

Quebec: After the elections, a slight hangover?

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We have all been so mobilised and impassioned by the Quebecois electoral battle of this summer of 2012 that being brought brutally back to earth on the evening of September 4 has not always been easy, notably for the most committed activists of Québec solidaire. After all, many looked to an electoral situation where everything suddenly seemed possible, thus leaving the door open to a number of unfounded hopes and unrealistic predictions.

However the results we have come up against have at least the merit of reminding us of some unavoidable facts.

First note: a still strong neoliberal right

At the social level, neoliberal hegemony had been strongly shaken during the spring of 2012, but at the political level the reflection of this phenomenon has only been partial, finding a relatively distant echo in the ballot boxes. Certainly the Liberal Party has gone into opposition (with 50 MPs) and Charest was well beaten in his county of Sherbrooke, obliging him to resign (something which is not negligible!). But this defeat is not a disaster for the Liberals given that with 31% of votes obtained, they are only 1% behind the Parti Québécois (with 54 seats) and remain a very powerful official opposition. And if we add the percentage of the CAQ (27%; 19 seats) to the Liberal 31% (= 58%), we realise very clearly how the weight of the neoliberal right remains preponderant on the Quebecois political scène. Even if the PQ score is supplemented by the two seats won by Amir Khadir and Françoise David as well as the percentages for Qs and Option Nationale (32%+ 6% + 1.9% = 39.9%), we are still far behind.

Second note: a Parti Québécois ready to govern from the right

This first note should be strengthened by the fact that the PQ is little more than a shadow of itself: the flagship of sovereignty wrecked on the rocks of neoliberalism, prudence and identity politics. Henceforth it is a party of government, but being in a minority, and considerably so, it will have all the trouble in the world in advancing any progressive projects, in particular that of sovereignty. and to the extent that the Qs cannot bring it the sufficient votes which it lacks (it needs 63), it will be necessarily impelled to govern (thinking of the future provincial budget) to the right. The support given by Julie Schneider, wife of the neoliberal billionaire Karl Pierre Peladeau, to Pauline Marois on the eve of the ballot is in this respect more than symbolic!

Third note: a considerable step forward but a disappointment

As for Québec solidaire, it remains still in fourth place, far behind the three old parties with only two deputies and 6% of the vote. Certainly many factors explain such a score (the question of the useful vote, the distortions of first past the post, the bias of the mass media and in particular Radio-Canada). Of course also some very good scores were recorded in a dozen or so counties [1], and Qs has everywhere made a not inconsiderable leap forward in relation to 2008: in sum a doubling of its vote and parliamentary representation.

But for many activists the result could appear frustrating, with respect to certain “winnable” counties, as well as the effort made and above all the professionalism and political and organisational capacities shown by Québec solidaire throughout this campaign. It is enough to think of its electoral posters (so clearly demarcated from those of the others), its slogan STANDING UP (so in tune with the period), its militant county electoral machines, and overall the fact that it made no false moves during its campaign. Not to mention the very good performance of Françoise David during the debate of the party leaders and the undeniable positive media effect this produced in all counties.

A dress rehearsal

That would undoubtedly be the sole positive side of this somewhat disappointing result: to remind us that for a party like Qs - a party clearly of the left and pro-independence — the struggle is not only organisational. It is first and foremost political. It is a struggle of great breadth and it is not only played — cannot only be played — on the electoral front. To counterbalance the power of the socio-political and media elites, not to mention the financial groups, Québec solidaire should rely on the social movements of popular origin (community, green, feminist, trade union groups and so on), on their resolute and united support as well as their unwavering commitment at its side on the social and political scene.

We are still far from that situation. Witness the hesitations of the trade union federations like the CSN, dithering over the useful vote, or the difficulties of the student movement in raising its demands with one voice in the electoral context.

Knowing that the fragility of the PQ minority government makes it likely that a new electoral battle will take place in the next 18 to 24 months, we have to work urgently in this direction.

That is the lesson to be drawn from this campaign of summer 2012... an indispensable and salutary dress rehearsal.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Mercier: 46.73%; Gouin: 46.15%; Sainte Marie Saint Jacques: 25.43%; Laurier-Dorion: 24.34%; Hochelaga-Maisonneuve: 23.69%; Outremont: 18.02%; Rosemont 14.52%; Taschereau: 11.60%