



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

<http://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5903>

Quebec

Québec solidaire reviews the election and maps campaign on climate crisis

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV528 - January 2019 -

Publication date: Friday 18 January 2019

Description:

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Meeting in Montréal December 7-9, the party's National Council (CN), which comprises delegates from its constituency associations and other membership bodies, debated and adopted a "political balance sheet" of the October 1 election, in which Québec solidaire doubled its share of the popular vote to 16% and elected 10 deputies to the National Assembly. [1]

In addition to adopting a leadership proposal to prioritize the issue of climate crisis and how to fight it, the CN held a preliminary discussion on how to prepare an internal debate on "secularism and religious signs" that is to arm the party to counter Islamophobic legislation threatened by the new Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government. An introductory document was introduced setting out the existing program on these questions, adopted in 2009, along with changes proposed by some party leaders in recent years. [2] The plan is to clarify the party's position at the next National Council meeting, to be held in March 2019.

The election report noted that QS had achieved all of its major objectives in the recent election. It had more than tripled its parliamentary representation, with gender parity and increased diversity among the new MNAs, winning seats outside of Montréal for the first time, and obtaining recognition as an official party in the Assembly.

Although the election was not preceded by any major debate or popular mobilization on fundamental issues affecting Quebec as a national entity in the Canadian state, in recent years there have been important mobilizations around ecology (e.g. stopping the Energy East pipeline), the #MoiAussi (Me too) movement, and agitation to raise the minimum wage. Another concern was the troubling global rise in right-wing populism with its anti-immigration rhetoric and "xenophobic, misogynist and racist ideas."

"Québec solidaire, by taking clear positions on the issue of climate change, by foregrounding the minimum wage demand, and affirming its feminist, independentist and inclusive project, was able to position itself as a relevant and effective force in this social and ideological context."

Among younger voters it was the party's emphasis on climate crisis and its support for universal free tuition that proved most attractive. And its environmental platform benefited from "the fact that we integrate this issue with a more comprehensive *projet de société*."

"Linking independence and environment is very important in getting the voters especially young people, who are less spontaneously in favour of independence to see the importance of Quebec's political emancipation."

It is important, the report emphasized, that the party not just be an effective voice in parliament. "We must do more to get a hearing outside the walls of the National Assembly, alongside our allies in the social movements, to give a voice to the popular opposition to this government." And this will help the party resist the calls for convergence with the Parti québécois, which will grow in light of the PQ's precarious situation. Moreover,

"the calls to 'recentre,' to 'put some water in our wine,' to 'compromise,' will become more insistent over the next four

years from people who think that power can only be taken through the centre. Québec solidaire will have to find a way to overcome these pressures, and to define itself by its own means."

Personal commitments prevented me from attending this CN meeting. However, a report and commentary by Pierre Beudet, who as a QS member was entitled to attend the meeting as an observer, presents an informative and reflective analysis of what it revealed of the progress of Québec solidaire and the challenges facing it. I have translated his article from *Presse-toi à gauche*, adding my own footnotes. Beudet edits *Nouveaux Cahiers du Socialisme* and is currently teaching at the Université du Québec en Outaouais in Gatineau.

Québec solidaire's National Council meeting A comment by a sympathetic observer

As the party's general secretary Gaétan Châteauneuf noted in his opening remarks, the 14th meeting of the National Council (CN) was above all a "moment of celebration." How could it be otherwise, given the spectacular results of last October 1? The increased vote, the three-fold increase in the number of deputies, the breakthrough outside of Montréal constitute, together, a real quantitative and qualitative leap as registered in the report presented by the outgoing chair of the National Elections Committee, Ludvic Moquin-Beaudry.

If we add to that the significant number of young people between the ages of 18 and 35 who opted for QS, especially around the central issue of climate emergency, the outlook is promising. The balance-sheet, endorsed by the 200 or so CN participants, justified the reporter's conclusion that "from now on, QS has the taste of victory."

Generations

Québec solidaire's progress since its founding in 2006 is impressive. At the time, it was a marriage of convenience between the most perceptive elements of the old left (like my friend François Cyr, unfortunately now deceased) and some personalities from the social movements such as the indefatigable Françoise David and François Saillant. The generation of the Seventies and Eighties was still full of energy, with a long and rich tradition of social struggles, but also aware that it had been unable to build a true political pole on the left.

It was time for a "self-critical" dialogue with the "generation of the 2000s" that had put new life into the movements, as in the World March of Women and the Summit of the Peoples of the Americas. Amir Khadir, and later Manon Massé, were very representative of this new tuned-in group of activists. And then, in 2012, there was a radical shift as tens of thousands of youth felt their time had come. That was when a new generation including Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois (GND), Ludvic Moquin-Beaudry, Simon Tremblay-Pepin, among so many others made what Québec solidaire has become today, a grand rallying point.

A change in course

The Quebec of the activists has now taken its place on the political scene. In his opening speech, GND [\[3\]](#) argued that QS had emerged from marginality, was clearly no longer the "party of lost causes," and had even to a considerable degree won the "battle of ideas." Subsequently, the 10 deputies, still dazzled by their victory, explained how they were constituting the "real opposition" in the National Assembly. With the Liberals and the Parti québécois

still groggy from their severe defeat, and a CAQ government that is incoherent, there is indeed ample space in which to disrupt the distance "between the people and the traditional political castes," as GND put it, adding that October 1, more than a chance event, was a "displacement of the tectonic plates."

There's a story here

Some speakers cautioned the National Council against an exaggerated triumphalist vision, noting in particular the attractiveness of a "new old" party like the CAQ among a great many voters, as well as the high level of abstention. Without minimizing the effort of the central team of QS and the many thousands of members in the 125 ridings, there was an alignment of the stars that resulted from such other factors as the collapse of the once-mighty PQ, now at the door of the palliative care unit.

Others noted that a tempting "alliance" between QS and the PQ, as proposed by some party leaders just last year, would have been a serious mistake.

In reality, QS is in search of an orientation that could be termed "strategic." The program the product of ten years of debate is both an interesting foundation reflecting the convergence between generations and militants but also somewhat of a burden that remains obscure for most members, and even more so the population.

A few months ago, before the election was officially called, the QS leadership had not seen the centrality of the environmental question; it was not included in the four or five major priorities in the campaign planning. Influenced by a report commissioned from the IREQ [\[4\]](#) that remains more or less secret even now, the tendency at the May 2018 NC meeting was to veer toward a "soft" consensus, out of fear of being taken for "radical ecologists." However, the determined mobilization of an increasingly militant ecology movement tipped the balance. If we are to speak of a displacement of tectonic plates, that is where it happened, especially among the youth. Almost at the last minute, the QS leadership changed course, and this was responsible to a large degree for the appeal of Manon Massé's remarkable presentations in the debates of the party leaders.

A "real" party, and some headaches

Frankly, QS has been more than admirable in its conduct of democratic debate up to now, with recurring congresses and engaged membership committees. Of course, when the party had only three elected deputies, the "parliamentary wing" did not take up too much space. But now, with the 10 MNAs and a huge supporting staff (QS is allocated a budget of \$1.8 million as a recognized party), it is likely that the centre of gravity will move more toward the National Assembly. This will be a real challenge, as it is for all progressive parties that reach a certain threshold. The parliamentary team will now assume great influence.

However, it will have to conform to a politically restricted terrain, the National Assembly and the party system, initially conceived by the British colonial regime and since adopted by all bourgeois parliaments as a means of sidelining the people. Beyond the divisions between the parties, the elected members end up constituting a caste that is surrounded, protected, and to some degree insulated by the "cadres and competents" (assistants of all kinds) whose job it is to serve, even to defend, their bosses, the MNAs, more than QS as a whole.

Ends and means

The dilemma is that this apparatus that QS will soon set up will tend (I don't say it is inevitable) to function on its own foundations. At worst, it becomes a "party within the party" and then the objective (transformation) is shelved in the interests of winning election, by hook or by crook. But QS was not established in order to "win elections"; that's a means, not the end. To undertake the great transformation, we also have to think about other means such as mobilization, popular education.

In reality, QS belongs to something that is bigger than itself, and that we can call, in the interests of simplicity, the "popular movement." Without that movement, we will go nowhere.

Of course, it will be said, rightly, that our party is far, very far from being sclerosed and indifferent to the people's voice. But hold on, the PQ was not initially the affair of a clique. The NDP, in its good years, was in tune with the popular movement. Elsewhere, the left re-ignited a genuine spirit of emancipation, as did the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil.

We will be told it is not like that here, but we should give this some thought. Once Lula was elected in 2002, the mechanisms of internal democracy were shrivelled. They said the PT has to govern, that the elected members were accountable to their voters and not the party members, etc. Parallel to this, some popular movements were decapitated, their members absorbed by the apparatus. One thing led to another, and a great popular movement lost its direction, ending with the recent great defeat.

Act now, in anticipation

Also, let's be realists. Québec solidaire is still very far from "power." I put the word "power" in quotation marks because I don't think a provincial government (the reality for now) holds real "power," which will remain in the hands of the real (federal) state and which, once again, is limited by the various circuits of the Canadian bourgeoisie and American imperialism.

This is not to denigrate the importance of the struggle that must be conducted to change this Quebec government. But it must be done without illusions. That is what Gramsci taught us: the fight is a "war of position," slow, strewn with pitfalls, which will not be ended on the day of an election victory. If we bear that in mind, we will avoid major disappointments, without forgetting that the real strength is that of the organized people, for whom the MNAs are the voice in the parliamentary arena.

Meanwhile, QS should invest in extra-parliamentary work that goes beyond statements of principle. During the National Council meeting, Simon Tremblay-Pepin said QS should "cling" to the mobilizations that are under way, as a stakeholder in a great convergence. To do that, we will need some means, some resources, devoted to mobilization and popular education that are distinct, but protected, from those assigned to support the parliamentary wing.

Avoid "true or false" debates

To become a party is to insert oneself on to the political scene as it exists, with its constraints. The system, and the media appendage that goes with it, is made to fool people, arouse unproductive discussions, avoid the essential. And

that is where the current debate on immigration and religious signs must be placed. GND repeated this in his opening speech at the CN; this "crisis" has been conjured up. Immigrants are not a threat to our society. There is no sign of "excess" in the practice of Islam any more than there is in other religious practices. Only a small minority wear ostentatious signs of their belief, and this has no impact on the population as a whole. So where is the real problem? There is one. Capitalism in its neoliberal form discriminates, super-exploits and treats some populations as inferior in its logic of accumulation. It needs cheap labour to pick broccoli in St-Hyacinthe. Or domestic workers to take care of our children.

The immigrants are the victims in this: unrecognized skills, "informal" discriminatory practices, restrictive contracts, etc. To do this, the rulers must convince the population that migrants do not "deserve" the same advantages as others. They create a "them" and "us," constructing a discrimination which we must fight without hesitation or qualification.

La guerre, yes sir!

A second consideration: globalized capitalism, the United States in the lead, is militarizing. [5]. The next world war is already begun, in that arc of crises that traverses a major part of Africa and Asia. To justify it, they have to entrench the idea that it is the populations concerned, mainly Muslim Arabs, who are the threat, and not the imperialist concerns of the great powers. That is the stock of Islamophobia, the new name for racism.

Here too, we must resist, as strongly as our ancestors did against hatred of the Jews, which when all is said and done was hatred of the workers and left parties, fueled by the right and the far-right, quite capable then as now of draping themselves in a nationalist cloak.

When the time comes, this will be one of the trump cards of the CAQ. How to fight? We cannot act if we do not go back to the systemic questions, over and above the "religious signs." Moreover, this is a vast global combat, we are not alone. Internationalism and altermondialisme (words I did not often hear in the National Council) must be in the forefront, and not a vague point on the agenda (generally at the end).

An important challenge

I am proud to see Québec solidaire taken in hand by the new generations. The left, in the past and even now, has not always recognized this necessary change. Of course, the "young at heart" (including the author of these lines) still have many things to say and do (there were still many white heads at the National Council meeting). Some comrades of the previous generations continue to play an essential role in moving projects forward. I am thinking in particular of André Frappier, whose mandate as the head of communications was not renewed; he has still more to share of the lessons learned from countless battles conducted by the people, the advances and also the retreats, the beautiful transformations and the "blind spots."

At the time when we were in the forefront there was a lot of arrogance, of know-it-all-ism, even a feeling that we were literally writing on a blank page. With this insane dream of "imminent victory," we broke the momentum. With greater modesty, greater capacity to listen, greater understanding of the complex processes that confront us, we could have done better. Today, it is reassuring to find that the QS members of this world are trying to go further.

December 11, 2018

[1] <https://socialistproject.ca/2018/10/solidaires-score-important-breakthrough-in-quebec-election/>

[2] For a review of these changes, see "[Québec solidaire prepares to confront a new government of austerity and social and ethnic polarization.](#)" under the subheading "Program development."

[3] Nadeau-Dubois was chief organizer of the QS election campaign. He is a co-spokesperson of the party along with Manon Massé, who represented QS in the party leaders' televised debates.

[4] Institut de recherche d'Hydro-Québec, a research institute established in 1967 by Quebec's state-owned power utility.

[5] Roch Carrier, *La guerre, yes sir!* investigates French-English relations during the conscription crisis in Quebec. Translated by Sheila Fischman (Toronto: Anansi, 1970), 113 pp. Adapted as a stage play in French in 1970 and in English in 1972. "Perhaps the most important work of literature in French relating to the [Second World] war and was equally well-received in English translation."

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/military/025002-7082-e.html>