

Quebec nationalists' near miss

By Martin Thomas

QUEBEC'S narrow vote on 31 October to reject breaking away from Canada by only 50.6% to 49.4% ensures that the issue will dominate Quebec's politics for years to come. For thirty years it has loomed larger and larger. On current trends, independence is bound to come, sooner or later.

The people of Quebec have a right to independence if they want it. Quebec is a distinct nation, long suppressed. Every socialist and democrat in Canada should champion self-determination for Quebec.

Whether working-class activists in Quebec should *wish* for the nation to choose independence, or *welcome* the prospect of independence, is a different matter. Generally Marxists in Quebec have backed independence. I used to think they were right. Now I doubt it.

Over the last thirty years, since militant Quebecois nationalism emerged, the substantive content of the independence proposed has decreased. At the start of the 1960s, Quebec was a despised, neglected backyard of the Anglo-Canadian state.

The English-speaking business and professional classes of west Montreal ruled over it almost like a colonial-settler elite. I saw this myself when I lived in Montreal in 1966. Reforms of real substance had already been made by the Liberal Party, but the line between the well-off west and the dingy French-speaking districts to the east of Boulevard St-Laurent was still almost as sharp as that between Manhattan and Harlem. Wide layers of the English-speaking middle class were openly racist against the French speakers, calling them dirty, lazy, ignorant, a dangerous mob.

An independent Quebecois government then, even a safely capitalist one, could have made serious changes, and given real substance to its nationalist aspirations by a national-Keynesian programme of public works.

In fact, many of those changes have been implemented over the last thirty years — in a slow, halting fashion — by the federal Canadian government and the Canada-oriented sections of the French-Canadian bourgeoisie, represented by liberal politicians like Pierre Trudeau and the current prime minister, Jean Chretien.

Canada is not the model of multicultural democracy it claims to be, but it is rich and flexible enough to be able to respond when a quarter of its population have nationalist discontents.

Because of resistance from the western provinces, Canada still has not formally recognised the Quebecois as a distinct nation, but it is now ostensibly bilingual. The French-speaking bourgeoisie has got its share of the pie in Quebec.

Meanwhile, the increased world-wide interlinking of the advanced capitalist



Independence supporter clashes with police after the vote

economies, and the increased domination over them all by the world financial markets, has wiped ambitious national-capitalist economic management off the agenda. The independent Quebec proposed by the Parti Quebecois on 31 October would remain within the North American Free Trade Agreement and closely tied to the US and Canada.

The diminished real import of Quebecois independence has probably increased its popularity. Independence is a safe as well as a satisfying radical-seeming option for discontented Quebecois — and why wouldn't they be discontented, with mass unemployment and social decay? In the same way, the secure caprice of the European Union has made proposals for independence more popular in many regions in Europe. Besides, 30 years of Liberal reforms do not wipe out two centuries of resentment.

All nationalism has a dark underside. Exalting the national identity and solidarity of the aggrieved nation, it tends to deny to the minorities within its own area those rights it claims for its own majority.

The importance of this dark underside in Quebec was highlighted by the outburst from Jacques Parizeau, Quebec's premier and leader of the Parti Quebecois, after he lost the referendum. "Let's stop talking about the French speakers of Quebec, let's talk about 'us'. Sixty per cent of us voted in favour of separation. We have been beaten, but basically by what? By money and the ethnic vote, that's all."

Before 1968, pro-independence parties were heavily Catholic, traditionalist and socially right-wing.

Modern Quebecois nationalism was stirred up in the 1960s not only by the influence of the civil rights movements and the colonial revolutions, but also by French president Charles De Gaulle's efforts to assert France as a world power ('Vive le Quebec libre' — long live free Quebec — he declared in a speech in Quebec in 1967).

Quebecois nationalism was alienated from the Canadian labour movement because of the strong English-Canadian bias of Canada's labour party, the New Democratic Party, which originated in the western provinces.

When the Parti Quebecois was formed in 1968 (by a Liberal rebel), it seemed to be a step forward. The PQ was social democra-

tic in colouring and established strong links with Quebec's militant trade unions.

Yet the PQ's main triumph since first winning a majority in Quebec in 1976 has been to make Quebec unilingual. French is the only official language for administration, education, etc., although 18% of Quebec's people have a first language other than French.

That 18% includes not only the wealthy English-speakers of west Montreal, but English-speaking workers — especially in some towns to the east of the St Lawrence river where almost the whole population is English speaking — and immigrants of neither English nor French backgrounds. Those immigrants have generally chosen to make English rather than French their second language, and they feel threatened by an aggressive emphasis on French "purity". (The only exception, I think, is the 19th century Irish immigrants, who assimilated into the French community.)

Ninety per cent of this "ethnic" vote went against independence, and some of the Native-American communities in Quebec declared that they would refuse to recognise Quebecois independence and secede back into Canada.

Of course it is understandable why the PQ wanted "positive discrimination" for the French language. But their actions have been utterly counter-productive for working-class unity.

Quebec is a distinct nation, with an unbridgable right to independence if it wants it. Whether workers and socialists should wish for it to become a separate state is another matter.

Lenin and other Marxists insisted on the right to self-determination of all nations, but in their arguments over the national question in central and eastern Europe they also, in general, favoured larger, multicultural states rather than fragmentation. Though they disputed with the Austrian Marxists, they never rejected the Austrian Marxists' desire to keep as many of the nationalities of the old Austro-Hungarian empire together in a reformed democratic state.

A "Leninist" approach to Quebec's national question would offer the best chance of redirecting the social discontent and militancy at present siphoned off into hopes for independence through the channel of the PQ's populism. ■