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### The Quebec Election of April 2014: Initial Impressions

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# The Quebec Election of April 2014: Initial Impressions

*Christopher Kirkey*

## Abstract

The outcome of the 7 April 2014 general election in Quebec proved to be a surprise to many observers. Voters across Quebec chose to support a pro-federalist, Liberal Party majority government, led by Philippe Couillard. Pauline Marois's overtly separatist *Parti Québécois* (PQ) was soundly and unexpectedly defeated. The 33-day electoral campaign, marked by a heightened focus on Quebec independence, identity politics and the proposed extension of further protections for the French language, illustrated that Quebec society was far more concerned with issues surrounding the scope and delivery of healthcare, education and a whole host of related economic issues, including employment, provincial debt levels, public expenditures, taxation and the pace of economic growth. This essay, in examining the election campaign, suggests that the preferred message of the PQ failed to resonate with Quebec public opinion; a message that was only further muddled with the introduction of 'star' candidate Pierre Karl Péladeau. The results of the 2014 election, this essay concludes, further points to significant shifts underway in Quebec society; shifts that portend important new currents in public attitudes and the very relationship between the province's residents and the Quebec state.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

An unanticipated election result characterized by surprise, astonishment and bewilderment. While this characterization might lead

one to think of the recent result of the Germany–Brazil World Cup semi-final football match (in which Germany thoroughly and unexpectedly dominated Brazil, 7–1), these words apply with equal candour and force to the results of the 7 April 2014 election in Quebec. The immediate electoral results are clear. The Liberal Party, under the leadership of Philippe Couillard, emerged victorious, capturing a clear parliamentary majority – 70 of the 125 seats in the Quebec National Assembly. The governing *Parti Québécois* (PQ) led by Premier and PQ leader Pauline Marois, was roundly defeated, capturing only 30 seats (from a pre-election total of 54). The *Coalition Avenir Québec* (CAQ) emerged in third place with 22 seats.

I will examine that election, and attempt to suggest what accounts for the unanticipated electoral result. I will also offer a word or two on developments in Quebec, above and beyond the specifics of the election itself, that may have indeed contributed to the outcome on 7 April. Finally, I will conclude with a very brief commentary on the state of political developments and economic challenges in Quebec.

## The results

Official governance in Quebec is founded upon a quite familiar model – parliamentary democracy. The periodic election of individual members, representing competing political parties, to parliament (or in the case of Quebec, the National Assembly) based on a simple plurality of votes cast by registered individuals in carefully designated territorially bound ridings, is the hallmark of Quebec and indeed many Western democracies. Quebec's National Assembly, with 125 members, woke on the morning of 8 April to a profound shift in the political landscape of the province. The minority *Parti Québécois*, led by Pauline Marois (the first female Premier of Quebec) was resoundingly defeated. Madame Marois even lost her own riding of Charlevoix-Côte-de-Beaupré.<sup>2</sup> The Liberal Party, under the direction of its leader, Philippe Couillard (who won his riding of Roberval, north of Quebec City in the Saguenay region), emerged triumphant with a solid majority of 70 seats.<sup>3</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, Canada's foremost newspaper, broadcast the electoral result in a full front-page spread. Two large, boldfaced words appeared above an oversized picture of a shocked Pauline Marois on election night: 'PQ CRUSHED'.<sup>4</sup> Montreal's English-language newspaper, the *Gazette*, posted a banner of how each political party fared, photos of a jubilant Couillard and a disconsolate Marois, framed by a headline

broadcasting ‘COUILLARD’S LIBERALS IN, MAROIS OUT AS PQ LEADER’.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most relevant statistical indicators to emerge from the election are as follows. The Liberals, who secured 70 seats, (up from 50 in the previous 2012 provincial election), captured 41.51 per cent of the popular vote. The PQ managed to win only 30 ridings (as compared to 54 in 2012), and perhaps more importantly, received only 25.38 per cent of Quebec’s popular vote, the smallest share of the popular vote that the PQ has received since 1970! The *Coalition Avenir Québec*, a right-of-centre party headed by former PQ member Francois Legault (a one-time member of the Marois-led PQ, who broke off from the party subsequently forming the CAQ), emerged with 22 seats (as compared to 19 in 2012) and 23.05 per cent of the popular vote. The left-of-centre *Québec Solidaire* ended the evening with three elected members, a net gain over its 2012 standing and 7.64 per cent of the popular vote. Voter turnout was 72 per cent of all eligible voters, as compared to 74.6 per cent in 2012. Most notable was the number of individuals who opted to vote in advance polls (as opposed to casting a ballot on election day) – more than 1.1 million Quebecers or 19.27 per cent of eligible voters (up from 16.61 per cent in September 2012 election) did so.<sup>6</sup>

## The election

The election itself, which lasted some 33 days, began against a backdrop of decided confidence for the *Parti Québécois*; public opinion polls showed that the PQ held a 12–15 per cent lead amongst likely voters. The election, called by the PQ, was designed to deliver a majority government – albeit for the PQ, not the Liberals.

The PQ opened the campaign on 5 March focused on promoting two divisive policy platforms they had introduced while serving as a minority government: their pledge to extend French language protections by way of revision to the 1977 Quebec French Language Charter and the promotion of a new so-called Charter of Values. The centrepiece of this latter initiative was the call for a ban, ‘in the name of religious neutrality’, on wearing overt religious symbols ‘such as turbans, Islamic veils and Jewish kippahs by the 600,000 employees in Quebec’s public sector; in effect, from judges and prosecutors, to police and prison officers, civil servants, doctors, nurses, teachers, daycare workers and employees of government enterprises including

Loto-Quebec, Hydro-Quebec' and the SAQ (the provincial-run wine and liquor distributor).<sup>7</sup>

The prospect of a PQ majority government would last for only four days. What would turn out to be the singular highlight and, most observers suggest, the critical tipping or turning point in the election, came on 9 March. The announcement that Pierre Karl Péladeau would stand as a candidate for the PQ in the riding of St-Jérôme, was in itself a dramatic and decidedly unexpected development. A profound Quebec economic nationalist, the right-of-centre/anti-union leader of media giant Quebecor, seemed to many – including faithful PQ Members of the National Assembly (MNAs), political party members and long-time supporters – to be ill-suited to the progressive state-first orientation of the PQ. Yet, as confusing as this may have been to some, it was Mr Péladeau's comments after being introduced by Mme Marois that would forever alter the campaign. He professed his ambition to 'make Quebec a country' and then with a clenched fist, forcefully punched the air.<sup>8</sup>

That moment, that statement, that gesture, irrevocably transformed the campaign: no longer would the focus be on identity and the Charter of Values, or revising the Quebec French Language Charter of 1977 to further promote and expand the official presence and use of the French language in Quebec. Instead the election would now be squarely focused on the prospect of a third referendum and the ongoing quest of the PQ to secure political independence for Quebec. Péladeau's recruitment and role in the electoral campaign guaranteed – especially to the delight of the Liberals – that the spectre of Quebec independence would remain at the centre of political discussion.

Marois and most of her closest advisers had concluded, even prior to the start of the election campaign, that if the PQ won a majority it would take at least a full mandate (four years) to prepare another referendum on sovereignty. She proposed to first begin by launching a province-wide consultation process with Quebecers and to then table a white paper on the future of Quebec, thereby initiating a debate.<sup>9</sup> All indications suggest that she may well have waited until the next election cycle had once again returned the PQ to power before placing a referendum before voters. Survey data confirmed that Péladeau was unquestionably a polarizing figure in Quebec, and worse yet for the PQ, the party quickly began to lose support to the Liberals and the CAQ, especially amongst francophone voters.

The Liberals led by Couillard, who as Liberal leader was regarded by many as a political neophyte to campaigning (and had only served

for three days as Liberal leader in the National Assembly), hammered away – successfully – at what he argued was the real agenda of the PQ. As journalist Sophie Cousineau observed: ‘Pierre Karl Péladeau was a dream come true for the Liberals’.<sup>10</sup> Couillard’s most frequently used campaign phrase spoke volumes: ‘The best way not to have a referendum campaign is not to have a PQ government April 7’.<sup>11</sup> It must be noted, however, that Couillard’s campaign was not risk-free; he ardently and repeatedly defended (in fact championed) bilingualism and federalism more fervently than any other political leader in provincial politics in many years.

*Coalition Avenir Québec* was, at the outset of the election campaign, considered by many as a distant third-place, fading party. The second televised debate between the political party leaders, however, changed that perception when a combative Francois Legault (a 56-year-old airline business executive) provided a strong performance that effectively placed his party back in the running as an electoral force. Indeed, towards the end of the campaign there was a thought that the CAQ might win enough seats to prevent the now surging Liberal Party from securing an outright majority (that turn of events never materialized).<sup>12</sup> The CAQ, like its ancestor, the *Action démocratique du Québec* (ADQ), is a conservative right-of-centre nationalist party that principally drew its support ‘from disaffected suburban and rural Liberals and a smaller swath from the PQ’.<sup>13</sup> It did not win any of Montreal’s 28 ridings. *Québec Solidaire* won three seats, including Amir Khadir in Mercier, Francoise David (she first won in 2012 after three previous unsuccessful attempts) and Manon Masse (on her fifth attempt to win a seat in the National Assembly) in Saint-Marie-Saint-Jacques.<sup>14</sup>

Marois, who resigned in her concession speech (on a very awkward platform where the three signature candidates vying to follow her as leader of the party – Péladeau, Bernard Drainville and Jean-François Lisée – all took turns aimed at implicitly projecting themselves as the front-runner for the leadership post), thanked her supporters by stating that ‘I’m worried about our language’.<sup>15</sup> Péladeau declared, ‘In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Quebecers must start making their decisions alone’.<sup>16</sup>

In his remarks on the evening of 7 April, Couillard stated ‘the time of inflicting wounds is over ... we are all Quebecers. We should focus on what brings us together. Division is over. Reconciliation begins’.<sup>17</sup> Here he was saying that discussion and debate over the PQ-sponsored Charter of Values, expanded Charter of the French Languages and political independence – all of which had proven, in the months prior to the election campaign and during the campaign itself to be decidedly

divisive, would be effectively curtailed and replaced with a more inclusive agenda, Quebec-focused within a broader Canadian federalist political structure.

As Les Perreaux of the *Globe and Mail* noted, the electoral results effectively ‘broke a cycle that has dominated Quebec politics since the 1970s, when the PQ and Liberals started alternating their hold on power every eight or nine years’.<sup>18</sup>

For its part, Ottawa – and the ruling Conservative majority government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper – welcomed the election results. Having effectively stayed out of the campaign, Harper remarked that ‘the results clearly demonstrate that Quebecers have rejected the idea of a referendum and want a government that will be focused on the economy and job creation … we look forward to working with the new government of Quebec on these priorities’.<sup>19</sup> Justin Trudeau, son of former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau and leader of the federal Liberal Party (and Canada’s current Prime Minister) voiced that ‘I had the utmost confidence that Quebec voters would reject the negative, divisive politics of Mme. Marois’ proposed plan’.<sup>20</sup>

## Interpreting the results

### The PQ platform and the campaign itself

National columnist for the *Globe and Mail*, Jeffrey Simpson, observed that ‘when students of how not to run an election campaign turn to their textbooks, the PQ campaign of 2014 will be Chapter One’.<sup>21</sup> Péladeau’s entry into the provincial election as a ‘star’ candidate for the PQ, the subsequent fist clench, his statements and the spectre of another referendum were disastrous for the PQ’s electoral fortunes. Marois and the PQ were unprepared for the reaction caused by Péladeau’s call for independence. In short, his actions placed the PQ on the defensive for the rest of the campaign. The PQ election strategy hadn’t included or anticipated the need to discuss, let alone defend/champion sovereignty or another referendum. Marois was forced to spend precious amounts of campaign time discussing ‘the nitty-gritty details of an independent Quebec, including hypothetical issues such as its currency and tourism policies’.<sup>22</sup> The election became an ‘election on a referendum’.

Campaign gaffes also plagued the PQ campaign. On 13 March, just four days after Péladeau was introduced to Quebec voters, a reporter

asked him a question. Yet when Péladeau, who was standing behind Marois at a news conference, chose to step forward to the platform to respond, Marois gently pushed him aside and instead responded to the enquiry herself. Other examples include:

- In the midst of the campaign, Marois (who was confident that the proposed Charter respected the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms) surprised Quebecers when she announced that a newly elected PQ government ‘would override any legal challenge’ by utilizing the Canadian Constitution’s notwithstanding clause.<sup>23</sup>
- Evelyne Abitbol, a candidate for the PQ in Acadie, finished a remote second – she suggested during the campaign, which caused controversy, ‘that under the PQ’s proposed Charter of Values, that any Jewish doctor who refused to remove his kippah would be fired’.<sup>24</sup>
- Teacher and PQ candidate Louise Mailloux, who compared circumcision and baptism to rape and said kosher products were a scam designed to allow Rabbis to line their pockets and fund what she called ‘religious wars’, lost her bid to become an MNA.<sup>25</sup>

Surprisingly, the PQ campaign strategy did not call for or include plans for an orchestrated attack against Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s federal Conservatives (always a prominent feature in Quebec in an effort to build support for, and associated with the run-up to, a referendum).<sup>26</sup>

## The Charter of Values

There was never uniform support for this initiative, amongst Quebecers, amongst francophones and within the PQ itself.<sup>27</sup> A proposed ban on wearing religious signs – an essential contradiction of the Canadian Charter and case law in Canada – was met with significant high-profile opposition. Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre, universities, hospitals, school boards, Quebec’s human rights commission, the Quebec Bar Association and past PQ premiers Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry (and former BQ leader Gilles Duceppe) all denounced the initiative.<sup>28</sup> This made it difficult for the PQ to galvanize support amongst Quebecers for this proposed action during the campaign. Secular-oriented sovereigntists who opposed the Charter and were unable to accept a right-of-centre pro-business/anti-union figure such as Péladeau were driven to support left-of-centre Québec

*Solidaire*. Conservative nationalists were also attracted by Legault's CAQ.<sup>29</sup>

Poll after poll uniformly demonstrated that Quebecers were not foremost interested and did not support the PQ campaign of identity politics as an issue deserving priority; instead, their concern was with jobs and economic growth. The need for new job growth (Quebec had actually lost nearly 30,000 jobs in February 2014 alone), efforts to address health care issues and the burgeoning debt were the concerns that preoccupied Quebecers.<sup>30</sup>

### The Liberals

The Liberals immediately, consistently and forcefully seized on Péladeau's truthfulness and blatantly warned that a referendum (and the ongoing PQ quest for Quebec political independence) would/must follow any PQ victory. Everywhere he travelled in Quebec, party leader Philippe Couillard reminded voters of this elementary fact. The Liberal campaign was invigorated as a result.

As a campaigner, Couillard did a superior job, proved to be a tireless worker and canvassed the province. The grassroots-focused campaign run by the Quebec Liberal Party was excellent. It must be acknowledged that Liberal leader Couillard made a few missteps during the race, the most notable being his comment during the second leaders' debate when he suggested that factory-floor employees at Quebec manufacturers who might come into contact with English-speaking clients should be bilingual. Couillard, later corrected himself saying he was referring to employees in customer service who would regularly interact with English-speaking customers and business leaders/colleagues.<sup>31</sup>

### Future directions in Quebec – A final word?

The April 2014 election campaign and result suggest two larger observations on Quebec society. First, additional administrative or legislative efforts aimed at advancing protections for the French language in the province are simply not as salient – they matter far less to the residents of Quebec in 2014 – as they once were. Simply put, 40 years of combined provincial and federal legislation and corresponding public policies have worked, in large measure (albeit not completely), to effectively defuse the lethal toxicity associated with language issues in

Quebec. Second, Philippe Couillard's victory provides further evidence that the social and political landscape of Quebec has been and continues to undergo a very significant shift; in short, the tectonic plates underpinning Quebec's model of development launched during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s – in which the state's institutional machinery was geared towards providing an expansive range of significant social and economic benefits – are shifting dramatically. The relationship between the Quebec government and its people is being fundamentally redefined; the prevailing state-centric model appears on its way to being displaced.

In the wake of the election, the current political landscape in Quebec leaves the *Parti Québécois* in search of answers to three related questions: who will lead the party (Marois was initially succeeded by Pierre Karl Péladeau who subsequently resigned from political life; Jean-François Lisée currently serves as party leader), how will the PQ recapture political power as a majority government, and more profoundly, can it find a way to make political independence an attractive option for Quebecers in the twenty-first century? Make no mistake, the desire for sovereignty in Quebec is not extinguished. Upwards of a third of Quebecers, polls demonstrate, want a country, rain or shine.

As Quebec's 31<sup>st</sup> Premier – along with his eight women, 18 men, 26-member cabinet – Premier Couillard has his work cut out for him; most especially on the economic front. To reposition Quebec as a place of economic growth, new jobs, lower taxes, receptive to international business and committed to lowering the debt level, the government has above all else committed itself to restraining, indeed reducing, public expenditures. A mini budget was recently unveiled, with the first comprehensive budget set to be introduced in autumn 2014.

What are the prospects for success? The Premier has placed enormously talented individuals as MNAs in charge of finance (Carlos Leitao, former Laurentian Bank of Canada chief economist) and the Treasury Board (economist Martin Coiteux, Quebec representative to the Bank of Canada). Perhaps more importantly, there exists a widely acknowledged acceptance on the part of Quebecers that action – now, not later – must be taken to remedy Quebec's economic future.<sup>32</sup>

The Quebec election of April 2014 ushered in a new political reality: Premier Couillard's central concern, in the short-term, will not be opposition from the independence-minded *Parti Québécois*, but will instead lie in the many economic challenges Quebec must squarely face.

## Notes

- 1 The following essay draws upon remarks delivered, in April 2014, as part of the annual Quebec Lecture at University College London. With the exception of the inclusion of primary sources and some minor editing, the format and content of this essay faithfully replicates those remarks. I would like to thank Tony McCulloch for his generous invitation to deliver the UCL Quebec Lecture this year. Tony is a wonderful colleague and friend, an exemplary scholar and a proponent of the need to study, understand and appreciate all that Quebec has to offer. I also wish to thank the Agent-General of Quebec in London, Mr Christos Sirros, for his opening remarks. Finally, I would like to extend my appreciation to all those new and emerging scholars from the United Kingdom and Europe who attended the lecture; I have no doubt that their interest in Quebec, perhaps more broadly in the study of Canada, will be rewarded.
- 2 Marois served 33 years as an MNA; her first political job was as press attaché to PQ finance minister Jacques Parizeau in 1978. She held several key cabinet positions before becoming Premier, including finance, health, education, revenue, labour and the status of women. The eldest of five children born to a mechanic and schoolteacher, she was raised in St-Étienne-de-Lauzon across the river from Quebec City, and attended private schools. She has been married for nearly 50 years to Claude Blanchet, who amassed a fortune in real estate. See Marian Scott, 'The Marois Era is Over', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, A6.
- 3 Couillard was born 26 June 1957; he started medical school at 17, chose neurosurgery, graduated at 22; he has three children, and has been married twice. He worked to set up a neurosurgery unit for the Saudi Arabian government oil company Aramco (1992–6); served as neurosurgeon at Université de Sherbrooke (1996–2003) and entered politics in 2003. He was elected as an MNA, and served as health minister for Premier Jean Charest from 2003–8. Couillard quit politics in 2008, becoming a partner in PCP Healthcare Opportunities Fund, a firm promoting private healthcare businesses operating within the public system. He became leader of the Quebec Liberal Party on 17 March 2013, and was subsequently elected to the Quebec National Assembly on 9 December 2013. See Marian Scott, 'Mild-Mannered Surgeon Takes Helm', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, A4.
- 4 Les Perreaux, 'PQ CRUSHED', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A1.
- 5 *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, A1.
- 6 'The Election by the Numbers', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, A2; Charlie Fidelman and Catherine Solyom, 'Voter Turnout Very Strong', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, B8; Jason Magder, 'Pollsters Feel Vindicated After Election Results', *Gazette*, 9 April 2014, A5. For precise electoral riding vote counts, consult 'Liberals Make Inroads All Over', and 'Colour This Island Liberal Red', *Gazette*, 9 April 2014, A8–A9.
- 7 Kevin Doherty, 'Marois Steps Down After PQ Loss', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, B2.
- 8 Konrad Yarabuski, 'Péladeau's election bid threatens to shake Canada', *Globe and Mail*, 10 March 2014, A1; Daniel Leblanc and Rheal Seguin, 'Péladeau the sovereigntist', *Globe and Mail*, 11 March 2014, A8–A9.
- 9 Rheal Seguin, 'Marois steps down after loss', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014), A5.
- 10 Sophie Cousineau, 'Make No Mistake: This Was a Self-inflicted Defeat', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A7.
- 11 *Montreal Gazette*, 8 April 2014.
- 12 Christopher Curtis, 'A Remarkable Comeback for Couillard's Liberals', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, B2.
- 13 Sean Gordon, 'A Third Way Remains Just That', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A5.
- 14 Rene Bruemmer, 'David, Khadir Retake Their Seats', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, B3.
- 15 Perreux, 'PQ CRUSHED', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A1.
- 16 Philip Authier, 'Spotlight Turns to Future of Sovereignty', *Gazette*, 9 April 2014, A6.
- 17 Authier, 'Spotlight Turns to Future of Sovereignty', *Gazette*, 9 April 2014, A7.
- 18 Perreux, 'PQ CRUSHED', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A1.
- 19 Daniel Leblanc, 'Harper Welcomes Liberal Win', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A6.

- <sup>20</sup> Mark Kennedy, 'What a Liberal Majority means to the Rest of Canada', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, A2.
- <sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Simpson, 'From 24 Sussex, A Big Sigh of Relief', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A6.
- <sup>22</sup> Daniel Leblanc, 'The Punch that Polarized a Province', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A6.
- <sup>23</sup> Ingrid Peritz, 'Turning Points: Four Moments that Shook up the Campaign', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A5.
- <sup>24</sup> Andy Riga, 'Liberals Paint the Town Red', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, B1.
- <sup>25</sup> Mailloux was vigorously supported (and by extension, defended) in her statements by PQ leader Marois. See Les Perreux, 'Marois Defends PQ Candidate Accused of Anti-semitic Beliefs', *Globe and Mail*, 14 March 2014, A1.
- <sup>26</sup> Seguin, 'Marois Steps Down After Loss', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A5.
- <sup>27</sup> 'Marois' Failed Xenophobic Gambit', *National Post*, 21 August 2013, A10.
- <sup>28</sup> Dougherty, 'Marois Steps Down After PQ Loss', *Gazette*, 8 April 2014, B2.
- <sup>29</sup> Seguin, 'Marois Steps Down After Loss', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A5.
- <sup>30</sup> Jay Bryan, 'Pauline Marois Thinks If she Ignores Job Losses, They Didn't Happen', *Gazette*, 8 March 2014, C1.
- <sup>31</sup> Peritz, 'Turning Points: Four Moments That Shook up the Campaign', *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2014, A5.
- <sup>32</sup> It should be noted that measures taken by the Couillard government since April 2014 have resulted in a variety of notable economic success stories including annual budgets that are currently generating healthy surpluses, fostering high levels of economic growth, restraining unsustainable growth in public expenditures and producing significantly lower levels of provincial unemployment.

## Note on contributor

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