

Quebec: Still a distinct society but not in the way you think

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The history of Quebec has often been defined in opposition to the rest of Canada. From the consolidation of Upper and Lower Canada to the Quiet Revolution to the patriation of the constitution and the drafting of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Quebec has been seen as a reluctant partner in the project of Canadian Confederation. Quebecers have long sought for themselves a separate status as a “distinct society” through special linguistic rights and constitutional provisions.

But today Quebec is distinct in an entirely different way. The recent announcement of elections by Premier Jean Charest marks a historic shift in the province’s political discourse. Though Charest will attempt to reignite the separatist-federalist debate, this election will largely be a referendum on the future of social welfare in the province. Unlike in the rest of Canada, Quebecers have not taken changes to education, health care, and daycare lying down. Quebec voters will leave constitutional issues aside in order to address the questions raised by the social protests, the scope and scale of which are unique in Canadian history.



Protesters block the entrance to the Hydro Quebec building during an anti-government protest in Montreal on Wednesday. Social and economic issues rather than national ones now dominate Quebec politics. (Aug. 8, 2012)

PETER MCCABE/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Sparked by concerns over the future of accessible quality education, the Quebec protests have spread far beyond the issue of rising tuition. The protests decry what Charest’s Finance Minister Raymond Bachand refers to as the coming “user pay culture,” in which basic rights, such as accessible post-secondary education and inexpensive daycare, are now referred to in an Orwellian twist as “entitlements” to be paid for by the end user. And since the passage of Bill 78, which profoundly limits dissent in the province, the protests also concern basic rights in a democratic society and the stubborn refusal of the Charest government to negotiate.

It is easy to malign the Quebec protests as the work of self-entitled students, especially when they currently pay the lowest post-secondary tuition in the country. But students make up only a small proportion of the Quebec population (6 per cent as of the last census), and the protests now regularly draw hundreds of thousands of people. In fact, the last six months have witnessed the largest marches in Canadian history, with somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 protesters descending on the streets of Montreal, according to [Le Devoir](#).

Clearly, these are no longer just student protests.

Quebec does face genuine economic problems: its joblessness rate exceeds the national average, it has the highest indebtedness as a proportion of GDP of any province and its economic growth rate has slowed in recent months. But the question remains how to resolve such problems.

It is an economic adage that one must invest in the future in order to ensure continued prosperity. And while these are times of austerity, the Charest government has, in fact, found money to invest in the province through “Plan Nord,” a multi-billion-dollar outlay in non-renewable resource extraction. However, the Charest government’s neglect of other sectors, such as education, health care and daycare is puzzling. A healthy, well-educated population will be key to the success of future generations who will increasingly work in a service-based knowledge economy. The province is mortgaging its future for short-term gain, much as the federal Conservatives are doing in the rest of the country.

According to the OECD, the gaps between rich and poor have widened in Canada over the past decade. Rising income inequality has followed increasing austerity measures, which target those services most needed by the poor. Under the guise of fiscal responsibility, Charest’s proposed changes to provincial social programs, such as increasing daycare fees from the affordable rate of \$7 per day, increasing tuition by \$325 every year for five years, and increasing health-care fees, will hurt the most vulnerable sectors of Quebec society. The rich, on the other hand, can always afford good health care, education and daycare.

As Quebecers go to the polls this September they will be asked to decide the future of social welfare in the province. Will Quebec remain

egalitarian or will austerity lead to a socially fractured and economically divided society as it has in the rest of Canada? Quebecers now face the same choices that we in the rest of Canada have been facing for more than a decade. While the rest of Canada remained silent in the face of such changes, Quebecers have mobilized in mass numbers to protest assaults on the values that all Canadians — English and French — once held dear. In this way, Quebec might still be a distinct society, but not in the way it used to be.

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