

## Canada: More on that election

Thursday 19 May 2011, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 18 May 2011).

### **Some further thoughts [1] about Canada's May 2 federal election and its implications for the left...**

A reader asked me what I thought about the significant decline in the combined votes for the capitalist parties over the last decade — from 78.5% for the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives and Alliance in 2000, to 59% for the Liberals and Conservatives in 2011.

I think the figures reflect three developments, essentially.

1. The ongoing decline of the Liberals. The combined Tory/Reform/Alliance vote in 2000 is 37.7%, exactly the same percentage as the Tories got in 2008. They increased this only slightly, to 39.6%, in 2011. But the Liberals have declined steadily throughout this period: from 40.8% in 2000, to 36.7% in 2004, to 30.2% in 2006, to 26.3% in 2008, to 18.9% in 2011.
2. The shift between the Bloc Québécois vote and the NDP in Quebec in 2011. The BQ took 39.9% in 2000, 48.9% in 2004, 42.1% in 2006, 38.1% in 2008 (about where it was in 2000). But in 2011 it sank to 23.4%.
3. The ongoing increase in the NDP vote, and of course the surge in 2011. The NDP polled 8.5% in 2000 (1.8% in Quebec), 15.7% in 2004 (4.6% in Quebec), 17.5% in 2006 (7.5% in Quebec), 18.2% in 2008 (12.2% in Quebec). Then the party surges to 33.1% in 2011 (42.9% in Quebec).

A closer analysis might show that the NDP has been steadily gaining support against the Liberals, and in 2011 it also overtook the Bloc. More than 4.5 million people voted for the NDP on May 2, about 2 million more than in 2008 — a huge shift in the popular vote.

A possible hypothesis: The trends reflect a polarization of opinion, with the Liberals being the main losers (especially outside Quebec), mainly to the NDP. In 2011, Quebec caught up with this trend in the Rest of Canada (ROC); a Léger post-election poll published in *Le Devoir* indicates that a desire to forestall a Conservative majority in Ottawa was the primary factor motivating Quebec's NDP voters. Harper and the mass media campaigned for a majority government, free at last to implement their "full" program. In turn, the broad "left" and "progressive" milieu in the ROC made the danger of a Harper majority the main issue. This was noticed in Quebec, where it was interpreted by many as well as a further threat to Quebec's national interests and integrity. This fed into a debate that had been developing for some years: was the Bloc's presence a sufficiently effective means of warding off these dangers? Could the NDP, the only potential alternative, be of use?

And Francophone Quebec, when it detects a developing shift in opinion, tends to vote as a nation, particularly in the federal context, a reflection of its consciousness as a national minority that is wary of federal intrusion on its jealously guarded jurisdictions, especially in the realm of language and culture. In 2011 public opinion seems to have reached a kind of tipping point, when the NDP vote in Quebec suddenly ballooned at the expense of the declining Bloc (already down from almost 49% in 2004 to 38% in 2008).

I should add, perhaps, that the shift to the NDP from the Liberals (and now the Bloc) is most remarkable because it largely occurs outside of any real increase in extra-parliamentary mobilization.

What the NDP seems to offer for many of its voters, I suspect, is a way to compensate for their perceived lack of perspectives; a means to fend off worse attacks by the capitalists, but without much sense of taking a radical turn. Layton's campaign seemed cleverly calculated to appeal to that lowest common denominator of potential support: modest tinkering in the interests of "working families", with a cheerful message that no one need feel threatened. Nevertheless, the voters' turn to the NDP, elevating it to Official Opposition status — within striking distance of forming the federal government — represents a huge collective protest against the right-wing thrust of politics in this country.

Obviously, there is much more to be said — for example, about the nature of this electoral polarization, and the development of the Reform-Alliance formations in the 1990s, their takeover of the Progressive Conservative party a decade ago, and the social bases, content and aims of this very conscious right-wing formation (and social and ideological coalition) now enjoying unprecedented control of the federal government. But for socialists the key question to think about now is what the election means for the course of working-class politics in Canada in the next period.

### **Amir Khadir: Quebec vote shows need for a left strategy for independence**

In the coming weeks, I plan to report and sometimes comment on various interpretations of the results that are being made within left and progressive circles. I will start today with a major op-ed article in the May 14 issue of *Le Devoir* by Amir Khadir, the Québec Solidaire member of Quebec's National Assembly: "After the federal elections: the Quebec that awaits us" [2]. Khadir makes a number of points worth pondering.

He begins with a comment similar to earlier ones he made [3], to the effect that the NDP surge in Quebec is a good thing, but he regrets that the Bloc suffered such a defeat. (In passing, he says he voted NDP in his riding against his good friend [BQ leader] Gilles Duceppe, and would not have done so had he known Duceppe would personally be defeated; but he adds that the elected NDPer, Hélène Laverdière (a long-time Canadian foreign service officer) "will make an excellent MP for Quebec."

Khadir says he was voting pragmatically, against Harper and to strengthen the NDP's rise in Canada. This "*vote utile*", he says, by contributing to the defeat of Bloc Québécois MPs like Duceppe, illustrates a problem "that must be addressed frankly in the independentist movement": the lack of a system of proportional representation. The first-past-the-post system resulted in the Bloc, with almost a quarter of the votes in Quebec, getting only one-twentieth of the seats. We now have to grasp, he says, "the danger that the lack of a proportional voting system poses for any sovereigntist formation".

The second lesson of the Quebec results, says Khadir, is "the political exhaustion of a certain sovereigntist orthodoxy". He points to "a new electoral dynamic": "emergence of a new left-right electoral anchorage; massive rejection of the Charest [Quebec] government; lack of enthusiasm about the PQ, which is perceived by some as belonging to the power élite and distresses others by its refusal to engage in the necessary fight for independence."

Who will benefit from this new configuration of the political landscape, he asks. "Everyone thinks of QS, but our formation still has a long way to go before it can arouse such passion. However, no party can now consider itself the proprietor of the sovereigntist vote.... No party is immune to reverses from the 'useful vote' and the aberrations of the present electoral system."

Québec Solidaire has consistently campaigned for reform of the electoral system to include some form of proportional representation. A poll released May 14 in *Le Devoir* shows QS with 9% popular support; a system of PR could give it 10 seats or more with a vote like that. (Khadir is so far its only elected member.)

As to the defeat of the BQ, says Khadir, the “new electoral dynamic” reflects “the exhaustion of the strategy that the leadership of the sovereigntist movement has pursued federally through the BQ.” He quotes Duceppe, at the PQ convention in April: “Electing as many sovereigntists as possible in Ottawa... for the next stage, electing a Parti Québécois government in Quebec City... [and] it all becomes possible, as far as sovereignty is concerned.”

The basic problem with the BQ-PQ scenario, says Khadir, is that it bases a strategy for Quebec independence on alienation from Canada. “But the approach has failed; it is time to try something else. And this cannot be strictly electoral, derived from above by some elected members lying in wait for fleeting winning conditions” — a reference to the PQ’s oft-repeated formula for a referendum victory based on taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by a conjunctural set of circumstances, such as the 1990 defeat of the Meech Lake constitutional amendment package.

*“Quebec, this country of projects that awaits us,” says Khadir, “can only be born from the firm will of our people and the dreams that sustain it. Quebec’s march toward its independence cannot be fueled by resentment. We have to imagine a strategy by which the acts taken for Quebec are aimed toward a ‘rupture de dépassement’ [freely, a challenging break from the present]. Innovating socially and economically. Taking the ecological and political turn that can reveal the exciting potential of freedom to our own people. It must be positive, and necessarily involve huge popular mobilizations.”*

Khadir then draws attention to Québec Solidaire’s concept of moving toward sovereignty through a constituent assembly that would help build a stronger relationship of forces in favour of independence, with a compelling legitimacy. The party counterposes this to the PQ’s top-down referendum strategy that excludes popular participation in formulating a program for an independent Quebec.

Khadir concludes:

*“It will be up to our people to decide. And when they have decided, since any independence will involve negotiations for new collaborations and agreements, Quebec will have every interest in seeing that a more open Canada emerges, under the leadership of principled, generous and open people — like Jack Layton and the NDP, who have undertaken to respect our right to self-determination.”*

Optimistic language, to be sure — and at this stage, excessively so! But the point is well made: The Quebec independence movement cannot overlook the need to win friends and allies in the Rest of Canada. And the NDP victories in the recent election, in a context of developing or deepening ideological, political and class polarization in the electorate in both Quebec and the Rest of Canada, open some new perspectives for doing this.

**Richard Fidler**

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\* From <http://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2011/05/more-on-that-election.html>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] see the previous article. On ESSF (article 21578): [[The federal NDP's electoral breakthrough in Quebec: A challenge to progressives in Canada](#)].

[2] See on ESSF (article 21584): [Après les élections fédérales - Le Québec qui nous attend](#).

[3] see on ESSF (article 21578): [[The federal NDP's electoral breakthrough in Quebec: A challenge to progressives in Canada](#)].