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Canadian State

Québec Solidaire Clarifies Its Support for Independence

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Description:

There were two main tasks on the agenda at the congress of the left party, Québec solidaire (QS), meeting in Longueuil December 1-3. One was the adoption of the party's platform for the next Quebec general election, to be held in October 2018. The other was ratification of a proposed fusion with Option nationale (ON), a small party originating in a split from the Parti québécois in 2011 after the PQ had put its goal of Quebec independence on the back burner for the foreseeable future. The fusion may add several hundred ON militants to QS's membership of 18,000.

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Following extensive debate, the fusion proposal was adopted by a vote of more than 80% of the 550 QS delegates. At a subsequent ON congress in Quebec City on December 10, the fusion with QS was accepted by 90% of the members who voted [1] Several dozen more, opposed to the fusion, walked out and did not vote. [2]

However, the QS congress lacked sufficient time to debate and adopt the bulk of the proposed platform, including some of the most important parts. It will be left to the party's 16-member executive, the national coordinating committee (CCN), to adopt the remaining proposals in the spring of 2018, in consultation with the party's policy commission which had created the original draft platform.

Homage to Catalonia

The congress debates were informed from the outset by the lessons of Catalonia's militant mass struggle for independence from the Spanish state. The opening night heard powerful speeches by two leaders of the Catalan left pro-independence party, the Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP), Eulàlia Reguant and Anna Gabriel, the CUP spokeswoman in the now-dissolved Catalan parliament. [3] Their presentations (in French) can be heard and viewed here. Their message of internationalist solidarity with national liberation struggles everywhere [4] was cited by a number of participants in the congress's subsequent debates. [5]

In a pre-congress interview, QS spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois said the recent events in Catalonia had "opened up our thinking about the need for a clear and positive approach" to Quebec independence. They reveal, he said,

"the profoundly revolutionary nature of the independence process, which entails a rupture with the dominant political system.... Catalonia is a good reminder that independence cannot be achieved only from above, in the salons of Outremont, with experienced constitutional scholars. The political forces that are going to lead the Quebec people toward independence are going to have to have the potential to generate a powerful social mobilization." [6]

This thinking was reflected in the congress debate on fusion with ON, and in particular in the new centrality of the fight for Quebec independence that fusion entails.

Further Clarity on Quebec Independence

At its earlier congress in May 2017, See [7] Québec solidaire had voted to probe the possibilities for a fusion between QS and Option nationale. In the proposed negotiations between the respective party leaders, it said, QS would

"discuss in its authoritative bodies the development of political campaigns on the independence of Quebec and the means by which to accede to it."

However, no report on these negotiations was issued to the QS membership until early October, when a joint news conference of QS and ON leaders suddenly announced they had signed an "agreement in principle" on a fusion that was to be put to the respective party congresses in December.

The agreement - presented as a "package deal" for adoption without amendment by the party memberships - indicated that Option nationale had taken advantage of the QS leaders' eagerness for a fusion to drive a hard bargain. I have summarized its key provisions in an appendix to this article, below. Among these provisions:

" ON is to continue to exist within QS as a "collective" with special rights not allowed to the other half-dozen or so collectives in the party. Under the QS statutes, members promoting specific orientations for the party (for example, secularism, ecosocialism, degrowth, animal rights, etc.) are allowed to organize within the party as a recognized collective, provided they comprise at least 10 members and abide by the party's "fundamental values." They are not given representation in leading bodies of the party, however. Under the agreement, ON will constitute a distinct collective with its own funding and representation in leading bodies, and at least three ON members will be nominated in 2018 as candidates in electoral constituencies deemed "winnable" for QS.

ON leader Sol Zanetti will be presented as the leading party spokesman on "issues surrounding the independence of Quebec."

" The ON collective will organize a "university" on independence in the spring of 2018, with the right to organize this event each year, provided it is self-financed.

"The unified party will republish an ON publication, the *Livre qui fait dire oui* [the "Book that leads to a yes"], although the "sovereign" Quebec it advocates is totally neoliberal in its economic program and conflicts in major respects with the QS program. [8]

" A party congress after the 2018 election will review the QS program with a view to "aligning it with the ON program" - the program of a party that has always said the independence it proposes is "neither left nor right" in its political content.

As might be expected, the sudden announcement of this ON-QS agreement aroused considerable controversy in the ranks of both parties. Many QS militants, in particular, deplored the fact that they had been given no opportunity to experience dialogue or collaboration with ON as a prelude to a unification of the parties. Instead, some noted, ON had run a candidate against QS in a recent by-election in Quebec City, and (unlike the PQ, which desisted) had even run against Nadeau-Dubois when he was the QS candidate to succeed party leader Françoise David in Gouin riding last spring.

Some members protested their inability to amend the agreement with its 18 different provisions, as well as the party leadership's insistence that it could be approved by a simple majority of votes at the congress even though it entailed some changes in the party statutes (which require a two-thirds majority for amendment).

A Constituent Assembly for an Independent State

But the substantive criticism, the subject of the most controversy in QS, was the agreement's inclusion of amendments to the party's program providing that a Québec solidaire government would act from the outset as the government of an independent Quebec, and its proposed Constituent Assembly would develop a draft constitution of an independent Quebec that would then be submitted to a popular referendum for approval.

Thus the ON-QS agreement alters what has been Québec solidaire's favoured mechanism for accession to independence. As I have noted in previous articles, since its founding in 2006 the party has insisted that the constitution to be drafted by its proposed Constituent Assembly need not necessarily be the constitution of an independent Quebec, that it could simply be, for example, a proposal for greater provincial autonomy within the Canadian constitutional regime - even though Québec solidaire itself would fight for an independent Quebec within the Assembly.

This ambiguity with respect to the Assembly's mandate reflected in part a fear that federalist supporters - currently a majority in Quebec - would be disinclined to participate in a project aimed at founding an independent state. It also reflected, I suspect, lingering federalist sympathies among former members of Option citoyenne, the feminist and community-centered organization that was one of the new party's founding components in 2006. (The other one, the radical-left Union des Forces Progressistes, had always advocated a constituent assembly with a "closed mandate" to found an independent and socialist Quebec.)

However, this ambivalence over the Assembly's mandate was not universally accepted by QS members. Nadeau Dubois had indicated he disagreed with the open mandate. And only last May, QS representatives in OUI Québec, a coalition of pro-sovereignty parties (PQ, ON, QS and the Bloc québécois) working to develop a common "road map" in the fight for independence, had signed a joint statement with the other parties endorsing the proposal for a Constituent Assembly but specifying that the Assembly must develop the constitution of an independent Quebec. [9] They were then overruled by the QS leadership, who withheld that statement from the QS congress meeting soon afterwards. As the party's national coordination committee explained in a report to the December congress, the four-party statement "completely contravened the QS program on this sensitive question."

Thus the ON-QS Agreement in Principle, with its amendments to what the QS program says about the mandate of the Constituent Assembly, represented for some QS members a sea change in a basic part of that program. A typical reaction was that of Jean-Claude Balu, chair of the QS orientations committee. In a vigorous dissent, Balu noted that from the outset of the process of defining its program, QS had made a rigorous distinction between its support of Quebec independence and its conception of a constituent assembly that is a "fully sovereign assembly of citizens open to everyone."

"In our founding principles, we say the national question must belong to the population of Quebec as a whole, including the indigenous peoples and persons of every origin, and not to the political parties.

"Moreover, if we really wish to have relations of equals, nation to nation, with the indigenous peoples throughout the constituent process, they must be invited to participate without imposing any conditions whatsoever upon them." Option nationale, he noted, with its virtually sole emphasis on independence, had manifestly failed to win electoral support. (In fact, ON's electoral results have barely exceeded 1% of the popular vote.)

"To rally a popular majority, Québec solidaire has relied since its founding on its social agenda [projet de société] and, to counter the downturn in support for independence, on a strategy linking its social transformation project to the accession to independence through a popular and sovereign Constituent Assembly."

The QS members negotiating fusion with ON, Balu concluded, should have done a better job in defending the party's

positions.

Most of the debate over the fusion agreement took place publicly, and almost all of the key documents were published in the on-line journal *Presse-toi à gauche*. [\[10\]](#)

Does Independence Trump Democracy?

Balu accurately expresses the reasoning behind Québec solidaire's road map to independence, as it has been articulated up to now. However, the argument is notable for its wishful thinking. The fight for an independent Quebec necessarily confronts powerful propertied interests dominant within the existing federal state and civil society. They will bring to bear immense media and material resources to influence and if necessary sabotage the proceedings of a constituent assembly. No matter how democratically appointed, or how democratic its functioning, if it lacks the clear objective of establishing the framework for an independent state the assembly will be immensely vulnerable to such pressures. Yet any result short of the draft constitution of an independent Quebec would simply be of no effect whatsoever. As Québec solidaire has consistently said, the federal regime cannot be reformed to become an adequate framework for the party's progressive social agenda. Yet the QS ambiguity on the Constituent Assembly mandate has undermined the credibility of the party's commitment to independence.

In a six-page leaflet distributed to congress delegates, a self-described group of "QS members in favour of the agreement for fusion with ON" addressed the fear of some QS members that the party's support of independence might trump its commitment to democracy:

"What makes the Constituent Assembly radically democratic is precisely that it directly involves the people in the foundation of a new state, given the perspective of independence. But... it must be clear from the beginning that the question of independence will be posed in the [subsequent] referendum [to approve the new constitution]. If there is a lack of clarity during the constituent process, the debates will be confused: are we writing the constitution of a province, of a country, both at once, one or the other separately? That is why we must know clearly where we are heading.

"Giving the constituent process direction or a destination does not mean it will be controlled from above, or that the people will not have an opportunity to declare themselves freely on their political future. Quite the contrary, it means leaving it to the people to democratically draft the outline of their proposed country [their project de pays] without having to comply a priori with the narrow constraints of the Canadian regime..."

Furthermore, the argument for independence cannot be left to an assembly appointed after the election of a Québec solidaire government. The party must campaign even today around a progressive social program that is clearly the program of a sovereign Quebec with control over all the powers of an independent state. And it must be recognized that the party will come to power only on the strength of a massive social movement from below that challenges the capitalist logic and laws responsible for the social inequality and environmental catastrophe we are now facing - a movement for "another Quebec" that is analogous, but multiplied many times over, to the mass upsurge sparked by the Quebec students who in 2012 mobilized and won broad popular support for free public post-secondary education.

The arguments in support of the Agreement in Principle negotiated by QS and ON leaders had been amply expressed before the congress, so the debate at the congress gave greater exposure to the critics and opponents. However, in the end the delegates voted overwhelmingly to accept the agreement.

Québec solidaire leaned over backwards to accommodate Option nationale's concerns and it remains to be seen how this will affect the party's functioning in the near future. Clearly, the integration of those ON members who will now join QS will stimulate some useful internal debate. With the fusion, the former ON has been won to a party that proudly proclaims its progressive goals and program - and does not pretend that Quebec independence is neither right nor left.

Inconclusive Debate on the Election Platform

The congress was unable to achieve its other major objective, the adoption of a platform for the next Quebec election. The platform, for Québec solidaire, is intended to select and highlight particular issues and demands drawn from the lengthy program [11] that the party has hammered out over nearly a decade with a view to their immediate relevance. An initial draft is compiled by the party's policy committee; it is then submitted to the members for amendment, following which a synthesis comprising the draft and proposed amendments by QS associations and leadership bodies is debated by congress delegates.

This has proved to be a somewhat unwieldy process. This year it resulted in a 130-page document in which the 15 topics addressed are listed alphabetically - from agriculture (Agroalimentaire et ruralité) to local democracy (Vie démocratique et régionale). And although an attempt was made to prioritize certain topics for the less than two days of debate, the proposed order, in the opinion of some delegates, did not assign sufficient importance to some urgent matters of the day.

As it was, the congress managed to get through the first six of the proposed topics, for the most part without major changes in the draft, leaving the remainder (as I noted earlier) for debate and adoption by the party's national coordinating committee later in 2018. Topics omitted from debate at the congress include economy and taxation, education, environment and energy, justice, health and social services, and strategy for sovereignty - that is, some of the most important questions the party should address in the election campaign, key components of a coherent social agenda.

Furthermore, some of the platform proposals left for later adoption by the party executive omit important parts of the party's adopted program. A blatant example is in the platform draft on the environment and climate change, which omits the QS program's target of a 67% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 needed to comply with the COP 21 Paris accords, as well as the party's opposition to carbon taxes and carbon markets, and its call for free public transit; Québec solidaire has been unique among political parties in Canada in adopting these demanding targets and demands. Incredibly, a 24-page pamphlet circulated at the QS congress by the Réseau écosocialiste [12] likewise omits these demands, as did a pre-congress article by a Réseau leader attempting to prioritize platform proposals from an ecosocialist perspective. [13]

Québec solidaire has made important progress in 2017. But the congress debates point to important challenges the party faces during the year to come, and beyond. "

Appendix 1

Agreement in Principle between Option nationale and Québec solidaire- a translated summary [14]

Preamble

Québec Solidaire Clarifies Its Support for Independence

This fusion should allow all progressive independentists in Quebec to work within a unified party that will spearhead the promotion of Quebec independence. This union takes place therefore on the basis of the program, the founding values (independentism, democracy, ecologism, feminism, pluralism, progressivism, global justice) and the statutes of Québec solidaire, but will preserve the spirit and visibility of the constituent aspects of Option nationale, which is summoned to become a collective in the unified party.

In the current political context, a reconciliation of the independentist and progressive forces is more necessary than ever in order to reunite the conditions for our exit from the Canadian regime and to enable the social agenda that Quebec needs. In view of the history of Quebec society and today's reality, this unification can be achieved only around a true program for a country, freed of the limits imposed by the Canadian political system. This historic agreement creates a new pole of unification for all those who are resolutely committed to this course.

The unified party will be called Québec solidaire.

Programmatic Issues

The QS program on accession to independence is to be amended as proposed in Appendix 1 hereto.

For the party program to fully reflect ON's contribution, five proposals from the ON program will be included in the electoral platform to be addressed by QS in December 2017.

The congress following the 2018 election will, in addition to adopting the party's program on "national defense," as provided by last May's QS congress, will review the entire program with particular (but not exclusive) attention to aligning it with the ON program.

Political actions

The unified party will continue its participation in OUI-Québec when it resumes its proceedings.

In the 2018 general [Quebec] election, the party spokespersons will support three candidates for nomination from ON, including at least one woman. One of these candidates will be the present leader of ON, who will be supported in contesting one of the 9 ridings considered most favourable by party's election committee among those not already held by QS.

This arrangement will be implemented by a mediation committee formed of ON and QS members and concerned local associations.

In the 2018 general election, the unified party will present (a) a financial framework for the process of accession to independence, including the establishment of the Constituent Assembly; (b) a financial analysis showing the financial viability of an independent Quebec. And these documents will be developed by consulting economists designated by ON.

Finally, the Canadian colonial regime will be ranked equal in importance with neoliberalism in the unified party's public communications.

Organizational adjustments

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ON will become a collective within QS. Its present funds will be integrated with the party's but may be used to fund initiatives of the ON collective provided the executive first approves, until the 2018 election.

The ON collective will have two positions on the national coordinating committee (a woman and a man) guaranteed for two years. QS will hire one person designated by the ON collective, who will enjoy the same conditions of employment as other employees of the party.

A committee will be established to advise and accompany ON and QS associations in their fusion process. Local, regional and campus QS associations must be fully functional as associations of the unified party no later than the end of April 2018 to ensure full participation of ON members in deliberations of the unified QS national council to be held next spring.

Every effort will be made to ensure that national commissions, theme commissions and working committees include members of ON who wish to participate.

Promotion of independence

The ON collective will organize a "university" on independence in the spring of 2018. ON funds may be used to finance this event. The ON collective may organize this event each year, inasmuch as it is self-financed.

The unified party will work closely with the ON collective to ensure that party members have available material promoting independence on a permanent basis, including the republication, reprinting and development of the Livre qui fait dire oui [the "Book that leads to a yes"], within the budgetary constraints of the party.

The unified party will feature the current ON leader in its public communications and activities concerning the issues surrounding the independence of Quebec, and in particular in public presentations on the matter.

Appendix 2

The Québec solidaire program concerning accession to independence will be amended as follows. All amendments are in italic or [crossed out].

The Québec nation and Canadian federalism(...)

Amendment 1 Canadian federalism cannot fundamentally be reformed. Quebec cannot possibly obtain all the powers it desires, not to mention those that would be needed for the profound changes proposed by Québec solidaire. *A Québec solidaire government will therefore implement the measures provided in its program irrespective of whether or not they are compatible with the Canadian constitutional framework. (...)*

A Constituent Assembly

Amendment 2 A Québec solidaire government will propose, *at the earliest opportunity*, the adoption of a law on the Constituent Assembly defining its mandate, its composition and its process.

Amendment 3 *This law will declare the independence of the Constituent Assembly from the Quebec National*

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Assembly and provide mechanisms to allow and promote the free expression of all tendencies within the Constituent Assembly and in the public debate surrounding the process.

The Constituent Assembly, an affirmation of popular sovereignty, will simultaneously reaffirm the sovereignty peculiar to the indigenous nations. The Quebec National Assembly will invite these nations to join in this democratic exercise by whatever means they decide, including, if this is their wish, granting them a major place in the very framework of the Constituent Assembly.

Amendment 4

Existing text source Congress 2016-11.04: The mandate of the Constituent Assembly will be to develop a Quebec constitution specifying the values, rights and principles on which our common life is to be based, and defining its status, its institutions, powers, responsibilities and resources that are delegated to them.

Amended text: The mandate of the Constituent Assembly will be to develop a *draft constitution of an independent Quebec*, specifying the values, rights and principles on which our common life is to be based, and defining its status, its institutions, powers, responsibilities and resources that are delegated to them.

The Constituent Assembly will be elected by universal suffrage and will be composed of an equal number of women and men. The voting procedure will ensure proportional representation of the tendencies and the various socio-economic walks of life present within Quebec society. In the election of this Constituent Assembly, candidates of all means and origins shall be allowed equitable access to the means of communication. Members of the National Assembly may not be elected to the Constituent Assembly, as participation in it requires that they be available on a full-time basis.

After the election of the Constituent Assembly, it will have the responsibility and the means to conduct an extensive process of participative democracy aimed at consulting the people of Quebec concerning their political and constitutional future as well as the values and political institutions pertaining to it. Pursuant to the results of this process - which shall be publicized and which the Constituent Assembly will be obliged to take into account - the Assembly will develop a draft constitution.

Amendment 5

Existing text source Congress 2016-11.04: The draft constitution will be submitted to the people through a referendum, which will mark the end of the process.

Amended text. The draft constitution will be submitted to the people through a referendum, which will mark the end of the process.

In order to ensure its plural and democratic character, and to fight against electoral fraud and outside interference, the government will ensure basic funding and strict surveillance of the campaigns to promote the respective options for and against the draft constitution.

Amendment 6

Existing text. source Congress 2009-05.21 (g) Throughout the Constituent Assembly process, Québec solidaire will

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defend its option on the Quebec national question and will promote its ecologist, egalitarian, feminist, democratic, pluralist and pacifist values without however presuming the outcome of the debates.

Amended text: Throughout the Constituent Assembly process, Québec solidaire, *as party, as parliamentary wing, and as government*, will defend its option on the Quebec national question and will promote its ecologist, egalitarian, feminist, democratic, pluralist and pacifist values. [without however presuming the outcome of the debates.]

December 12, 2017

[Life on Left](#)

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[1] See the full text of the QS-ON agreement : <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J0...>

[2] Option nationale et Québec solidaire ne font plus qu'un," Le Devoir, December 11: <http://www.ledevoir.com/politique/q...>

[3] Another scheduled guest speaker, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of France's new left-wing party, La France Insoumise, had to cancel his appearance but recorded a 15-minute video message to the congress: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CE6...>

[4] To listen (in French): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time ...](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time...)

[5] A public meeting in Montréal December 4 to hear the two CUP leaders drew more than a capacity crowd, many of them from Quebec's Catalan community.

[6] L'indépendance, un processus révolutionnaire," L'aut'journal, No. 365, GND interviewed by Pierre Dubuc: <http://lautrejournal.info/20171129/en...>

[7] Québec solidaire (2): No to an electoral pact with the PQ, Yes to a united front against austerity, for energy transition and for independence: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spi...>

[8] For a trenchant critique of the book by a Marxist economist and QS militant, see Marc Bonhomme, "Le livre qui fait dire oui à un Québec concurrentiel sur le marché global.": <http://www.marcbonhomme.com/files/l...>

[9] See [8]

[10] See "Débats autour de la fusion de Québec solidaire et d'Option nationale.": <http://www.pressegauche.org/t-01-De...>

[11] <https://quebecsolidaire.net/proposi...>

[12] See Québec solidaire: Au-delà du parlement, se donner le pouvoir de changer la société: <https://ecosocialisme.ca/nouvelles/...>

[13] See Bernard Rioux, Presse-toi à gauche, November 21, 2017, available on ESSF (article 42749), [En route vers un Québec indépendant...](#)

[14] The full text is here in French: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J0...>