

Why the Parti Québécois Expelled SPQ Libre

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A five-year long attempt to reform the Parti Québécois (PQ) as an independentist and “social-democratic” party ended abruptly on March 13 when the PQ’s national executive decided not to renew recognition of its left-wing “political club” as an authorized grouping with the party. The decision, which effectively expelled Syndicalistes et Progressistes pour un Québec Libre (SPQ Libre)[1] from the party, was promptly approved by the PQ’s conference of constituency presidents.

The PQ leadership’s move coincided with a weekend [symposium](#) sponsored by the party on the theme of reorienting Québécois toward individual enrichment in place of collective enrichment – part of an ongoing campaign to win the hearts and votes of disaffected followers of Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ). The far-right ADQ, which the PQ replaced as Official Opposition in the December 2008 general election, has since slipped catastrophically in opinion polls and now ranks just below the left-wing party, Québec solidaire.

In 2005 the PQ had amended its statutes to allow SPQ Libre to join the party as an officially recognized “club.” Party leaders, including former Premier Bernard Landry, hoped to use SPQ Libre to forestall support for Québec solidaire, which was then being formed through a fusion of left-wing organizations. SPQ Libre member Monique Richard, former president of the [CSQ](#), was elected President of the Parti Québécois and later elected as a PQ candidate to the National Assembly. Other prominent SPQ Libre members included Vivian Barbot, former president of the Quebec Women’s Federation (FFQ) and later a Bloc Québécois MP; former PQ minister Robert Dean; and Marc Laviolette, former president of the [CSN](#) (and current SPQ Libre president).

The PQ leadership’s surprise decision to expel SPQ Libre may have been provoked by the latter’s publication on the eve of the party symposium of a major [document](#) entitled (in translation) “To grow rich sustainably is to grow rich collectively.” It argued that Quebec’s enormous achievements toward overcoming its historic development lag within Canada had been achieved since the 1960s through state action in the interests of the Quebec nation collectively, and that this – not individual profit-seeking – should continue to be the trajectory and hallmark of a sovereign Quebec. The document said the only other option, which it described as “the federalist approach” – but was clearly the direction being mapped by PQ leader Pauline Marois and her executive – was to “lighten the tax burden of the better-off while crossing our fingers [in the hope] that the monies released would not go the path of tax havens but be reinvested in Quebec.”

The group’s expulsion sent a clear signal to the media, the ADQ, and the PQ membership and potential funding sources that such talk was no longer acceptable within the party.

Québec solidaire a Lifeline?

But it also raised a new question as to where the now-homeless SPQ Libre and its supporters might find a lodging. Québec solidaire was quick to respond with a [statement](#) issued March 14 by QS leaders Amir Khadir and Françoise David. They linked the expulsion of SPQ Libre to the pressure on the PQ of the looming confrontation between the government and the Common Front of public-sector unions, whose contracts expire at the end of March. David noted that PQ leader Marois had recently criticized the Common Front wage demands as “somewhat high.” The PQ, said David, equated wealth creation with the abandonment of social justice, “the necessary ingredient of collective prosperity.”

“To defend the public sector union members, to press for recognition of the work done by health-care personnel and an end to their impoverishment, would displease our economic élite,” said Khadir. “The PQ desperately lacks the necessary political courage to stand up to these powerful interests.”

Journalist Paul Cliche, a QS member and long-time left activist – he led the Front d’Action Populaire, or FRAP, a municipal party that challenged the electoral machine of Montréal Mayor Jean Drapeau in the early 1970s – issued his own statement: SPQ Libre members could “console themselves, for there is another sovereigntist party, one resolutely progressive and turned toward the future, which is ready to welcome them – Welcome to Québec solidaire, comrades....” And indeed, the existence of SPQ Libre, with its orientation to working within the PQ, has been an ever-present reminder of the incomplete nature of the left regroupment process that gave birth to Québec solidaire.

SPQ Libre Clings to PQ

However, a QS-SPQ Libre fusion, while it would help give Québec solidaire a stronger presence and influence within the labour movement, is not on the immediate agenda. In a [statement](#) issued March 18, SPQ Libre leaders declared their intention to continue working as individual members within the PQ and urged their supporters to get elected to PQ constituency executives and become delegates to the party’s next convention, in 2011. The statement holds out the hope that the party membership will somehow challenge and reverse the leadership’s rightward turn.

A parallel statement issued on the same date by SPQ Libre said that as an independent organization its “mandate” would expand, action within the PQ now being only one component. And in an act of pure hubris, it appealed “to independentists, progressives and trade unionists, whether members of the PQ or Québec solidaire or without a party” ... “to join our ranks”!

These statements, notwithstanding their defiant tone, confirm the hopelessness of the SPQ Libre strategy. As they relate, the group had complied with the PQ registration and filing requirements; its members had been “good soldiers,” running as PQ candidates in elections, publicly voting in favour of the party’s election platforms, loyally attempting to advance their positions within the party structures. Where they spoke out independently, as in newspaper articles published in their name, it had been to support strikes, oppose the war in Afghanistan, criticize cutbacks in healthcare, etc. – “current matters that are not contentious within the PQ, at least we hope so.”

In party debates, they had achieved “more victories than defeats” – winning party support

for a resolution on nationalization of wind-power generation (soon disavowed by the party leader), another resolution to make French the sole language of instruction in the publicly funded junior colleges, proposals in favour of electrification of urban and inter-urban transportation, etc., while suffering defeat on such issues as ending government subsidies to private schools, or a proposal to allow a referendum on popular initiative, independently of government policy.[2]

But they had been accused of not conducting their debates publicly instead of confining them to the party's institutions. Fair enough, said SPQ Libre, but "it is hard to develop coherent thinking in two-minute interventions in the Constituency Presidents Council or the National Council, which meet only twice a year and where we had only one and two delegates, respectively." And SPQ Libre was seldom invited to participate in party consultations. Furthermore, there was no attempt to use the new technologies to facilitate internal debate. "By new technologies, we don't mean Twitter [which is offered on the PQ website]. Sorry, we're willing to be concise, but 140 characters, that's not enough for us!"

And now, despite all the efforts of SPQ Libre, the PQ seemed determined to "appease Capital." Why was Pauline Marois questioning the wage demands of the Common Front? "We deplore the absence of any reference to the union movement in the new PQ discourse.... Any use of the words "ouvrier," "travailleur" or "populaire" seems to be banished. Understandably, the existence of a political club including the word "syndicalistes" in its title could grate on some ears."

More Hope in the Bloc?

In short (although SPQ Libre does not say so), the Parti Québécois is what its left critics have long maintained: a bourgeois party, wholly committed to upholding capitalism, incapable of envisaging any reforms that might offer a perspective beyond the narrow horizon of neoliberalism. The PQ's fundamental *raison d'être* is to use the resources of a "sovereign" state to enhance the standing and wealth of a narrow class of homespun Quebec capitalists who themselves are inextricably tied through investments and outlook to the economic and social system that oppresses the majority of Québécois. This party cannot be the vehicle for a truly independent and progressive Quebec.

It may be that many of SPQ Libre's original members had already drawn that lesson. Although it boasted an initial membership of about 800, the group was down to some 400 or so by this year, and had just filed a list of 313 party members' names with the PQ while promising a dozen more to follow. Québec solidaire already includes some former SPQ Libre members, and can hope for more in the future. Other members have simply been absorbed by the Parti Québécois; for example, Monique Richard, the former president of SPQ Libre and now a PQ MNA, did not oppose the club's expulsion.

While continuing to hold individual memberships in the PQ, the SPQ Libre leadership seems to hold out greater hope for the federal Bloc Québécois, judging by a major article in the March issue of the monthly journal *L'aut'journal*. Pierre Dubuc, who doubles as the journal's editor and SPQ Libre secretary, used the occasion of the Bloc's 20th anniversary since its founding to score some points against the PQ leadership and to outline an optimistic perspective of a new rise in the Quebec independence movement in response to trends within the Canadian federal state. Dubuc praised the Bloc as a party more conscious of the federalist threat to Quebec than its sister party in Quebec City, the PQ, attributing this firmness in part to the presence of leading trade union figures in its parliamentary

deputation. Dubuc is a talented journalist and a perceptive observer of Quebec and Canadian politics with a remarkable facility to articulate the historical perspective that informs the Quebec independence project, and his article, which I have translated below, merits careful reading.

There is one notable omission, however, in Dubuc's comparison of the Bloc with the PQ. As I explained in a [previous post](#), while the PQ is waging an Islamophobic campaign for a complete ban on public service employment and provision of government-funded services to anyone wearing conspicuous symbols of their religious faith (such as the hijab or Muslim headscarf), the Bloc supports what it terms "open secularism" and is more receptive to accommodation of public displays of the beliefs of religious and ethnic minorities. Dubuc's *L'aut'journal*, however, has itself been conducting a retrograde Islamophobic campaign of its own. Louise Mailloux, a regular columnist in the journal, has written many articles not only attacking "reasonable accommodation" of minority religious beliefs, and in particular Muslims, but viciously attacking Québec solidaire leader Françoise David for her party's support of "open secularism."

Differences of this nature, on an important question of principle, could prove a major if not insuperable obstacle – at least in the short run – to a fusion between SPQ Libre and Québec solidaire. •

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Notes

1. The name translates freely as Trade-unionists and progressives for a Free Québec.
2. An op-ed article in [Le Devoir](#) by Jean Baribeau, the SPQ Libre treasurer, however, presented a different balance sheet. The group, he said, had "sparked many debates, had some successes and suffered many defeats."

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