

Quebec election called for December 8

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Quebec Premier Jean Charest, who has headed a minority Liberal government since March 2007, has called a provincial election for Monday, December 8.

In launching the Liberal campaign Wednesday, Charest said that only a majority Liberal government could provide Canada's second-most-populous and sole majority-French-speaking province with the strong leadership it needs to confront the world economic crisis. "Quebecers," said Charest, "know that a minority government is an unstable government. They also know that during a storm there shouldn't be three pairs of hands on the steering wheel."

Charest's "three pairs of hands" is a reference to the fact that his government has hitherto needed the parliamentary support of one or the other of the opposition parties, either the *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois (PQ) or the right-wing populist and Quebec "autonomist" Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ).

If the Liberals are anxious to go to the polls, it is for two interrelated reasons. First, they fear that as the world financial crisis becomes transformed into a world recession, it will severely affect their popular support. Second, they recognize that the recession will cause the province's finances to hemorrhage, forcing the government to implement unpopular policies, including further cuts in public and social services and hikes in day care and university tuition fees and electricity rates.

Charest "fundamentally believes we're going into a very different period," an unnamed "close associate of the premier" told the well-connected *Montreal Gazette* and *National Post* columnist L. Ian MacDonald. "We're being told by our own economists," continued Charest's associate, "that we are into unprecedented, uncharted waters."

Quebec's most influential daily, *La presse*, responded to Charest's launching of elections by endorsing his call for a majority government. "We are in agreement with Mr. Charest on this point: in a period of economic uncertainty a majority government is decidedly preferable.... [It] is majorities that in the past have demonstrated boldness and courage.... [A] government with minority support in parliament is incapable of taking difficult measures—measures that sometimes impose reality and put in place essential policies that have the drawback of being controversial.... The [next] provincial government will not be able to satisfy all those groups that will ask for its help. It will doubtless be forced to cut spending and possibly find means of increasing revenue."

La presse's only proviso was that Charest and his Liberals have yet to prove that they are equal to the challenges Quebec faces. Big business has long decried Quebec's purported "immobilisme"—that

is, the popular opposition to the privatization of all or part of the province's healthcare system and other government services—arguing that Quebec is less "competitive" and otherwise "out of step" with the rest of North America.

There is a striking parallel, as even the corporate media has been forced to concede, between Charest's election gambit and that of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. In early September, Harper, who had headed a minority Conservative government for 30 months, called a federal election. He argued that the government needed a fresh mandate because of increasing world economic turbulence, while simultaneously insisting that Canada's economy is fundamentally sound.

Central to Harper's strategy was the calculation that big business would rally behind the Conservatives' drive for a majority government because they would view it as the best instrument for shifting the full burden of the economic crisis onto working people. Corporate Canada did, by and large, throw its support to the Conservatives, but they failed in their bid for a parliamentary majority.

Charest is also arguing that Quebec needs a majority government to confront the economic crisis, while publicly claiming that the crisis will not be severe.

On Tuesday, the Liberals presented an "economic update" to the National Assembly in which they claimed that Quebec will escape a full-blown recession and manage to avoid incurring a budget deficit. These projections have been dismissed as "rosy" if not outright disinformation by many economic analysts and political opponents. Quebec's Auditor-General was quick to pour cold water on the government's projections, saying that the government's so-called reserve fund is an accounting sleight-of-hand and that the Liberals have not respected the "spirit" of the "no-deficit" law the Parti Québécois government of Lucien Bouchard adopted in 1996.

The Liberals have steadfastly resisted opposition calls that they reveal the losses the Quebec Pension Plan, which is a major player on North American financial markets, has suffered as a result of the sub-prime mortgage crisis and subsequent bank failures and stock market sell-offs.

Both the PQ and the ADQ have denounced the Liberals for their "electoral opportunism." They argue that there is no need for an election because both parties have offered to loyally collaborate with the Liberals in taking action to shield the province from the economic crisis.

The opposition's willingness to support the Liberals, the Quebec political party most openly identified with big business, only serves to demonstrate the fundamental agreement between all three parties over the key class questions, their differences concerning

Quebec's status within the Canadian federal state notwithstanding.

The truth is the opposition parties' reasons for opposing elections are no less cynical and opportunistic than the premier's reasons for calling them. The Liberals have a lead in the opinion polls—a lead very much bound up with the opposition parties' respective crises.

The crisis of the opposition parties

The ADQ, the official opposition in the National Assembly, fears it is heading for a debacle on December 8. Opinion polls show it with the support of as little as 14 percent of Quebec voters, less than half of the 31 percent share of the popular vote it won in 2007. Last month, two ADQ Members of the National Assembly defected to the Liberals.

The ADQ was for many years an also-ran in Quebec politics. But in 2007, it was able to tap into the mass popular disaffection with the two traditional establishment parties, the Liberals and the PQ, which had pursued similar neo-liberal policies when in office, slashing public and social services and lavishing tax cuts on big business and the well-to-do.

Egged on by much of the corporate media, ADQ leader Mario Dumont placed at the center of his 2007 campaign a xenophobic attack on religious minorities and immigrants, whom he claimed have been coddled by the state and constitute a potential threat to "Quebec values."

Both the PQ and Liberals have adapted to this right-wing campaign. PQ leader Pauline Marois has said that her party will strip newcomers to Quebec of certain political rights—including the right to stand in provincial and municipal elections and petition the National Assembly—if they don't pass a French-language proficiency test. Late last month, in preparation for calling the elections, the Liberals announced that henceforth immigrants to Quebec will be forced to sign a pledge avowing their support for "Quebec values," thus promoting the reactionary notion that immigrants are a threat.

The collapse in support for the ADQ underscores that its vote in 2007 was largely a protest against the two establishment parties. Indeed, as Quebecers have learnt more about the ADQ, including its advocacy of a two-tier healthcare system and close ties to the Harper Conservatives, its support has fallen sharply.

A second factor in the ADQ's crisis is that the corporate media has deemed it too unstable and untested to be trusted with power. It is one thing to use the ADQ to push Quebec politics to the right, another to have it take the reins of power and risk inciting mass opposition through its unabashed promotion of social reaction.

The PQ has formed Quebec governments for 17 of the last 32 years, but since falling from power in 2003, it has been buffeted by crisis and divided internally over the extent to which it should emphasize the drive for independence and how it should "modernize" its purportedly "statist" program.

Marois made no mention of the PQ's call for an independent Quebec in her opening election statement. Upon securing the party leadership, shortly after the PQ saw its share of the popular vote

fall in the 2007 election to its lowest level since 1970, Marois forced through a change to the party program, rescinding a commitment to hold a referendum on Quebec sovereignty during the first term of a PQ government.

The PQ's founding in 1968 was spearheaded by a dissident pro-Quebec independence faction of the Liberal Party led by René Lévesque. A bourgeois party, the PQ has nonetheless postured, with the assistance of the union bureaucracy, as a party of the people, even at times claiming to have "a favorable prejudice for the workers."

In the 2003 and 2007 elections, masses of workers and young people deserted the PQ, having correctly drawn the conclusion from its right-wing governmental record that it is no less an establishment party than the Liberals. The union bureaucracy, by contrast, has intensified its collaboration with the PQ, creating a new vehicle the *Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre* [Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec] to institutionalize its support for the PQ.

The unions will no doubt seek to rally support for the PQ on December 8, by claiming that the PQ will better protect working people from the impact of the developing slump. In fact, the PQ, with the full support of the unions, ruthlessly imposed the agenda of big business in the face of the so-called "deficit crisis" of the 1990s, imposing massive social spending cuts, eliminating tens of thousands of public sector jobs, and expanding workfare. And the PQ has continued to shift further right. In the weeks prior to the election call, it was vying with the Liberals to poach legislators from the right-wing populist ADQ.

Two other parties are contesting the elections, the Green Party and Québec Solidaire. The former won 3.85 percent of the vote in the last election and the latter 3.26 percent.

Québec Solidaire is a self-avowed left-wing, pro-Quebec independence party. It was created by a tiny fraction of the union bureaucracy, various community groups, and the petty bourgeois radical left. Its perspective is very much one of seeking to pressure the union bureaucracy and the big business PQ. In the recent federal election, it supported the "anybody but Harper" campaign of the Quebec unions, with many of its personnel openly advocating a vote for the PQ's sister party at the federal level, the Bloc Québécois.



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