

# Quebec General Election: Quebec solidaire Scores Important Breakthrough

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**The October 1 general election campaign in Quebec unfolded as two distinct contests. One was the competition between the Liberals and Coalition Avenir Québec for control of the government. The other was a battle between the Parti québécois and Québec solidaire for hegemony within the pro-sovereignty movement.**

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In the end, the CAQ replaced the Liberals in government on a platform that claimed to offer “change” but in substance promises even more of the same capitalist austerity inflicted on the Québécois under successive governments since the mid-1990s. PLQ support is now heavily concentrated in its minority Anglophone enclaves of western Quebec.



*“For the creation of the first country in the world founded with the indigenous.”*

The real change, however, was registered in the surge of support for Québec solidaire, which more than doubled its share of the popular vote and elected 10 members to the National Assembly, one more than the PQ’s total under the vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system. Although the PQ received slightly more votes, it was a crushing defeat for the party founded 50 years ago by René Lévesque that as recently as 2014 had governed the province. Jean-François Lisée, defeated in his own riding by the QS candidate, immediately announced his resignation as PQ leader.

### **Quebec general elections (2018 and 2014)**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>2018 Seats</b>	<b>2018 % of vote</b>	<b>2014 Seats</b>	<b>2014 % of vote</b>
Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ)	74	37.4	22	23.1
Liberals (PLQ)	32	24.8	70	41.5
Parti Québécois (PQ)	9	17.1	30	25.4
Québec Solidaire (QS)	10	16.1	3	7.6
Total		125		125

In part, this split in popular support reflected a generational shift; pre-election polling showed QS in advance of the PQ among voters under the age of 35. But it also reflected to some degree a class divide, a rejection among younger voters of the PQ’s record as itself a party of capitalist austerity and its regressive catering to white settler prejudice in sharp contrast with Quebec’s increasingly pluricultural composition, as well as a growing determination among many that Quebec sovereignty, to be meaningful, must be integrally connected with the quest for fundamental social change.

### **QS: A Political Force in Contention**

Throughout the campaign, the mainstream media featured the argument that this was the first election in which Quebec sovereignty was not at issue. But they largely missed the significance of these shifts within the pro-sovereignty movement as it continues to radicalize.

For Québec solidaire, the election campaign was an opportunity to win support for the party’s ideas, recruit new members, and build its organization and influence, including in regions outside Montreal. On all counts, it appears to have been successful. On the eve of the election, political columnist Michel David, in the pro-PQ *Le Devoir*, had to admit that “the emergence of QS as a political force that is in contention from now on has been the outstanding feature of the campaign now closing. [\[1\]](#)”

The party now has 20,000 members in a province of 8.3 million. [\[2\]](#) Just over half of its candidates in Quebec’s 125 constituencies, or ridings, were women, including a Muslim in a Montreal riding and an Inuit in a far-north riding. Two of its successful candidates are former leaders of Option nationale, another sovereigntist party which merged with QS last year. In Montréal’s Mercier riding, Québec solidaire’s first elected MNA, Amir Khadir, now retired, was replaced by Ruba Ghazal, a Palestinian-Québécoise.

In many ridings, dozens of members worked full-time during the campaign, while hundreds of others canvassed from door to door or staffed the phones to talk to voters. Party leaders toured the province in a specially chartered bus. In the months prior to the election and during the campaign, the party held mass assemblies, some drawing an audience of up to a thousand or more.



*QS campaign bus, rear view: "In Quebec, we pass on the left to get ahead."*

Party members were urged to design their own posters to illustrate major themes in the QS platform. The results [3] were audacious and astute, with a hint of the élan registered in the 2012 "maple spring" student upsurge. This is a party with some good ideas... and a sense of humour.

## **Building the QS**

In televised debates between the leaders of the four major parties, QS co-spokesperson Manon Massé managed to publicize some key proposals in the party's platform to a wide audience, even if she was not always successful in her explanations due to her inexperience and the time constraints. With her calm demeanour, a contrast to the loud and sometimes insulting exchanges between the three male leaders whose party programs differ little in neoliberal substance, she portrayed QS as a party that could legitimately sustain its claim to offer a radical progressive and feminist alternative to the capitalist parties. She was, as one media commentator said, the "real revelation" of this campaign [4]

For most of its history, QS has been swimming against the current in Quebec politics. Since the narrow defeat of the 1995 referendum on sovereignty, austerity programs and cutbacks in services implemented by PQ and Liberal governments have seriously weakened the trade unions and unravelled the social fabric of key Quebec institutions and facilities. The women's movement is almost unique in maintaining a major presence in civil society. More recently, however, a burgeoning environmental movement has managed to stop (at least for now) the Energy East pipeline project and oil and gas fracking in the St. Lawrence river valley. (It will now have to contend with the CAQ's pledge, as the new government, to resume fracking on Anticosti Island.)

The massive student upsurge that shook Quebec in 2012 may have marked a turning point in the anti-neoliberal resistance; one of the leaders of the movement for free post-secondary education, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, joined Québec solidaire early last year and is now the party's co-spokesperson along with Manon Massé. When he joined, the party signed up 5,000 new members.

Québec solidaire had high hopes in this election. It began preparing for it last December. The same congress that voted to fuse with Option nationale debated and adopted proposed planks in its election platform, although shortage of time meant that large parts of the platform were adopted instead by the party's National Committee in May of this year. The platform is derived from the party's program, adopted over the past decade in successive congresses, each devoted to particular aspects. [5] The election platform was assembled from parts of the program addressed to what were

considered issues of prime importance and demanding the most urgent attention.

Meanwhile, QS activists worked hard to line up a strong slate of candidates and to develop the publicity and other materials that would help them in their campaign appearances. Nomination meetings in some cases saw real contests among potential candidates and were well-attended, especially in ridings with hundreds of QS members.

## **Quebec Politics in Context**

The political context offered some openings. Quebec's Liberal party, which has governed for 13 of the last 15 years, was deeply unpopular as a result of its extreme austerity, its treatment of healthcare – rampant burnout among nurses (but huge increases in doctors' incomes) – abhorrent conditions of seniors in long-term care facilities, decrepit schools, poor infrastructure maintenance, and a succession of major corruption scandals.

The Parti québécois has lost faith in its founding idea, the creation of a sovereign but capitalist Quebec, now linked inextricably with the PQ's record of "zero deficit" austerity during its terms in office since 1995; the party has put the quest for sovereignty on ice for at least the next four years. It lost the last election after its short-lived government initiated a deeply divisive Charter of Values that stigmatized ethnic minorities, especially Muslim women. Entering the election campaign as the third party in the polls, the PQ could no longer pose as a "lesser-evil" alternative government option.

The Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), a third capitalist party formed in recent years by right-wing dissident péquistes and former Liberals, was ranking ahead of the others in pre-election polling. But while it spoke of "change," it soon was clear in the election debates that the party would, if anything, push Quebec further to the right. Its platform appealed to suburban voters with promises of wider highways and "strong" and "more efficient" government, with no mention of climate change, greenhouse gases or urban sprawl. Its leader François Legault, who personally appointed the party's candidates – a majority were women, so as not to be outflanked by QS in this regard – campaigned most distinctly to lower by 20% Quebec's quota for "economic immigrants"<sup>4</sup> and impose mandatory tests on French language proficiency and knowledge of "Quebec values" on citizenship applicants; if they failed they would be "expelled," he said, although he later retreated on that threat. PQ leader Jean-François Lisée said his party would admit mainly immigrants who already speak French.

This left Québec solidaire as the only party promising progressive change. What did it propose? As the party's election materials are only in French, of course, I will summarize some major provisions.

## **Climate Crisis**

Québec solidaire was the only party to put the climate crisis at the centre of its campaign.

"The fight against climate change is the biggest challenge of our century," said the party in introducing its 86-page "Economic Transition Plan," entitled *Now or Never*. [6] Human activity is responsible for the increasing ecological imbalances and humanitarian disasters, so radical government action is needed. Many of the party's proposals for action before 2030 cannot be implemented within Quebec's jurisdiction under the Canadian constitution; in the present context, these necessary measures can only be implemented by a sovereign Quebec, it notes.

A scientific consensus, QS reminds us, dictates that by 2050 global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions must have declined by 80 to 95% from the 1990 level if climate warming is not to exceed the critical

threshold of a 1.5o C increase.

But in Quebec GHG emissions decreased by only 9 per cent between 1990 and 2015. There is no more time for half-measures, says QS. A QS government, it pledges, will by 2030 decrease these emissions to 48% of the 1990 level. [7] “A colossal collective effort is needed,” it says. Quebec does not lack the necessary means or know-how. What’s missing is

*“political will, blocked in part by the Canadian government’s obsession with petroleum and the lack of commitment of the provincial elites.... Our plan is conceived within the perspective of a Quebec that is marching toward its independence, to provide itself with the tools needed to carry out the transition. This is the real meaning of sovereignty, of a people who themselves direct their economy and its relationship to the territory.”*

Transportation is responsible for 40% of GHG emissions in Quebec, and Québec solidaire proposes to expand public transit, to rapidly phase out petroleum-fueled vehicles and to reduce the carbon content in inter-city transport. Among its many specific measures, the platform proposes:

- Free public transit within 10 years; in its first term, a QS government would cut fares by 50%
- Nationalization of inter-city transportation and a big increase in service
- High-speed transportation (the technology to be determined) between Montréal and Quebec City, followed by links to other cities
- An \$8-billion increase in transit infrastructure spending, and \$20-billion more by 2030 with special attention to electrification of trucking (e.g. establishment of “electric highways” [8])
- No further road construction projects other than for safety or linking remote regions.
- Renewable Energy Development

Québec solidaire proposes a major increase in diversified renewable energy production through wind (to be placed under “public control”), solar (to be promoted by state-owned Hydro-Québec), and geothermal energy. Oil and coal are to be replaced for home heating purposes by production of “second generation biofuels” manufactured from non-food biomass (e.g. plant and animal waste). As well, the party would ban subsidies for fossil fuels and all exploration or exploitation of these energy sources on Quebec territory.

A novel proposal is QS’s plan to establish large-scale battery production under “public control,” taking advantage of Quebec’s extensive lithium deposits.

Proposals to improve land management and agriculture include restrictions on urban sprawl, promotion of food sovereignty and organic agriculture, and a tax reform to help municipalities fund an ecological transition, including possible replacement of property taxes with more equitable and regionally oriented funding provisions.

Building construction is another major source of GHG emissions in Quebec. QS would reform the building code to require energy efficiency ratings in every project. And it proposes to “repatriate” the Quebec portion of the federal “tax free savings account” program (currently valued at close to \$80-billion), and replace it with a Quebec “sustainable housing” TFSA that would allow individual investors to use up to \$50,000 of their tax-free investment on energy-efficient renovation of their residences, managed by Quebec’s energy transition agency.

The Quebec government's existing environmental advisory agency, the BAPE, [9] would be strengthened and mandated to insist on free and informed consent of indigenous communities for any development project on their lands.

In its 2018 election platform [10], QS proposes that communities be given a veto over mining permits, that mines be obliged to maintain reserve funding adequate to restore extraction sites, and that mining royalties be assessed at 5% of the gross value of output. At present, royalties on Quebec mines generate annual revenues of only \$100-million on production valued at \$8-billion. The other three parties propose no change in this arrangement [11], nor do they agree to the QS proposal to subject all mining projects to environmental assessment by the BAPE.

Development contracts would no longer award priority to the lowest bidder, ignoring environmental externalities.

Once independent, Quebec would review its refugee reception policy to provide for assistance to climate-change refugees.

Under the heading "Democratic Transition," a QS government would adopt an annual carbon budget, setting an annual limit on GHG emissions. Every major investment project involving state financial participation must include a climate impact assessment. A transition program would fund retraining of affected workers in the petroleum and other affected sectors, with special provision for women and immigrants.

The party estimates that its climate change measures, taken as a whole, will create 300,000 new jobs. These in turn should increase state revenues by about \$6.5-billion in income and direct taxes, but also municipal revenues by \$9.7-billion, not to mention the one percentage point of the provincial sales tax a QS government would allocate to municipal governments. However, QS does not include these revenue sources in the costing of its transition plan because they do not involve direct government expenditures. [12]

## **Ecosocialist?**

Despite these positive measures, the Quebec solidaire climate change proposals are open to criticism from an ecosocialist perspective. For example, the party's election platform promises to retain Quebec's current cap and trade emissions program which it operates together with California (and until recently with Ontario), even though it recognizes that its impact on GHG emissions is extremely limited – and the party's program opposes both carbon trading and carbon taxes, the first described as a speculative tool for enriching multinational corporations, and the second as a regressive tax on the poorest.

The platform says cap and trade will be maintained for now since it will help to generate funding for the party's proposed ecological transition. During its first term a QS government will design and implement a form of progressive taxation to replace cap and trade. However, its promised carbon price of \$110 per ton by 2030 falls far short of constituting an effective price on pollution.

Also problematic is the QS platform's lingering accommodation to the car culture. For example, it promises that by 2030 only hybrid or electric cars will be eligible for sale, and low-income consumers will be subsidized if they buy an electric car to replace a gasoline-powered vehicle that is more than 12 years old. In fairness, however, the platform does note that "once collective transportation within and between cities is in place, some old habits will have to be discouraged," and it promises increased fuel taxes and bridge and highway tolls "adjusted to social and family



situations” to be implemented in coming years. The transition plan concludes:

“Infinite growth in a finite world is not a viable or desirable projet de société. It is a dead-end, and we must abandon it.... We will not be content with improving a system that has shown over and over how flawed it is. Our government will orient the economy in terms of human needs, which are inseparable from the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity. By putting in place the conditions of a new relationship to the natural world and to human activity, we will lay the foundations of an environmentally friendly economy.”

“We also think,” it adds, “that beginning with our first term in office we must undertake a break with the Canadian federation in order to be able to carry out this plan.... To carry out a coherent ecological transition by affirming our sovereignty is the best way to proceed in solidarity with the peoples in the rest of the world.”

## Equality, Not Austerity

Among the many other progressive measures listed in Québec solidaire’s 2018 election platform the emphasis was on reversing the harsh austerity regime enforced by successive PQ and Liberal governments since the mid-1990s and the need to expand social programs and benefits. These included proposals such as:

- Free and accessible **public education** from pre-school to university, to be implemented within five years. Promotion of local neighborhood schools.

School curriculum to be determined by communities with input from teachers and parents.

Education on sex, gender equality, history (the latter to incorporate contributions from indigenous and ethno-cultural communities). Improved French language teaching and cultural integration. No public funding of private schools. Increased pay for teachers, job security, and respect for their professional autonomy.

- Public medicare to include **universal dental care**. Establishment of **pharmacare** for group purchases and generic drugs, and creation of a **public universal drug insurance plan**. Local clinics (CSLCs) to include psychiatric care, mid-wife services, expanded home care support, with increased funding. Doctors to become employees with reduced wages.

Environmental impact studies on the health of workers and communities in extractive industries.

- **Equitable justice**. Establish a universal legal aid plan. Raise small claims limits to \$30,000. Support community legal clinics. Decriminalize simple possession of all drugs and treat drug dependency as a public health problem. Reduce the number of jail sentences of less than two years through establishment of alternative programs. Indigenous justice to be based on autonomy of their communities and practices. Recognize as fundamental the right to demonstrate, and the right of students to strike. Create an independent, impartial and transparent police oversight body.

- **Food sovereignty**. Encourage small producers. Protect seasonal workers. Protect supply management but ensure fair distribution of production quotas to assist second-generation family farmers. Support organic agriculture, local production. Prevent over-fishing. Protect farmlands from speculative purchases and free-trade agreements. Farmer union pluralism, eliminating the state-enforced monopoly of the agribusiness-dominated UPA.<sup>10</sup>

- **Income and employment**. Include self-employed and domestic labour in state pension plans. Defined benefits, not contributory, and indexed to the cost of living. Citizen representation on pension boards. Increased pension benefits for low-income and special-needs families. A \$15 minimum wage, indexed annually. A pilot-project on basic income.

- **Fair taxation.** New tax brackets to account for differences in income, these brackets to be applied to all types of income with few exceptions. Increase corporate taxes. Fight tax evasion and avoidance. Restore the capital tax on financial corporations. Municipalities to be allowed to generate independent revenues and made less dependent on property taxes.

- **Strengthened labour rights,** including multi-employer union certification. Anti-scab legislation. Right to strike on social issues. Four weeks vacation after one year employment. Stronger protection for worker health and safety.

- **Housing** to be listed as a right in the Quebec Human Rights Charter. Construction of 50,000 eco-energy efficient homes per year, with special attention to fighting homelessness. A stronger rent-control board. A national housing rental registry. End legal victimization of the homeless, including the indigenous who are over-represented in this population.

- **Electoral reform.** Establish mixed proportional representation: 60% of seats awarded to candidates winning a plurality of votes, 40% to be distributed among parties and regions proportionate to their share of the popular vote. Preferential voting at the municipal level. Male-female parity among all party candidates and cabinet members. Institute direct democracy mechanisms, such as participative budgets. Organize an Estates General on funding of news media. Provisional government support for alternative and independent media.

- **A feminist Quebec.** Gender-differentiated analysis in designing programs and policies, taking into account other forms of domination and discrimination. LGBTQ recognition at all levels, including in seniors' homes. Public education to combat stigmatization, harassment of sex workers. Public campaign against sexual violence.

- **A plural Quebec.** Increased funding to community agencies working with immigrants and cultural communities. Affirmative action for minorities in the public service and firms with 50 or more employees that benefit from government contracts and subsidies. Recognition of foreign diplomas. Foreign farm workers to have access to community social programs, francisation and integration. Allow them to unionize.

- **Language rights.** Apply Law 101 (Charter of the French Language) to firms with 10 or more employees. (The current threshold is 50 employees.)

- **For a sovereign Quebec in solidarity with the indigenous peoples.** In its first mandate, a QS government would provide for election of a Constituent Assembly to draft a constitution for an independent Quebec, which would then be put to a popular referendum for adoption. During the transition to independence, a QS government would keep the Canadian dollar but create a national currency and a public central bank at the appropriate time. A parliamentary committee would calculate the fair allocation of Quebec's share of the federal debt. Quebec would adopt the UN Declaration on Indigenous rights, and would implement the 94 calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It would assist indigenous nations in their efforts to preserve their languages and traditional cultures.

## **• Preparing for Independence, Then Implementing It**

In many parts of its platform documents, Québec solidaire separates proposals realizable in the first term of a QS government, prior to independence, from longer-term measures in the party program; in its climate action platform, the longer term is 2018 to 2030. Where it does not do this, limiting its proposals to first-term provincial action within the constraints of the federal state, the proposed



measures are comparatively modest.

For example, the section entitled “For an economy serving the common good” calls for redefining the mandate of the Caisse de Dépôt et Placement (the government pension-funds investment agency) to include social and environmental values and job creation, with more citizen representation on the board and more attention to regional and indigenous development projects. It would also redefine a “sharing economy” to include tighter controls on Uber, Airbnb, etc. A “public bank” is to be created to serve public institutions, households and firms.

However, the QS *program*, addressed to measures to be implemented in an independent Quebec, states that the party intends to “go beyond capitalism” and to “explore alternative economic systems.” It will no longer consider economic growth as an objective in itself and will assign less importance to the GDP and more to considering the “social and economic externalities caused by economic activity.” In the long run, it says, QS aims for “the socialization of economic activities.” Its proposal for “social transformation” will be based in particular on

*“a strong public economy (public services, state enterprises and nationalization of major firms in certain strategic sectors) and on promotion and development of a social economy (cooperative, community sector, social enterprises). A certain place will be maintained for the private sector, particularly for small and medium enterprise.”*

Moreover, nationalized firms will operate in a system of “national and democratic planning” and be placed under “decentralized management” by boards composed of “the workers, state representatives, elected regional officials, citizens’ groups and First Nations, etc.” And within these firms the organization of the work will be self-managed by the workers themselves.

The program also calls for establishment of a state bank either through creation of a new institution or “through partial nationalization of the banking system.” Banking will be considered a public service, with much tighter regulation of credit, currency and fees to clients.

A similar dichotomy between election platform and party program can be observed in the platform’s discussion of “international solidarity,” which is addressed in an essentially provincialist framework, notwithstanding some very progressive proposals on this topic in the QS program for the international policy of a sovereign Quebec.

## **Red-baiting**

Naturally, the QS surge in campaign opinion polling provoked a closer scrutiny of its plans, and not only by sympathizers. Although the QS platform is not explicitly “anti-capitalist” or “socialist,” the party’s right-wing critics were quick to draw their own conclusions. Columnists and editorial writers dug out the QS program and cited some of its major propositions in order to warn voters that the party was much more dangerous than Manon Massé’s smiling disposition might suggest.

In *Le Devoir* [13], Paris-based columnist Christian Rioux drew attention to Québec solidaire’s links with European socialists. He pointed to parallels between the programs of QS and La France insoumise, the party led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. In a message to a QS congress last year, hadn’t Mélenchon referred to QS co-spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois as “a brother in struggle”? Both parties, moreover, had been founded with Communist party support. [14] Indeed, wasn’t QS very similar to those “far-left parties” rising almost everywhere, like Die Linke in Germany, Syriza in Greece, or Podemos in Spain? And hadn’t Manon Massé gone to Catalonia last year where she consorted with the CUP, [15] a “radically anticapitalist party”?

Less informative was columnist Denise Bombardier, writing in *Le Journal de Montréal* [16]. “Manon Massé is making light of us by disguising the real nature of her party, which is nothing other than a copy of the Western communist parties that plunged the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the totalitarianism that collapsed with the Berlin wall.”

But it was Parti québécois leader Jean-François Lisée who led the attack. “Québec solidaire is anchored in Marxism and anti-capitalism and is controlled in secrecy by a dogmatic, sectarian current,” he said. In a televised leaders’ debate [17], where he was asked to outline the PQ approach to healthcare, Lisée instead turned on Manon Massé, asking who was the real leader of her party. Although most viewers probably recognized it as an attempt to belittle Massé’s leadership capacities, many *péquistes* and *solidaires* also recognized it as an expression of Lisée’s frustration over the QS membership’s rejection in a party congress last year of his proposal for an electoral alliance, initially supported by some QS leaders. [18]

Not to be outdone, former Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe chimed in with a personal attack on Massé. Among other allegations, he said her French is so poor that it disqualifies her from becoming prime minister. Referring to Massé’s self-acknowledged difficulties in English, as revealed in the English-language TV debate, [19] he said sarcastically that her English is “as good as her French.”<sup>15</sup>

However, these attacks on QS may have backfired. They did not sit well even with other PQ leaders, and Lisée had to acknowledge that he was called to account by, among others, his deputy leader Véronique Hivon, who is reported to have refused to campaign with him for several days. Such incidents revealed the real panic that had seized the PQ as QS surged in the polls – as well as the elitist rancour of some nationalist protagonists grown accustomed to the bipartisan PQ-Liberal alternance in government.

Duceppe’s attacks on QS provoked the Bloc Québécois leadership in Quebec City to call on “all independentist voters” in the area to support QS candidates Catherine Dorion and Sol Zanetti. “Their unpretentious and refreshing discourse paves the way to a new generation of frank and determined MNAs,” the local BQ stated on its Facebook page. This prompted the Bloc’s parliamentary caucus in Ottawa to declare its adherence to the PQ, equating as always the “interests of Quebec,” which it claims to defend, with those of the PQ.

If most election coverage in the corporate media was hostile to Québec solidaire, it was a different – although mixed – story in the independent and alternate media. *Presse-toi à gauche*, an on-line weekly periodical that supports Québec solidaire, published many articles highlighting the QS campaign and its implications. Of particular interest was a series of profiles and interviews with QS candidates that appeared each week. Most were authored by Pierre Beaudet. They gave a perceptive view of what the campaign looked like “on the ground” and the diversity of the party’s candidates. Some examples:

- Andrés Fontecilla, a former QS president, contested Montreal’s Laurier-Dorion riding for the third time. The riding has many “cultural communities,” as multicultural environments are labelled in Quebec: in this case many Greeks and South Asians. Fontecilla himself is of Chilean origin. This year QS was joined by a small group of Indian and Pakistani youth with roots in the left in those countries and who are active in community groups. Working in Fontecilla’s campaign were more than 300 party members, eight of them full-time. He was even publicly endorsed by Pierre Céré, his PQ opponent in 2014. Andrés won election on October 1.

- Ève Torres, a mother of three wearing the Muslim *hijab* or headscarf, was the QS candidate in Mont-Royal-Outremont. The riding contains a large Anglophone population, relatively well-off. But there are also large communities coming from Asia, Africa and the Maghreb. In Outremont, 25% of

the population are Hassidic Jews. A feminist and antiracist activist, Ève Torres was heavily involved in fighting Islamophobia during the controversy sparked by the PQ and Liberal attempts to dictate clothing codes to ethnic minorities. She reports that “little by little, we are shaking off the amalgam that many people make between the PQ, identitarianism, and sovereignty support.... I am not saying it is easy to explain the national question to people from Bangladesh, or even from the Maghreb, but when we manage to have a discussion, there is an opening.” And how does she deal with those uneasy about her headscarf?

*“I support secularism, although not the French version, which excludes those who are not part of the majority culture. The question of Islam, in any case, is not really posed in political terms. I am feminist, left-wing, I fight for gay rights. In my view, women’s rights are not negotiable in any society, including ours. Our rights cannot be bargained in the name of any religion whatsoever. I say that while not renouncing for a single second my adherence to the Islamic religion.”*

- Several QS candidates were openly gay or lesbian. Simon Tremblay-Pepin, the party’s economics spokesperson, ran in the Montréal riding of Nelligan. He was profiled by Fugues, “the magazine of Quebec gays and lesbians,” as was Élisabeth Germain, the QS candidate in Charlesbourg riding in Quebec City. Divorced, aged 72, she was asked whether sexual orientation should be private only or “transparent.” Her answer:

*“I think it is important to be transparent when it is relevant, but I don’t think we need to take the initiative in announcing all of our characteristics. For my part, I emphasize why I am active; I think it is much more important to say I am a feminist, antiracist militant, for human rights and against poverty, than to say I am a lesbian, an ex-Catholic, mother of x children or a grandmother.”*

- Another candidate outside of Montréal, the QS stronghold, was Christine Labrie, running in Sherbrooke. Once a major industrial centre, the city has a large student population. It is a milieu she knows well, as she teaches at the Université de Sherbrooke while completing her PhD in women’s studies at the University of Ottawa. She has three small children. She reports that more than 350 persons are in her campaign committee, and some of the party’s public meetings have drawn more than 1,000. Living in Sherbrooke are many people from the cultural communities, “newcomers from Syria and Afghanistan, Colombia, the Congo, even Nepal!” They encounter major problems in finding and using available programs and services, and many are receptive to QS’s proposal to establish centers to help immigrants become integrated in Quebec society, she reports. Christine was elected on October 1.

- Émilise Lessard-Therrien, aged 26, was the Québec solidaire candidate in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, a sprawling riding several hundred kilometres north of Montréal. Its QS membership of 600, more than the PQ’s 550, is the second highest outside of Montréal, exceeded only by Quebec City’s Taschereau riding. Some 200 were involved in the campaign, which has a budget of \$40,000. QS is known in the area as the party that wants to nationalize the mines, an unpopular stance, although the party’s platform proposes only to raise mining royalties and to invest the new money in diversifying the economy, particularly in development of agriculture and forestry. Émilise was elected on October 1.

*Ricochet* is a Quebec-based on-line journal published in both French and English versions that tends to cover progressive causes and campaigns. Its French edition featured a number of videoed debates among candidates from five parties (including the Verts, or Greens). However, its English edition virtually ignored the election, [20] while one of its cofounders, Ethan Cox, published an article in the U.S. magazine *Jacobin* largely dismissive of the election’s importance and highly critical of Québec solidaire [21], especially for its support of independence which he characterized as a “millstone around the party’s neck.”

The progressive independent media in English Canada, such as rabble.ca, likewise ignored the Quebec election for the most part. Once again, it was a story of two solitudes.

### **Electoral Officer Tries to Chill Debate**

As is usual in election campaigns, trade unions and other social movements attempted to inform their members about party positions on issues of particular importance to them. For example, Équiterre and a dozen or so ecology groups published the parties' replies to a list of 23 proposals involving such issues as climate change, transportation, protection of biodiversity and agriculture. Likewise, the major union centrals posted on their web sites or in their newspapers a similar compilation of party positions on labour and related issues.<sup>17</sup>

To their consternation, midway through the campaign the Chief Electoral Officer (DGEQ) sent notices to all of these organizations warning them that publishing such inventories of party positions was a legal offense exposing each to a minimum fine of \$10,000. The DGEQ claimed, with no basis in fact or law, that such publicity constituted illegal third-party "election spending." The official letter sent to these groups claimed that they were prohibited from "publicizing, commenting on, comparing or otherwise illuminating, favourably or not, a political program, or acts or measures taken, advocated or opposed by any candidate or political party."

The ecology groups - including Équiterre, the David Suzuki Foundation, Greenpeace, Nature Quebec, etc. - announced they would challenge the DGEQ ruling, even if it meant going to court. The union centrals threw their support behind them.

It appears that the DGEQ declined to follow through on its threat, and most if not all of the groups affected continued to publish their inventories of party positions on their web sites or in their print information. Strangely, the DGEQ made no further attempt to explain its bizarre and unprecedented interpretation of its own governing legislation.

### **Support for QS**

In the end, a number of social movements indicated support for actions or proposals of Québec solidaire.

The Quebec women's federation (FFQ), in a statement entitled "Beyond Parity," [22] noted not only that a majority of QS candidates were women, but that almost 20 per cent of QS candidates were from racialized or immigrant minorities, far more than candidates of the other parties (9%, 12% and 13% of the PQ, CAQ and Liberals, respectively).

Karel Mayrand, Quebec director of the Suzuki Foundation, praised QS's climate change platform. "It is an ambitious, but very realistic plan," he said. "To make the ecological transition at the speed we need to go now, it is what is necessary."

Ghislain Picard, Chief of the Quebec-Labrador Assembly of First Nations, in a major statement [23], warned the next government "that they will have sovereignty on their political agenda: that of the First Nations." He added:

*"Only one party clearly recognizes the rights of our nations. Questioned about the borders of a sovereign Quebec, the co-spokesperson of Québec solidaire, Manon Massé, said 'We are going to start from the present demarcations of Quebec, and then we are going to discuss with our*

*indigenous brothers and sisters.’ [...] Manon Massé is right: the territory of a future sovereign Quebec will have to be negotiated with the governments of the First Nations....*

“Forget your discoveries and your conquests. Those colonial reflexes are over and serve to isolate Quebec in its past. Starting October 1, the sovereignty of the First Nations will indeed be on the order of the day.”

In a sign of the times, the widely read pro-PQ on-line and monthly print publication *L’Aut’journal*, which has consistently attacked QS for (among other things) dividing the independence movement, did not endorse the PQ as a party, but instead called for “voting for independentist and progressive candidates, and more particularly those who are best placed to win election. [24]” Its editor, Pierre Dubuc, had earlier in the campaign praised QS for its call to end public funding of private schools, and Manon Massé for her denunciation of PQ leader Lisée who wanted to shunt pupils in difficulty off to the private schools [25] – which as a rule do not admit such pupils.

## **The Challenges Ahead**

The CAQ victory promises hard times ahead for the Québécois. This may well prove to be the most right-wing Quebec government in half a century. As it implements a new stage in neoliberal reaction, the Quebec left and social movements will be faced with huge challenges. Québec solidaire, with its new strength on the political scene, will come under a lot of pressure to defer, accommodate, compromise the principled positions that have brought it to this point.

Among these challenges, there are some we must begin to discuss, says prominent left activist and author Pierre Beaudet, writing on the eve of the election [26].

*“The necessary transition that QS outlines will not only be difficult, it cannot be done without a formidable mobilization from below. Having 6 or 8 or 15 solidaires in the National Assembly will be a good thing, but the relationship of forces will not change without this mobilization. In this sense, the initiative must be taken up by the popular movements, which above all must not be content to await miracles on the parliamentary scene. The ‘real’ rulers are well aware of this, ensconced as they are in the back rooms of the state and the big corporations, and not just locally. They will continue to engage in a pitiless ‘war of position’ to organize and impose their reactionary policies.*

“And these rulers are internationalized, not to say ‘internationalists,’ in their own way. That is all too clear here, a few kilometres from an empire that is dominant.... It was one of the most tragic errors of the PQ... to think for one second that we could ‘cajole’ the United States. To avoid this illusion, we will have to work with the rest of the world, including with the U.S. people themselves who are resisting Trump’s frenzies. Likewise, there are some interesting things happening in the rest of Canada, in particular in relation to struggles around environmental issues. These activists are our brothers and sisters, we must work with them.”

**Richard Fidler**

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**P.S.**

• October 3, 2018:

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

- Richard Fidler is a member of Solidarity Ottawa and a member of Québec solidaire. He blogs at Life on the Left.

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/chroniques/537939/la-part-du-reve>

[2] Transposed from Quebec to Canada, with five times the population, this 20,000 would be 100,000; to the United States, with 40 times the population, it would be 800,000.

[3] Visible here:  
<https://monaffiche.quebecsolidaire.net>

[4] <https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/chroniques/537389/la-revelation-->.

Québec solidaire's progress in the campaign marks a new advance in a process of rebuilding and recomposition of the left in Quebec that began about 20 years ago and proceeded through a series of fusions among different left parties and feminist and community activist movements: the formation of the Union des forces progressistes in 2002, the fusion of the UFP with Option Citoyenne in 2006 to form Québec solidaire, and the fusion of Option nationale with QS in 2017.[[For a detailed explanation of this initial process, see Richard Fidler, "Québec solidaire: A Québécois approach to building a broad left party," *Alternate Routes*, Vol. 23 (2012).

[5] Under an agreement with Ottawa, signed in 1991, Quebec may determine its annual target for acceptance of most immigrants, while the federal government retains jurisdiction over refugees and family reunification cases.

[6] [https://api-wp.quebecsolidaire.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/maintenant\\_ou\\_jamais.pdf](https://api-wp.quebecsolidaire.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/maintenant_ou_jamais.pdf)

[7] It should be noted that the platform's target is substantially less than the 67% reduction in emissions by 2030 projected in the QS program. The party's national committee in May reduced the platform target on the ground that it was now "unrealistic" given the delay to date. (See "Charting a path for Québec solidaire.":

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/05/16/charting-a-path-for-quebec-solidaire>)

In my view, however, the delay in reducing emissions would be better viewed as cause for greater urgency in tackling the climate crisis, not for a retreat taken out of narrow electoralist concerns.

[8] An increasingly popular concept in the United States, an "electric highway" would include electric vehicle fast-charging stations at 25 to 50 mile intervals along major roadways.

[9] Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement [Office of public environmental hearings].

[10] <https://cdn.quebecsolidaire.net/QS-Plateforme-Électorale.pdf>

[11] <https://www.ledevoir.com/economie/537534/pequistes-caquistes-et-liberaux-disent-non-a-une-hausse-des-redevances-minieres>

[12] This point seems to have eluded the author of a Le Devoir editorial attacking the party for its supposed financial irresponsibility. He noted that QS recognizes four actors in its concept of



economic development: the non-profit social and community sector, household labour, the public sector, and the private sector, to which it assigns “a certain place, especially to small and medium enterprise.” But “QS proposes a host of generous measures while taking for granted that they will be financed by taxing only the fourth wheel of the coach, the private sector, since the other three pay no tax.” Somehow, he overlooked Québec solidaire’s fiscal framework, which provided a line-by-line breakdown of its projected revenue sources and savings. No matter: “In any event, in the long term QS ‘aims to socialize economic activities,’ the soft version of good old Chinese communism.” Jean-Robert Sansfaçon, “Québec solidaire: L’Avenir ou le passé?,” *Le Devoir*, September 25, 2018.

[13] <https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/chroniques/537781/les-marxistes-honteux>

[14] The Quebec Communist party was until recently a recognized “collective” within QS. But it is now a supporter of the Parti québécois. See Guy Roy, “L’appui au PQ reste essentiel,” *L’aut’journal*, September 20, 2018:

<http://lautjournal.info/20180920/lappui-au-pq-reste-essentiel>

[15] Popular Unity Candidacy. Two CUP deputies were invited guests at the December 2017 QS congress. Rioux might have mentioned as well that Massé had earlier sailed on a boat to Gaza as part of the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, which QS voted unanimously to endorse at its 2009 congress.

[16] <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2018/09/28/les-fourberies-de-manon-masse>

[17] <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-surge-by-left-wing-quebec-solidaire-means-election-probably-will-end/>

[18] See “Québec solidaire: No to an electoral pact with the PQ, Yes to a united front against austerity, for energy transition and for independence,” *Life on the Left*, May 28, 2017. Available on ESSF (article 41194), [Québec solidaire \(2\): No to an electoral pact with the PQ, Yes to a united front against austerity, for energy transition and for independence](#). Another factor is the QS leadership structure, with male and female “co-spokespersons” in place of a “chef” or leader in the usual parliamentary custom. For the purpose of the election campaign and the party leaders’ debates, the QS national committee decided to designate Manon Massé as the party “leader” and “candidate for prime minister,” with Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois the deputy leader.

[19] The English debate, unprecedented in Quebec elections, was an initiative of PQ leader Lisée who, like the CAQ and Liberal leaders, is proficient in English. The debate itself was widely questioned in nationalist circles. As former *Le Devoir* editor Lise Bissonnette said, it was like saying that to be prime minister of Quebec one has to pass an oral test in English. (And now Gilles Duceppe has proposed a French test as well!) Bissonnette noted that it put Manon Massé at a distinct disadvantage, and questioned the very appropriateness of a debate in English as it catered to the mistaken view of some Anglophones that they are second-class citizens. See Pierre Dubuc, “Débat en anglais: Bravo Lise Bissonnette!,” *L’aut’journal*, September 19, 2018: <http://lautjournal.info/20180919/debat-en-anglais-bravo-lise-bissonnette>

[20] An exception was a lengthy article exposing the CAQ’s economics expert, running in Saint-Jérôme, as a hack for oil interests and a client of the notorious Koch brothers and other U.S. and Canadian ultraright foundations and think tanks

<https://ricochet.media/en/2347/the-oil-lobbys-pipeline-to-the-caq-part-1>

The article was also published in its original French version in several independent media

including *Presse-toi à gauche*.

[21] <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/09/quebec-solidaire-election-caq-montreal-sovereignty>

[22] <http://www.ffq.qc.ca/2018/09/elections-provinciales-2018-au-dela-de-la-parite/>

[23] <https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/idees/537645/la-souverainete-des-premieres-nations-au-programme-du-prochain-gouvernement>

[24] <http://lautjournal.info/20180928/elections-2018-se-preparer-la-tourmente>

[25] <http://lautjournal.info/20180917/elections-2018-lelephant-dans-la-piece>

[26] Available on ESSF (article 46248), [Le moment de Québec solidaire](#).