

RETHINKING SOCIAL DEMOCRACY: THE PQ'S *Projet de Société*

William D. Coleman

Early in the history of the Parti Québécois, a battle for the heart and soul of the party was waged between two factions. On the one side were impatient Liberals and nationalist Créditistes who tended to take a technocratic perspective on matters political. On the other side were the still angry militants of the leftist Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (RIN) and the dreamers of the intellectual classes who emphasized participatory democracy and social democracy. The early victories in the 1972 and 1973 party programmes went to the social democrats. The PQ campaigned in the 1973 and 1976 elections with a set of proposals that placed it to the left of the New Democratic party, favouring a strong leadership role for the state.

In 1985, by the time the party had served its nine years in power, much of this social democratic vision had been lost. The referendum defeat, the bitter confrontations with public service workers in the early 1980s, and the general weariness all leftist parties feel after years of battling business had taken its toll. René Lévesque and his successor, Pierre-Marc Johnson, were willing to set aside sovereignty as a short-term goal in favour of a more centrist, brokerage route to policy-making. In disgust, many of the dreamers and the dedicated *indépendantistes* of the party, Jacques Parizeau among them, resigned.

Still another nine years have passed and the PQ has regained much of its energy and vitality. The dreamers and bed-rock nationalists have returned to the fold. Jacques Parizeau is party president and Premier, Bernard Landry is vice-president and Deputy Premier, and the father of Bill 101, Camille Laurin, is again an M.N.A. at the age of 71. Under

Parizeau's leadership, the party has renewed its programme and rethought its understanding of what independence might mean. In the process, it has returned to its social democratic roots and embraced the old RIN idea of independence first and discussion and negotiation after.

In 1993, the National Executive Council of the PQ authorized the publication of a popularized, summary statement of its new party programme entitled *Le Québec dans un Monde Nouveau*. Rapidly a best-seller in the province, the statement was translated into English by Robert Chodos and published by James Lorimer and Co. in 1994 under the title *Québec in a New World: The PQ's Plan for Sovereignty*. The party's statement comes in three sections: the first describing the changed socio-economic context, the second outlining a societal plan or *projet de société*, and the third sketching a process that leads from an electoral victory to sovereignty.

THE NEW WORLD

The PQ begins by noting the increased interdependence among the world's economies. No longer can a country be content with producing for its own domestic market and protecting its businesses with tariffs and subsidies. Rather, to succeed, a nation-state must look more and more to export markets and must rely on international economic institutions and trade agreements to protect access to these markets. The old protectionist type of state intervention is neither legal nor particularly well-advised. The transition to this more globalised economy has placed tremendous pressure on the social welfare state and such programs as unemployment insurance, social

assistance, and universal health care. As these pressures have taken their toll through program cuts, fissures in society have widened between the poor and other classes, between peripheral regions and metropolitan centres, and between ethnic and religious groups.

One response to these changes has been to say that the state no longer needs to be involved in industrial policy; that the welfare state has removed incentives for citizens to improve themselves and should be dismantled; that regions must fend for themselves and let the most market-oriented win; and that the forces of law and order should be strengthened. Today's Parti Québécois passionately rejects this neo-liberal ideology. It argues that governments should not stand aside; rather, they must actively formulate coherent adjustment strategies to maximize opportunities in the new economy. Governments must protect as best they can the social safety nets. Finally, they must actively cultivate and promote social solidarity and mutual responsibility.

Throughout this analysis of the new economic order, the party sees a key place for a strong, active, interventionist state. In fact, it is urgent that the state move quickly and undertake major reforms. For such action to occur in Québec, the PQ adds, sovereignty is a virtual necessity. The Canadian federal system is so paralysed by overlapping responsibilities and inter-governmental bickering and the Canadian state so lacks legitimacy in Québec following Meech Lake that no effective state response is possible within existing constitutional arrangements. Only the Québec state can assume this full role and only when it becomes a new, sovereign member of the family of nations.

A PLAN FOR A NEW SOCIETY

The PQ's return to social democracy is signalled by its overriding commitment to the achievement of full employment: "Québec can rebuild and strengthen its networks of solidarity and move towards full employment by making job creation the central objective, even the obsession, of its economic development strategy" (at 20). Job creation and the achievement of full employment thus form the core objectives around which the PQ's societal plan is built. In sketching out this plan, the party moves away from the typical social democratic Keynesianism of the 1960s and 1970s: the management of demand by the manipulation of fiscal and monetary macroeconomic policies. Its social democ-

racy rests on a strong, interventionist state to be sure, but one that acts on the supply side using microeconomic policies.

First on the party's agenda is educational reform. To survive in the new economic order, societies must have citizens with a solid basic education, and a mastery of their language, both marked by reception of a secondary school diploma. In addition, more citizens need to pursue postsecondary education, particularly vocational training buttressed by extensive apprenticeship programs and significant investment by business firms. Second, the contemporary state must support and encourage high levels of research and development. In this respect, the PQ emphasizes the importance of small business. Thinking perhaps of such successful European regions as northern Italy and Baden-Württemberg in Germany, the party stresses the role of cities and regions as poles of development. It adds that dense networks of business firms, local governments, and regional educational institutions, particularly as they are indigenously rather than foreign controlled, provide the key to a successful economy in the new world order.

Third, the contemporary state must actively build social solidarity and a sense of partnership among key societal actors: "For a full employment policy to work, it is essential for all stakeholders in employment — government, business, the cooperative movement, trade unions, community groups and educational institutions — to participate and work together ... Here the public authorities have the role of orchestra conductor or catalyst: they ensure that cohesion and solidarity among economic stakeholders work to best advantage" (at 25). This notion of social partnership echoes the social corporatism of the similarly small European states of Norway, Sweden and Austria. It also represents a long-standing goal of the PQ. During its period in power from 1976 to 1985, the PQ set up a whole framework for joint decision-making by social partners in various sectors.

Built around these three core elements of the plan, the party adds policies for balanced regional development, sustainable development, equality of opportunity, gender equality, and the elimination of poverty. In reflecting upon the need for social solidarity in the new Québec society, the party calls upon the government to support actively Québec culture, including nurturing the talents and vitality of artists and other creative citizens. It also affirms its commitment to a pluralist society where the individual rights of anglophones are protected, where

their network of educational, social and cultural institutions can flourish, where immigrants feel welcome, and where Aboriginal peoples will have a "special place" and autonomous governments.

Finally, the PQ stresses that this revitalized social democratic society can only be created and sustained if Québec is a sovereign state: "Sovereignty will provide us with the conditions in which full employment can be achieved because it will, at long last, make possible reaching the crucial goal of coherence in our policies relating to economic development — job training policies, fiscal and budgetary policies, industrial and agricultural policies, regional development policies" (at 20-1). Sovereignty is also crucial for social solidarity because it gives "Québec control over all the instruments it needs to develop its cultural identity" (at 36). Sovereignty will allow anglophones and other minorities to dispense with competing loyalties to Canada and Québec and commit themselves firmly to Québec. Sovereignty will provide a new context for drawing up a "social contract" between the government of Québec and Aboriginal peoples. For the Parti Québécois, realization of its social democratic vision for Québec is only possible if Québec becomes an independent nation-state.

ACHIEVING SOVEREIGNTY

Following the debates and analysis that took place in Québec after the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, the PQ states that consensus has been reached in the province about what sovereignty means:

- all taxes imposed in Québec are collected by the Québec government or its agents
- all laws that apply to Québec citizens on Québec territory come from the National Assembly
- all international treaties, conventions and agreements are negotiated by representatives of the Québec government and ratified by the National Assembly.

At its 1988 and 1991 party conventions, the PQ specified the major steps it will take if elected in order to bring independence about. An examination of these steps shows that they represent a rejection of a gradual *étapiste* approach followed by René

Lévesque in favour of a more direct and rapid process.

Once elected, the PQ promises to follow these steps:

- submit to the National Assembly for adoption a solemn declaration stating Québec's wish to accede to full sovereignty
- following discussions with the federal government, proceed to fulfil its responsibility and its mandate to establish a timetable and mechanism for the transfer of powers and for the division of debts and assets
- ask the National Assembly to institute a commission with a mandate to draw up a proposed constitution for a sovereign Québec
- ask the population of Québec in a referendum to approve the idea of a sovereign Québec with the proposed constitutional mechanisms
- propose "mutually advantageous" forms of economic association to the federal government (at 44).

If we examine these steps carefully, we see that the PQ's electoral victory today means something quite different than did its victory in 1976. In 1976, the party promised to provide "good government" first and then to hold a referendum on whether to start the process toward independence sometime later during its mandate. Accordingly, the referendum question in 1980 asked the people of Québec whether they would give the government a mandate to begin negotiations. In 1994, an electoral victory will be interpreted as already providing the government a mandate to begin negotiations and preparations for independence. The people of Québec will then be asked to ratify in a referendum the constitution and proposed relationship with Canada.

In its planning document, the PQ provides some indication of what it would like in the new constitution. It proposes to retain a Westminster-style parliamentary form of government, but as a republic with a President elected by the National Assembly. It would like the Québec Charter of Rights and Freedoms entrenched in the constitution, including

guarantees of rights for the anglophone minority. It will also propose guaranteeing Aboriginal rights, recognizing Aboriginal peoples as distinct nations, and providing explicit recognition of their right to autonomous governments. It argues that Québec's territory will include the present boundaries of the province of Québec.

Unlike 1980 when an economic association with Canada was part and parcel of an independent Québec, the 1994 program sees this relationship to be one that is negotiated *after* Québec has become sovereign. The party has some preferences. It would like to retain the Canadian "economic space" based on a monetary union, a customs union, and a free trade area involving "some" degree of free movement of services, capital, and people. When it comes to governance of this economic space, the program is more vague, offering some ideas but not drawing firm conclusions. It speaks of a ministerial council, a secretariat, and a dispute settlement tribunal. It would also like some participation in the Bank of Canada. What is important here is that this economic association is no longer a necessary condition for independence. If an economic association is not negotiated, so be it. Québec will continue on its way as a sovereign state, belonging to the United Nations, the GATT, NATO, NORAD and, the PQ expects, NAFTA.

EVALUATION

The Parti Québécois has articulated a clear, coherent vision of a social democratic Québec operating as an independent nation-state. By defining full employment as its long-term goal and job creation as its most immediate objective, the party rejects neo-liberal orthodoxy that commands the state to cease intervening in the economy. Boldly, the party claims a central role for the state and rejects any notion that the state should stand aside and let the chips fall where they may. Linked to this social democratic vision is an urgent call for immediate independence for Québec. Perceiving Québec's society and economy to be in crisis as a result of global restructuring, the party argues that only a full set of policy instruments that comes with political sovereignty will enable it to act in time. Unemployment is high, poverty is rising, and social solidarity is disappearing.

Two questions arise about this vision of Québec's future. First, is the social democratic vision a viable one? Three times over the past five years, Canadians

have elected social democratic NDP governments. Each of these governments in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia came into office with social democratic ideas not that dissimilar from those of the PQ. Yet faced with significant budgetary constraints and the concerted opposition of their respective business communities, these governments have had rather little success in realizing the changes in society and the economy they had hoped for. All have come to espouse the fiscal orthodoxy that one might have expected from Liberal or Progressive Conservative governments.

Evidently, a Parti Québécois government will be swimming against a similar budgetary stream. The government of Québec has a significant deficit that must be addressed. Business in Québec is not social democratic in orientation and thus different from capitalists in other provinces. Yet the PQ plan will require significant government intervention and perhaps increased spending. Are these sustainable in the long run? One advantage available to the PQ and not to the other social democratic governments is a longer history of cooperation among the social partners. The political organization of business interests, of labour, and of agriculture in Québec all follow a more European approach.¹ In this respect, the government has available to it in society the organizational capabilities for broader change that are not found in Ontario, Saskatchewan and B.C.

If we assume that realization of the social democratic vision will require some increase in government expenditures and a strong sense of social solidarity, the pursuit of political independence will present further obstacles. Even the most nationalist of Québec's economists argue that independence will be costly in the short term and perhaps over the medium term. These added costs, when coupled to the existing deficit, will leave the government precious little room to follow a social democratic agenda.

Moreover, if the 1980 Referendum campaign is any indication, the political process leading to independence will be highly divisive. As yet, there appears to be no clear consensus even among francophones that independence is the best solution to Québec's problems. The anglophone and other non-francophone cultural communities are close to unanimous in their opposition. Two of the most prominent First Nations, the Mohawks around Montreal and the Cree in Northern Québec, are adamantly opposed to sovereignty as well. Creating the kind of social solidarity that is a necessary

condition for social democracy promises to be a near impossible task over the medium term.

Second, is the winning of an electoral mandate a sufficient basis for beginning the process toward independence? Political scientists who have investigated the idea of electoral mandates have demonstrated that these are very difficult to justify. Citizens vote for a host of reasons. Even in the 1988 federal election where the free trade issue dominated the electoral campaign, a close examination of public opinion and voter preferences provides only scant evidence that the victorious Conservatives had a "mandate" to implement free trade.² A PQ election victory means many different things to different groups of people. For only a small minority does it signify an endorsement of an immediate move toward political independence.

In its earlier guise, the PQ developed an *étapiste* strategy in response to a clear preference of Québec citizens to deal separately with the independence issue outside the usual electoral process. How far can the party move toward independence when it will scarcely have any mandate to do so? What will be the political repercussions in Québec and in Canada if it proceeds as planned? These questions are remarkably difficult. Any Parti Québécois government will be forced to compromise somewhat the party programme on the accession to independence if it is to retain its legitimacy. Will the party leadership be willing to compromise? What does democracy demand in this situation? The answers again are unclear and yet heavy with implications for the nature of the political debate over independence and the socio-political strife that is bound to follow. □

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Endnotes

1. For some analysis, see W.D. Coleman, *Business and Politics: A Study of Collective Action* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).
2. See H. Clarke, J. Jenson, L. LeDuc and J. Pammett, *Absent Mandate*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Gage, 1991).

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