismantling of Medicare, the universal, public health insurance program, by allowing the private sector to insure and provide at partial state expense hip, knee and cataract surgery. This list, moreover, is soon to be expanded to include such medical procedures as cardiac care and cancer-related surgery.

In December 2005, the Charest government used an “emergency” law to strip half a million healthcare, education, and other provincial public sector workers of the legal right to strike until March 2010 and impose on them seven-year contracts providing wage increases well below the annual rate of inflation.

The immense popular opposition to the Liberals’ right-wing agenda twice burst into the open. In December 2003 there was a wave of demonstrations and walkouts and widespread calls from workers for a general strike; in the winter and spring of 2005 a student strike forced the closure of many of Quebec’s post-secondary institutions for days and in many cases weeks.

These opposition movements were torpedoed by the trade union bureaucracy, lest they become a threat not just to the Quebec government but to the Canadian ruling elite as a whole. As Confederation of National Trades Union President Claudette Carbonneau argued at the height of the December 2003 anti-Charest protests, “I do not wish that he [Charest] give up his right to legislate and to govern.”

The union bureaucracy’s suppression of the working class opposition to the Liberal government is the first reason why Charest has been able to make a political comeback.

A second reason is that Quebec’s other major big business party, the Parti Québécois (PQ), can hardly differentiate itself from the Liberals, being obsessed with the desire to, in the words of party leader André Boisclair, “comfort capital” by making Quebec the most profitable place in the world to invest.

Boisclair’s open courting of big business follows in the wake of nine years of PQ rule, from 1994 to 2003, which saw PQ premiers Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard, and Bernard Landry impose the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, then, when the annual provincial budget deficit had been eliminated, declare tax cuts their first priority.

Neither the right-wing governmental record of the PQ, nor the self-proclaimed pro-business agenda of the party’s head, has dissuaded the unions from maintaining and reaffirming their political support for this capitalist party. At a special congress last weekend, the Quebec Federation of Labour, Quebec’s largest trade union federation with a half million members, voted to endorse the PQ in the current election campaign.

Charest has also benefited from increased big business support.

Capital was long-chagrined by the Liberals’ failure to fully implement their tax-cutting pledges and there were even complaints that Charest was jeopardizing the “Quebec model” of using the labour bureaucracy to push through major anti-working class measures by engaging in inflammatory, antiunion rhetoric.

But in the past 18 months, the corporate elite in Quebec and across Canada has warmed to Charest. While a factor in this is the fears of the most powerful sections of capital of a return of the PQ to power and a third referendum on Quebec independence, Charest has won business accolades for his success in targeting Medicare and public sector workers, even while repositioning himself as a “moderate.”

The latter tack has been facilitated by the emergence of the Action démocratique du Québec or ADQ, a party that denounces universal social programs in the name of personal

freedom and preaches the most vulgar forms of chauvinism and anti-immigrant prejudice. It is being used by the ruling elite to push public debate even further to the right. And established bourgeois parties such as Charest's Liberals use it as a foil to conceal their own reactionary agenda and appeal to voters as the lesser evil.

If the Canadian ruling class favours the re-election of Charest, as testified by a *Globe and Mail* editorial that praised him as a "sensitive, mature politician who has brought good government to his province," it is not only as a way to maintain the right-wing trajectory of Quebec politics.

Canadian capital sees the Quebec elections as having a major impact on the federal political equation.

Charest, himself a former head of the federal Progressive Conservatives, is a long-time and key political ally of federal Conservative Prime Minister Stephan Harper, who has led a minority government in Ottawa for the past 13 months. The re-election of the Quebec Liberals is seen by many analysts and Conservative strategists as an essential element in Harper's efforts to secure a majority in a fresh federal election that could be engineered as early as this spring.

One of the highlights of the Quebec election campaign will be the tabling of a federal budget scheduled for March 19, barely a week before polling day. The Harper government, which advocates a decentralization of the Canadian federation as a mechanism to undermine national social programs, could announce a major transfer of powers and funds from Ottawa to the provinces. That would make it possible for Charest to praise the virtues of Canadian federalism, the better to denounce the sovereignty or separatist option promoted by the PQ.

Charest's reelection would in turn be seized upon by Harper as evidence that his so-called "openness" to Quebec, i.e., to the demands of Quebec's elite for more powers, is paying off for Canada. He would then be tempted to precipitate federal elections in the hope that an increased Quebec Conservative vote would be enough to give him the majority government that he covets in order to push ahead with a radical right-wing agenda.

For Harper's Conservatives, in other words, hopes of forming a majority government do not rest upon the prospect of convincing the public of the soundness of their positions. This would be a near insurmountable task, given the very weak popular support for a program aimed at dismantling what remains of the welfare state, trampling upon democratic rights under the pretext of a "war on terrorism," and conducting an aggressive foreign policy to assert the geo-strategic interests of the Canadian ruling class.

Harper, who in the last election sought to bamboozle the electorate with a demagogic campaign focusing on Liberal corruption and law and order, hopes rather to consolidate the Conservative grip on power by manipulating the electoral process and regional divisions within the elite.

The use of such methods, based on contempt for public opinion, is inseparable from the political agenda being pursued by the Conservatives and the political establishment as a whole—an agenda that in the name of free markets aims to subordinate ever more completely the social needs of the majority to the profit interests of a tiny minority of capitalist owners and to revive the Canadian state's militarist traditions so that Canada's elite can take an active part in the neo-colonial re-division of the world.

By aligning Canada's foreign policy still more closely with Washington's—as demonstrated in its decision to extend the Canadian Armed Forces' intervention in Afghanistan and to rally to the support of Israel when it invaded Lebanon last summer—the Harper government is tying the Canadian bourgeoisie's fortunes to the most destabilizing and incendiary element in contemporary world politics. Following its fiasco in Iraq, the Bush administration is getting ready to launch another war of conquest, this time against Iran, while whipping up communal conflict in the region.

For a US administration politically weakened by its catastrophic failure in Iraq and the rout suffered at the 2006 midterm elections, and on the verge of launching another military adventure with incalculable consequences, the support of a country like Canada—that long maintained for its own reasons the posture of a foreign policy independent of Washington—could play an important role.

Within the framework of Harper's electoral manoeuvring to consolidate his grip on power and reinforce Canada's collaboration with Washington, the Quebec elections could become a link in an international chain of events leading to a major conflagration in a critical area of the world.

It is, thus, all the more imperative for working people in Quebec and Canada to raise the life-and-death issues that will be kept out of the Quebec election campaign—the neo-colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the unending attacks on the democratic rights and living standards of working people at home.

The urgent task of the hour is the building of a mass global movement of working people against the imperialist wars being carried out and planned by the United States and their allies, including Canada.

To the nationalistic calls being made by all parties in the Quebec elections working people must counterpose the international unity of workers in a common struggle against the root cause of war and mounting social inequality, the profit system.

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