

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2146>



Canada

# The federal NDP's electoral breakthrough in Quebec: A challenge to progressives in Canada

- IV Online magazine - 2011 - IV436 - May 2011 -  
Publication date: Thursday 12 May 2011

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights  
reserved

---

**If Jack Layton's election-night speech to his Toronto supporters is an indication of what lies ahead, the NDP is going to have a hard time coming to terms with a parliamentary caucus now composed of a majority of MPs from Quebec.**

To a crowded room in which nearly everyone was waving Canadian flags, the NDP leader delivered two thirds of his remarks in English without ever mentioning the expression "Quebec nation". The scene, televised across Canada, did not go unremarked in Quebec, where most of the NDP's sudden support had come from nationalist-minded voters, including many sympathizers of Quebec independence.

The NDP breakthrough was the big surprise of the May 2 federal election. In a wave of support that developed into a veritable tsunami, the NDP took 42.9% of the Quebec popular vote, winning 58 of the province's 75 seats under the first-past-the-post system and defeating most MPs and candidates of the pro-sovereignty Bloc Québécois, now shrunk from a caucus of 50 to only four MPs in the House of Commons. And along the way the NDP candidates reduced the much smaller contingents of Quebec Conservatives and Liberals to six and seven seats respectively.

In the Rest of Canada (ROC), the NDP share of the popular vote increased from 17.5% in the previous federal election (2008) to 26.3%, largely on the coattails of the Quebec surge. But the party's net gains outside of Quebec were limited to five new seats.

With a total of 102 seats — 60% of them from Quebec, where in 2008 the party took 12.2% of the vote and only one seat — the NDP now constitutes the Official Opposition. This is clearly a major achievement for the party. It was won despite the almost unanimous opposition of the big-business media: 31 Canadian newspapers editorially endorsed Harper's Conservatives; one, the Bloc Québécois (*Le Devoir*); and one, the NDP (*Toronto Star*).

However, it is an Opposition with little parliamentary clout. Stephen Harper's Conservatives, the "Tories", with just 39.6% of the popular vote, elected 167 MPs, giving them a clear majority in the 308 seat House. As for the Liberals, they elected only 34 MPs, an all-time low for that party.

The NDP can abandon its dream of "making Parliament work." It will work well, but not for the NDP's natural constituency — what it referred to in the campaign as "working families."

## A new Conservative hegemony

Over the next four or five years, the reinforced Harper government can be expected to pursue even more vigorously the right-wing agenda it has followed for the past five years of its minority government: more war and militarization, privatization of social services and federal institutions (*Canada Post?*), the weakening or abolition of many regulatory bodies, more "free trade" and investment deals, increased spending on police and prisons, and a complete flouting of the most minimal environmental measures that has already turned Canada into an international pariah petro-state. Quebec will be further marginalized through the addition of new parliamentary seats in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, where the Tories are strong.

With the crushing defeat of the Liberals, Harper has now established the Conservatives as the hegemonic party of

capital. But this hegemony comes at a price. Capital in Canada has traditionally ruled through a system of alternance between Liberals and Conservatives, each ready to replace the other if defeated in Parliament or by the electorate. However, with the crushing defeat of the Liberals, and the victory of the NDP, the scenario has radically changed. Although the Tory government's parliamentary majority is secured for four or five years, the alternance is now up for grabs. For Canada's ruling circles, this poses a dilemma. Should they bank on rebuilding the Liberals? Or should they start thinking of the NDP as an acceptable option at the federal level, as they already do in some provinces where the NDP has governed for many years?

Provincial office is one thing. But the central government, with its crucial jurisdiction over banking and finance, foreign affairs, the military, trade and commerce, criminal law and the senior courts and judiciary, etc. — and above all its role in protecting the territorial and institutional integrity of the state and forestalling any challenge by Quebec to that integrity — that's a somewhat different matter.

The difficulty here, of course, is that the NDP, created at the aegis of the trade unions in English Canada, has historically been viewed by Capital and labor alike as a workers party and for that reason has never enjoyed the confidence of big business — despite all the efforts of NDP leaders down through the years to neutralize and overcome that antipathy.

For the time being, a choice between a reconstituted Liberal party and the NDP as the party of federal alternance remains open for debate. The outcome will depend very much on how the situation in Quebec evolves. Meanwhile, Harper is being reminded that he must rule in the interests of the entirety of the capitalist class, and not just a right-wing faction of the class. Whether or not that will require him to rein in some of the more extreme rightist elements in his caucus remains to be seen.

## Little policy debate

Despite the serious stakes involved, the election campaign was characterized by a remarkable absence of discourse on the major issues confronting the country — from the wars in Afghanistan and now Libya to the looming climate and environmental catastrophe, the economic crisis and the “national question,” the ongoing disaffection of Québécois with their place as a nation in the Canadian constitutional setup. In the media and party platforms, voters were essentially asked to choose between competing menus of promises that purported to increase their disposable income in various ways, as if politics and citizenship itself involved little more than a consumer marketing exercise. Most media analysis during the campaign centered on speculation as to how many seats the shifting percentages in the polls might yield to each party as a result of tactical vote-splitting between parties in the multi-candidate ridings. But serious policy debate? There was very little of that. It is not easy, therefore, to decipher what the May 2 vote indicates about shifts in public opinion.

Le Devoir's Josée Boileau expressed the frustration of many on the lack of substantive policy debate, in an April 29 editorial on the federal election:

*An ageing Canada is spinning its wheels [s'autosuffit]. It does not dream, does not assume new challenges, does not see itself as a source of inspiration, nor does it draw inspiration from what is done elsewhere. ...*

*Last week Le Devoir interviewed Bolivia's ambassador to the United Nations, who reported on his moves to get the UN to adopt a Charter of the rights of nature. Bolivia itself, seeing the climate changes that have melted its glaciers by one third, adopted similar legislation last December and has appointed an ombudsman to enforce it.*

*Moreover, the country dreams of an international tribunal of climate justice, and of replacing the notion of GDP by an indicator of sustainable development. In short, Bolivia is talking 21st century! Here, we are still talking ancient Greek.*

It was also “and even more importantly” an election campaign nearly devoid of serious mobilizations outside the electoral arena around issues of importance to working people that could have contributed to policy debate. The antiwar demonstrations in mid-April were small. Despite the threat to abortion rights and equality legislation posed by a Conservative victory, the women’s movement was largely unheard. A Parliament Hill demonstration on May Day, initiated by the Hamilton Steelworkers union locked out by US Steel, attracted only a thousand or so demonstrators, although it was addressed in part to an issue of great concern to millions – the vulnerability of pensioners who are being deprived of their life savings and old-age security by corporate bankruptcies and downsizing.

In the youth-based environmental and social movements, many activists are inclined either to abstain from electoral politics or to focus their political action on the community rather than “national” level. [1] Some who did become involved in the election were initially at least attempting to forge an informal “anybody but Harper” coalition that could elect candidates of any party but the Tories. The NDP’s sudden surge in pre-election polling tended to convert many of these to NDP votes, which on election day helped to defeat a few Liberals and allow the election of some Tories.

Notwithstanding the lack of substantive debate, a few observations can be made, I think, about the trends revealed in the May 2 voting. With special reference, as usual, to Quebec, that deep and decisive fault line in Canada’s political landscape.

## The Liberal fall from grace

For the Liberals, now down to 34 seats with only 18.9% of the popular vote – their worst result ever – the election was catastrophic. Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, defeated in his own riding, resigned as party leader the next day. Ironically, the voters’ immolation of “Igggy” coincided with the news on election eve of the U.S. assassination of Osama bin Laden; Ignatieff first sprang to public prominence in the wake of 9/11 as a Canadian professor at Harvard who authored newspaper articles defending torture in the pursuit of terrorists.

Throughout most of the 20th century, the Liberals ruled as Canada’s “natural governing party,” the party’s parliamentary representation traditionally drawn from most parts of the country, including Quebec. That hegemony originated in the late 19th century when a Conservative government suppressed the Northwest Rebellion of French-speaking Métis and Indigenous peoples and hanged its leader Louis Riel. Quebec’s resulting hatred of the Tories endured for well over half a century.

The Liberals’ slow decline began almost 30 years ago, in the wake of the Trudeau government’s unilateral patriation – despite unanimous opposition from Quebec’s National Assembly – of Canada’s constitution imposing a complex amending formula that virtually rules out fundamental constitutional change and a Charter of Rights specifically aimed at overruling crucial features of Quebec’s language laws. Their unpopularity in Quebec crucially paved the way for the victories of Brian Mulroney’s Conservative governments in 1984 and 1988.

The Liberals enjoyed a decade-long return to government beginning in the early 1990s in the wake of the defeats of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional agreements, which broke up Mulroney’s alliance of western provincial autonomists and Quebec “soft” nationalists and produced the Reform and Bloc Québécois parties. In 2000, the Liberals were even able to outpoll the Bloc in Quebec as a result of popular disaffection with the Parti Québécois, the BQ counterpart, and the PQ government’s “zero deficit” austerity program. But the Liberal party was massively rejected shortly afterwards when the sordid details emerged of the “sponsorship” scandal in which the federal

Liberals had spent millions of government dollars on illegal funding to subvert the Quebec sovereigntist movement. The Bloc Québécois recovered its lead and the Liberals were once again relegated to their largely Anglophone enclaves.

Having gone through three leaders in the last five years, the federal Liberals are now in existential crisis.

In 2006 the Conservatives regained office, this time as a merged and blatantly “neoliberal” Reform-Conservative party under Stephen Harper. But they had few seats in Quebec, and now they have lost their tiny enclave of ridings in Quebec City to the NDP.

## The Bloc Québécois: An exhausted strategy?

The big loser in Quebec was of course the Bloc Québécois. How did this happen?

The BQ originated as a party of disappointed federalists; its first MPs, in 1991, were Conservatives and Liberals who broke from their parties in the wake of English Canada's rejection of the Meech Lake constitutional agreement, which had been intended to legitimate Canada's Constitution in the eyes of the Québécois. The Bloc was to be Quebec's agency in Parliament during the negotiation of Quebec's independence following the 1995 Referendum.

When the Referendum narrowly failed — just under 50% of the voters opted for the “yes” — the Bloc evolved into an insurance policy for Quebec, a means of avoiding the conflict of legitimacy for the Quebec nation that had arisen in the early 1980s when the National Assembly voted against the patriation deal but the Quebec MPs in Ottawa voted for it. As such, the Bloc's MPs, for five successive elections comprising two-thirds of Quebec's deputation in the House, became an enduring symbol of Quebec's alienation from the Canadian Confederation. They purported to defend “the interests of Quebec” conceived as a purely nationalist non-class specific counterpart to the Parti Québécois and its bourgeois independentist perspective.

The Bloc's program was similar to the NDP's in many respects, excepting the Bloc's allegiance to a sovereign Quebec — at best, proposals for modest reforms within a neoliberal context. Where it differed, it was sometimes to the right. For example, while the NDP promised to “review” the Tories' decision to spend billions on the purchase of new F-35 fighter jets, the Bloc demanded only that a “fair share” of the planes' manufacture, deployment and maintenance be done in Quebec — a position that grated on the antiwar sensibilities of many Québécois. However, both Bloc and NDP voted with the Tories and Liberals in favour of Canada's participation in the NATO assault on Libya. And the NDP program promises to “maintain the current planned levels of Defense spending commitments.” This general all-party agreement on Canada's massive increase in military spending under recent Liberal and Tory governments helped to preclude debate on foreign policy during the election campaign.

In recent years, with little prospect of an early move toward sovereignty under the PQ, progressive opinion in Quebec increasingly questioned the Bloc's utility in Ottawa and began to look for potential allies in English Canada. During the 2008 federal election campaign, a debate opened up within the pro-independence left over whether to vote for the Bloc or the NDP. It foreshadowed the movement from below that suddenly erupted during this year's campaign. And when the polls this April indicated swelling support for the NDP, the Bloc reverted to its specifically sovereigntist base, hoping to mobilize support through speakers like PQ leader Pauline Marois and former premier Jacques Parizeau, ghosts of elections past. This reinforced the popular perception that the Bloc had outlived its claim to represent Quebec's interests, broadly defined, on the federal level.

## The NDP: A vote for the party, not the candidates

The NDP's Quebec candidates surfed into office on a wave of popular disenchantment with the Tories, Liberals and Bloc. A post-election survey by Léger Marketing published May 7 reveals that the uppermost concern among Quebec voters, including many former Bloc supporters, was to find some way to block the Conservative government and that the Bloc was no longer seen as the best rampart. The NDP was perceived as the one party that offered some prospect of change. At the same time, NDP voters indicated that the potential for constitutional change was not a major factor in their decision. The Québécois have largely abandoned any expectation of constitutional change coming from Ottawa or the ROC "which does not mean they have abandoned their desire for greater national autonomy or independence.

The huge majorities the NDP registered in many ridings were gained without real organization or presence of the party. However, it fielded a candidate in every riding, not only to sustain the illusion of a potential party of government but also to benefit from the generous state funding for every vote a party gets under the election laws. [2] Many of these candidates were poteaux ("poles"), as they are known in Quebec "stand-in placeholders without known roots as activists in unions or social movements in the respective communities. At the outset of the campaign, they were not expected to win. Some are already proving an embarrassment to the party, such as the young woman elected in a rural 100% Francophone riding who does not speak French, lives a three-hour drive from the riding, and vacationed in Las Vegas during the campaign.

There are some notable exceptions, of course. One is Nicole Turmel, a former president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, one of Canada's largest unions. Another is Romeo Saganash, elected in a far northern riding, a Cree leader who was one of the negotiators for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. At least one new MP, Alexandre Boulerice, a trade unionist and environmental activist, is a member of the left-wing pro-independence party Québec Solidaire; he was communications director for the NDP campaign in Quebec and says he is a supporter of Quebec independence.

Two of the party's Quebec MPs are former Liberals. Thomas Mulcair, deputy federal leader, was once a cabinet member in the province's Charest government and is former legal affairs director of Alliance Quebec, the Anglophone lobby that has led the fight against Quebec's language laws. Françoise Boivin is a former Liberal MP. They are committed opponents of Quebec sovereignty. The particular views of most of the other new MPs are not known. It is a safe bet that many support Quebec's traditional nationalist demands for linguistic, cultural and jurisdictional autonomy; some probably harbour sovereigntist sympathies. This ensures a sharp conflict within the party if the Layton leadership pursues the NDP leadership's longstanding dream of replacing the Liberals either through elimination (their original project) or merger "an attractive goal to them today, when they could be in the drivers' seat in any such agreement. We had a foretaste of this in December 2008, when the Liberals and NDP signed onto a coalition government agreement (with Bloc support) in an unsuccessful effort to defeat the Harper minority government.

The electoral breakthrough in Quebec will "at least for the next four or five years, the term of Harper's majority government "bring the NDP face to face with the reality of Quebec and the national question. This will be a new and no doubt unsettling experience for the party and its hundreds of thousands of members and supporters across Canada. If the NDP is to develop a meaningful understanding of the national question and foster relations of active solidarity with the progressive forces within Quebec, it will have to jettison a lot of baggage from its past. This will involve much more than a rhetorical adherence to Layton's concept of "asymmetrical federalism" "which, by the way, was not mentioned in the party's formal election program. The pressures will grow exponentially if, as opinion polls predict, the PQ forms the next government in Quebec.

## A dismal history of failed encounters

Historically, the NDP has failed to gain even a modest foothold among Quebec's French-speaking majority. Shortly after its founding in the early 1960s, the party's Quebec supporters split, a largely Anglophone minority refusing to follow the majority in establishing an autonomous albeit sympathizing Quebec counterpart, the Parti Socialiste du Québec. The PSQ advocated a new constitutional relationship of two "associate states", Quebec and Canada, but was outflanked by the pro-independence RIN [3] and later the development of the Parti Québécois. (PQ founder René Lévesque incorporated the "associate states" formula in his party's program, with the proviso that Quebec had first to separate before it could negotiate a new relationship with the ROC; he called it "sovereignty-association").

In the early 1970s, the NDP's exceptional opposition to the War Measures repression in the October Crisis attracted to the party a contingent of Francophones led by union leader Raymond Laliberté. [4] At the party's 1971 federal convention, most of them allied with the left-wing "Waffle caucus" delegates around resolutions in support of Quebec's right to self-determination; they lost interest in the party when it subsequently expelled the Waffle.

In the early 1980s, the party leadership under Ed Broadbent endorsed unilateral patriation of the Constitution without Quebec's consent, and in 2000 the party voted in favour of Bill C-20, the Clarity Act, which (among other things) made Quebec sovereignty following a successful "yes" vote contingent on agreement by the federal Parliament "a blatant violation of Quebec's right to self-determination.

This brief historical sketch omits many incidents of a similar nature in the course of the NDP's problematic relationship with the Quebec national question. It is now 50 years since the party's founding. Whatever excuse there may have been in 1961 for the party's ambivalence on the Quebec question, the electoral breakthrough today occurs in a very different context "characterized most notably by the existence of a powerful pro-sovereignty movement and the existence in Quebec politics of a fledgling left-wing party, Québec Solidaire, which seeks to arm the independence movement with a progressive social agenda that differs radically from that of the capitalist PQ and BQ.

Yet in every major confrontation over the national question that has arisen, the NDP's Canadian nationalism "its commitment to the federal state structures" has trumped any sympathies for Québécois nationalist challenges to those structures.

It need only be added that this blindness if not hostility to Quebec's concerns and demands has not elicited major opposition within the NDP's ranks. Globe & Mail political columnist Jeffrey Simpson notes: "As we saw during the Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional debates, rank-and-file NDPers are no more inclined to humour Quebec than supporters of other [federalist] parties." However, I would argue that such indifference more often than not reflects ignorance of what is at stake than it does conscious opposition to Quebec's fundamentally democratic aspirations as a nation with its own dynamic of development. Getting up to speed on these issues now becomes a major challenge facing NDP members and supporters in the Rest of Canada. Let us hope that the new contingent of MPs from Quebec can assist them in this task.

## The Sherbrooke Declaration

When Jack Layton took the leadership of the NDP in 2003 he undertook to shift the party's approach toward a more sympathetic stance on some longstanding Quebec demands. [5] In 2005 the General Council of the party's Quebec section adopted a document now commonly known as the Sherbrooke Declaration. Entitled in part "Federalism, Social-Democracy and the Québec Question," it was subsequently endorsed by the federal NDP at a 2006 convention and is the most complete statement of the NDP's current position on the national question. [6] What does

it indicate of current NDP thinking?

The Declaration is thoroughly federalist in orientation. It rules out any prospect of constitutional change, the usual way the national question is posed in Canada. It admits that the refusal of successive Quebec governments (both sovereigntist and federalist) to sign on to the 1982 Constitution "is a real untenable problem in the long term" but states the party's objective "in the medium term" is "to get results that could allow Quebec to embrace the Canadian constitutional framework." In the TV debates, Layton referred to this as "creating winning conditions" for Quebec.

The document refers to Quebec only once as a "nation" (quotation marks in the original) and says that Quebec's national character "can be expressed in the context of the Canadian federation." It "recognizes Quebec's right to self-determination," but emphasizes that in the NDP view this right can be "exercised within Canada," and that in any case it "is not useful or necessary" to "legally formalize this process."

It says the NDP "would recognize a majority decision (50% + 1)" in the event of a referendum on Quebec's political status but cannily formulates this as 50% + 1 "of the Québec people" (and not voters!). And it adds that the federal government must "determine its own process in the spirit of the Supreme Court ruling" on the Quebec Secession question (1998). That ruling specifically denied that Quebec could secede without the consent of the other provinces as well as the federal Parliament, or without determining the borders of an independent Quebec. (Significantly, the Sherbrooke Declaration, in its definition of the Quebec "nation", does not include a reference to territory. [7])

The Sherbrooke Declaration does not repudiate past positions of the party on the Quebec national question. In fact, it is explicit that the Declaration "does not make obsolete the other positions taken earlier," citing (inter alia) NDP positions on bilingualism and multiculturalism. French is defined as the "language of work and the common public language" in Quebec; but Quebec's Charter of the French Language (Law 101) says French is the official language and the common language, full stop, not simply of the "public" sphere. Instead, the Declaration proclaims the party's support of the federal Official Languages Act within Quebec "a law that grants equal rights to English in federal institutions.

There is nothing in this document that is incompatible with the parliamentary NDP's support of the infamous Clarity Act.[8] In fact, these positions are largely incongruent with the Québécois nationalism that has fueled the province's emergence as a self-conscious nation in recent decades and "in the face of intransigent resistance from Ottawa" stimulated the movement for sovereignty or independence.

However, these issues were not aired much in this campaign, other than in the French-language leaders' debate, when Layton sidestepped Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe's challenge to support the Bloc position on applying the provisions of Law 101 to federal government institutions in Quebec.

## A repudiation of sovereignty?

It is unlikely that many of those who voted for the NDP were aware of the party's actual positions and record on these issues. For most, it was probably enough to know that the party differed in significant ways from the Tories and Liberals, and seemed more sympathetic to some of Quebec's outstanding national grievances. In any event, a commonly expressed theme of voters' comments in talk shows and media interviews was that Quebec's constitutional status would and should be determined in Quebec, not Ottawa. Thus the "poteaux" phenomenon; people voted for a party, not the individual candidates.

Does the NDP sweep denote a repudiation of Quebec sovereignty by the Québécois, as alleged by prominent NDP supporters in the ROC such as Stephen Lewis? No serious commentator in Quebec — from committed federalists to disappointed Bloc Québécois supporters — makes that argument. Sovereignty still registers about 40% support in opinion polls, and the Bloc, while reduced to four seats, still managed to win the support of 23.4% of Quebec voters. It broods on the sidelines, hoping no doubt that the NDP's neophyte deputation in Ottawa will implode before the next federal election, when the Bloc could again be a potential contender!

It is significant, however, that once again the Québécois have voted overwhelmingly for parties that do not form the government in Ottawa, a manifestation of their alienation from the federal regime. (Prior to the Bloc's formation, Quebec tended to vote in federal elections for the party perceived as likely to form the government, in the hope that this would guarantee it a voice in the cabinet.)

The durability of the NDP's gains in Quebec is by no means certain. The party faces many challenges as the Layton leadership strives to incorporate its new Quebec MPs into a functioning caucus in Parliament, and the latter in turn face a major challenge in the need to build understanding and support for Quebec aspirations within the party, and among its working-class supporters, in the ROC.

## And Québec Solidaire?

The NDP victory is naturally attracting much interest, and speculation as to its meaning, in Québec Solidaire, the independentist party of the left that seeks office only within Quebec. In a post-election statement, QS co-leader Amir Khadir expressed regret at the Bloc defeat, but praised Layton for his "intelligence and understanding of Quebec." The NDP, he said, "will show itself worthy of the confidence the people of Quebec have placed in it, and will reject the opportunism of the federalist elites who interpret that support as rejection of the idea of sovereignty." And he added, in this optimistic vein:

*Quebec has shown once again to what degree it is a distinct society. The Québécois have demonstrated a thirst for change and an attachment to progressive values. When the day comes that we decide to be independent, no one will be able to prevent us. Independence does not belong to a political party, it belongs to the Quebec people.*

Responding to a reporter's question at his media scrum April 21, Khadir noted:

*I think a Quebec in which Québec Solidaire were in power might be better able to negotiate Quebec's future, a sovereign future decided by the Québécois, with a Canadian government led by Jack Layton rather than a Michael Ignatieff or a Stephen Harper. It seems to me that this should be obvious for most sovereignists.*

Writing in the May 3 issue of the webzine *Presse-toi-À-gauche*, Bernard Rioux, a leader of the QS collective *Gauche Socialiste*, welcomed the NDP's gains and the division in the sovereignist vote between Bloc and NDP.

*It is the sign that we in Quebec can no longer present sovereignty as being beyond the left-right polarization. Already, on the Quebec scene, the birth of Québec Solidaire posed this need to link the project of an egalitarian, feminist and ecological society, the project of national independence, and the democratic process of achieving independence, as the three dimensions of a redefinition of our struggle for national emancipation. This is the orientation that should inspire us to redefine the struggle for real social transformation and for our national independence.*

Rioux pointed as well to the internal dynamics of the NDP. These, he thought, will also be radically transformed.

*As Official Opposition, the NDP will be placed in the centre of Canadian politics. It will be traversed by a series of strategic debates: over orientations in opposing the Conservative government, over relations with the Liberal party, over Quebec's place in the Canadian confederation. With more than half of its caucus from Quebec, it cannot be content with an economic discourse in abstraction from all the questions related to Quebec's national oppression.... With the Canadian nationalism that oozes from this party, and the presence of sovereigntists in its caucus, other waves could shake the party.*

The election result is a startling reminder of the volatility of Quebec politics. At the same time, it underscores the centrality of events in Quebec not only to Canadian politics but especially to the fate of progressive forces in the Rest of Canada. It demonstrates the potential for Quebec to become, once again, a bulwark of resistance to the aggressive rightist program of the Harper government.

Socialists in the ROC will have to think about possible means of taking advantage of this new situation, and especially of engaging positively with Quebec progressives and independence supporters who will be encouraged by the NDP's electoral advance to take a new interest in developments in the Canadian state.

May 8, 2011

This article was first published on the the blog [Life on the Left](#).

---

[1] A notable exception to this pattern occurred on Vancouver Island, where a community-based electoral mobilization managed to elect Green Party leader Elizabeth May, that party's first (and only) Member of Parliament. In that riding, Saanich-Gulf Islands, the voter turnout was 75.3%, the third highest in the country. Overall, only 61% of the electorate voted, not much higher than in the 2008 election.

[2] Harper has promised to put an end to federal state funding of political parties. This will be a harsh blow to the Liberals, while also depriving the NDP of its major source of funding. As for the Tories, the new "natural ruling party" of big business, they don't need it.

[3] Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale, led by Pierre Bourgault.

[4] Laliberté was a former president of the then teachers' union (now the CSQ).

[5] For an account of some of the key steps in this process, see ["How the NDP managed to win nationalist voters in Quebec."](#)

[6] To my knowledge, the federal NDP has never published the Sherbrooke Declaration, although it was frequently cited in the Quebec media during the recent campaign. A few NDP candidates in Quebec linked to it on their web sites. The English version cited here was published bilingually by Layton's then "Quebec lieutenant" Pierre Ducasse when he ran unsuccessfully in the 2008 election campaign.

[7] This is not a trivial question. As Pierre Dubuc, editor of the left sovereigntist monthly L'aut'journal notes, "When Stephen Harper speaks of the Québécois nation, he refers to the 'Québécois' and not Quebec" as a diplomatic note of the U.S. Embassy, revealed this week by Wikileaks, has just reminded us. This does not involve recognition of Quebec territory.... This opens the door to partition of Quebec territory. Soon after the 1995 referendum Harper, a [Reform party] MP, tabled a private bill describing the procedure to be followed for partitioning Quebec in the case of a possible victory of the Yes." Just as the British did in separating Northern Ireland from Ireland when conceding the latter's independence! Divide and rule...[Jack Layton was critical of the Clarity Act, adopted before he was an MP, but later repudiated his opposition.