Chapter 5

Québec Labour: Days of Glory or the Same Old Story?

Peter Graefe

The Québec labour movement sometimes is held as a model elsewhere in Canada. Given its high level of union density and its large mobilizations in symbolic work stoppages against repugnant state actions, there is appeal for both the bean counter concerned with organizational maintenance, and the romantic embracing big shows of protest. More substantively, labour's political action in Québec has played an important role in advancing social and labour rights for Canada as a whole, whether in extending collective bargaining rights to public sector employees in the 1960s, or in introducing anti-scab legislation and universal child care in the 1970s and 1990s.

The strategies used by the Québec labour movement, both electorally and in policy discussions, differ from those employed by the Canadian labour movement, whether federally or in the provinces. Despite their perceived success, these strategies remain largely untried in the other provinces. In a situation where labour outside Québec is casting around for new political strategies, the existence of an alternative tradition of political participation is worth studying. Québec's national character and class dynamics are distinct from those in the surrounding Canadian and American societies and provided a unique series of political possibilities for Québec labour. However, there is enough commonality in terms of the legislative framework around unions, the bureaucratic structures of policy-making, and electoral and legislative institutions to draw more lessons than has been the case.

These lessons from the Québec experience are more complicated than either the bean counter or the romantic might think, for strategies that worked in the past no longer provide the same leverage on political outcomes. Specifically, the Québec labour movement faces the twin challenges of articulating a new vision of economic and social development for Québec that could guide political strategizing, and of engaging politics where the character of the national question has taken on a different form with fewer tangible pay-offs. There have been days of glory, but increasingly Québec's experience looks like the same old story experienced by the broader Canadian labour movement.

Following a brief overview of the Québec labour movement's political trajectory over the past century, this chapter concentrates on labour movement strategy since the early 1990s. This timeframe allows us to gauge how the Québec labour movement has positioned itself in politics as the first radical thrust of neoliberal restructuring gave way to a longer process of recrafting Québec's social and economic institutions within a broader neoliberal framework. It also allows for an analysis of how the labour movement's last coherent political strategy, based on progressive competitiveness and partnerships, played out across the 1990s and has since lapsed into forms of *ad hoc* political engagement. Indeed, this brings Québec closer to the other provinces on the labour and politics front than it has been in some time. As in other provinces, there is much to decry in the lack of overall political vision, but also some hope for renewal.

The Distinct Political Trajectory of Québec Unions

It is easy to forget how central language is to politics, particularly if you speak English in Canada or the United States. But if you belong to a community that speaks a different

language from the majority, you are placed in a unique situation. First, you are at a disadvantage when you participate in the realm of the majority, because you have to interact in a second language and presumably a different culture, and thus you bear all the costs of translation. Second, the language and culture of the majority may not fit perfectly with how your own group sees and understands the world, raising the question of whether it makes more sense to do more of your politics within the space of your minority, so that your unique ways of seeing are not swamped by the majority. These abstract propositions, which find some resonance in the historical experience of the Québec labour movement, are central to explaining the development of Québec labour's distinct political flavour.

In addition to linguistic differences, we observe a variety of factors that make the Québec labour movement unique. First, the labour movement in Québec consists of four labour federations with the legitimacy and power to speak in the name of affiliated unions when engaging the state and the public. Québec labour federations hold distinct political traditions and are engaged in complex relations of both cooperation and competition with one another. In terms of partisan politics, none of the federations in Québec has had a formal relationship with a political party in the way that unions in other provinces have affiliated with the NDP (see Evans this volume). Nationalism provides a unique political environment, enabling a different set of claims and perhaps legitimating more collectivist claims in the name of the national interest. Finally, as will be discussed more fully below, the institutionalization of state-society relationships in the past thirty years has created a series of partnership institutions that allow Québec labour to influence policy independent of the party in power on a more ongoing basis than in most other provinces.

Before turning to contemporary labour politics in Québec, a brief historical overview is in order.

From the very earliest attempts at organization, engagement with unionists from the United States and Canada has been paired with demands for some autonomy to deal with issues of language and culture. The Catholic Church exploited this demand for autonomy in the 1920s with the creation of a Catholic labour federation, the *Confédération des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada* (CTCC). Tied to a conception of essential harmony between the interests of labour and employers and of the Church as the primary locus of societal organization, the CTCC was skeptical of political participation and especially partisan politics (Rouillard 2008).

This confessional and non-partisan position contrasted with competing labour federations linked to American-based and Canadian-based unions with stronger traditions of social democratic political activity. However, this parallel tradition never led to the creation of a provincial labour party. While the industrial unions linked with the Canadian Congress of Labour came to support the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in federal elections, this party enjoyed no electoral traction in Québec, and indeed little appreciation for the province's political vocabulary (Savage 2005: 38).

Through the post-war years of Premier Maurice Duplessis (1944-1959), a staunch defender of free enterprise and fierce opponent of union rights and the welfare state, the necessity of labour's political participation became clearer for several reasons. These included concerns about the formal recognition of unions and the legitimacy of strikes arising from such conflicts as the Asbestos strike of 1949 and the Murdochville copper strike in 1956 (Rouillard 2008). But they also included broader concerns about the need

for economic planning to counter unemployment and further development of the welfare state to catch up with neighbouring jurisdictions. During these years, the unions were largely social democratic in outlook. While supportive of maintaining Québec's autonomy within Canada, they were also wary of strong shows of nationalism, especially since the leading nationalist organizations were seen as conservative and close to Duplessis (Rouillard 2008). Over this period, the Catholic unions remained non-partisan, but became more militant in negotiations and strikes, as well as more political in the sense of making policy demands and doing member education. The CTCC shed its confessional character to become the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN) in 1960. The unions associated with the international unions likewise strengthened their participation in partisan politics, particularly following the merger of the craft and industrial unions into the *Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec* (FTQ) in 1957, parallel to the formation of the AFL-CIO in the United States and the CLC in Canada in 1955 and 1956 (McRoberts 1988, 102-105).

While the FTQ had been involved in the launch of the NDP in Québec in 1960-61, its enthusiasm and investment quickly dissipated for two reasons. First, the NDP lacked roots in Québec, and did poorly in federal elections throughout the 1960s, never electing a member (Oliver and Taylor 1991; Savage 2005). Second, the rapid rise of nationalism in the 1960s complicated the political situation, as the left divided over the issue of Québec's relationship to Canada. This delayed and ultimately prevented the formation of a provincial NDP party for electoral purposes, on the one hand, while alienating the unions from active participation in the federal NDP, on the other. The FTQ ultimately followed a number of key labour leaders and organizers, as well as a large

share of their membership, into support for the sovereignist Parti Québécois (PQ) (Rouillard 2011, Piotte 2001). This support was never formalized with linkages that would create accountability between the party and the FTQ, but rather took the form of regularly endorsing the PQ in provincial election campaigns, and having high-level union officials sit, in an individual capacity, on PQ executive bodies so as to bring the union perspective into the party.

The other major labour federation, the CSN remained a step further removed from electoral politics as a result of its pre-history as a Catholic federation. Partly as a result of not endorsing political parties, let alone creating a labour party, it invested more heavily in community politics. In the late 1960s, the CSN developed the idea of creating a "second front" outside of collective bargaining, which consisted of trying to provide some unified direction to community and social movement political action. The idea that this might ultimately create a worker's party nevertheless remained undeveloped outside of Montreal, where the attempt to mount a municipal party (the *Front d'Action Politique* (FRAP)) was undermined by state repression during the 1970 October Crisis. The CSN's community focus was coupled with a vigorous critique of the state as a locale of exploitation, and a tendency to not engage the state except in an oppositional logic. Its membership, meanwhile, flocked to the Parti Québécois, even as the CSN leadership condemned it as a bourgeois party. Caught between a leadership interested in a workers' party to the left of the PQ, and a membership already at home with the PQ, the CSN had every reason to maintain their traditional political neutrality (Rouillard 2011; Güntzel 2000: 379).

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the Québec unions entertained an evolving relationship with the new nationalism coming out of the post-1960 Quiet Revolution.[i] While hesitant about the conservative cast of earlier French Canadian nationalisms, there was much in the post-1960 state building for unions to embrace, be it improvements in the social wage or the extension of collective bargaining rights to public employees. These openings brought them to concentrate their demands on the Québec state, and to support the extension of Québec's space of constitutional autonomy (Rouillard 2008). The unions also got entangled in the radicalism of the Quiet Revolution, with the major federations releasing manifestos in the early 1970s containing strong and open critiques of capitalism in Québec, and calling for changes of a socialist nature. Here the national question and class came together, as Anglophone control of the commanding heights of the economy meant that economic democratization would be both socialist and nationalist. As such, the radicalization of political perspectives should not be dismissed as a fad or the result of the unions' capture by a cadre of radicals, but as reflecting deeper questioning of relations of domination. However, the speed with which the FTQ moved from its manifesto into support for the PQ, and the limited grassroots support in the CSN and the *Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec* (CEQ, the teachers' federation) for moving towards socialism, should also lead us to not romanticize this period. While radicalism ebbed through the 1970s, nationalism grew stronger. The federations were divided on supporting Québec sovereignty in the 1980 referendum, with the FTQ strongly in support, the CSN supporting sovereignty but refusing to campaign, and the CEQ refusing to intervene. By 1990, they were all loyal supporters of sovereignty and in

the 1995 referendum they supported the Yes side without conditions (Güntzel 2000; Savage 2008).

Old Habits and New Strategies of Engagement

In the early 1990s, in assessing the Québec labour movement's political and economic strategies, Carla Lipsig-Mummé (1991) discerned a strategic paralysis, of trying the same strategies even if they no longer worked, but also some evidence of strategic innovations. The largest union federation, the FTQ, seemed content to continue its direct involvement in mainstream political activity with open support for, but no formalized ties to, the PQ. In light of the significant gains in labour legislation and the social wage in the PQ's first term in office (1976-1981), this strategy seemed effective. The PQ portrayed itself as favourably disposed to workers and appeared to deliver when in office. In its second mandate (1981-1985), which coincided with the recession of the early 1980s, this strategy became problematic as the government attempted to balance its budget through cutting wages and removing collective bargaining rights for public sector employees. The PQ's concern with maintaining a positive relationship with the FTQ nevertheless pushed it to provide some compensation for these reversals, developing some rudimentary stakeholder participation in economic decision-making.

Whereas the FTQ embraced the opportunities to participate in multi-stakeholder forums and consultations, the CSN largely adopted the strategy of the *chaise vide* (empty chair) consistent with its oppositional stance. While such an outside strategy might have had appeal during the social upheavals in the early 1970s, by the early 1980s it provided little leverage.

Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, the FTQ and the CSN nevertheless revamped their strategies. The FTQ possessed a head start: from the late 1970s they pushed for social democratic adjustment strategies based on peak-level concertation between business, labour and government. The inspiration here was the corporatism or tripartism practiced in certain European countries like Sweden. Through the 1970s, important macroeconomic policy decisions concerning wage settlements, social programs and employment initiatives were decided by negotiations between union federations, employers' federations and the government, rather than by the government alone. While Québec lacked the organization of business and labour interests to allow such a form of corporatism, the FTQ believed that job creation and economic restructuring could be made into positive-sum processes through institutions that allowed social actors to dialogue and pursue concerted action. The FTQ thus pushed the construction of partnership institutions that would enable ongoing participation in policy development. Yet this begged the question of how this would work for labour in the absence of the strong union-party linkages that had made tripartism work in Scandinavia. The CSN arrived at a similar position in its own attempt to think through a development strategy appropriate for an economic context marked by trade and investment liberalization (Graefe 2007).

For both the FTQ and the CSN, their renewed strategies came out of attempts to confront employer pressures around work re-organization and concessions in private sector workplaces facing heavy international competition. Simply opposing such demands risked having plants close or relocate to other jurisdictions. The answer was to negotiate change in order to protect jobs and to ensure the adoption of worker-friendly

forms of flexibility. This was packaged as "social partnership," where both unions and employers worked together for competitiveness and job preservation, and where negotiated change provided positive-sum solutions.

At the level of Québec as a whole, a similar argument was made for how partnership and stakeholder representation could serve both economic competitiveness and the interest of workers. This would hold at the level of large-scale macroeconomic and industrial policy and in specific areas such as training and health and safety. While there might be features of this program specific to Québec, the overall vision was one shared with many other labour movements of the period. It was often labelled "progressive competitiveness" as it sought means to ally economic competitiveness with the achievement of labour movement objectives (Albo 1994).

Counter-intuitively, the strategy of concertation made a virtue out of the loose ties between the unions and the political parties. As a senior political advisor for the FTQ explained, his experience with government-business-union partnerships in other provinces was that the government party never trusted the unions because they felt any confidential information would immediately end up in the hands of the NDP (Interview with the author, February 2005). Given the lack of direct union-party relationships in Québec, such experiments could rely on a stronger basis of trust.

The strategy of concertation found fertile ground in the early 1990s because the provincial Liberal government (1985-1994) needed to mobilize a more inclusive sense of the political community given the constitutional battles with the Rest of Canada, on the one hand, and the PQ, on the other. As a result, it too was inspired by the idea of social partnerships for competitiveness, and experimented by creating a training and labour

force development board run jointly by labour and business representatives. It also launched a cluster-based industrial policy that encouraged firms in a given sector to meet to define shared solutions to common problems such as training, research and development, infrastructure deficits and export promotion.

Meanwhile, in attempting to define an inclusive political economy for an independent Québec, the PQ developed similar themes. The idea of positive-sum compromises between business and labour was golden for the PQ: it always had to struggle between reassuring the business community that Québec sovereignty would not be costly, and promising citizens that sovereignty would strengthen social justice and not simply changing the colour of the flag. It therefore embraced the idea that participation in a global free trade context could benefit all, provided that appropriate adjustment strategies were instituted. Such policies would fully mobilize all skills and capacities, allowing Québec to compete on the higher end and thereby maintain higher wages and social spending. The PQ likewise touted concertation by social partners in order to identify positive-sum solutions (Parti Québécois 1994). The PQ thereby wrapped its nationalism around progressive competitiveness, creating what could be termed "competitive nationalism" (Graefe 2007).

When the PQ swept to power in 1994, it embraced progressive competitiveness for its economic rationale and especially its portrayal of the nation as a consensual community above the divisions of class. This was dangerous for the labour movement in that "national consensus" would be placed above unions' class demands when the two conflicted. But it also held the possibility that, in seeking to mobilize an inclusive

movement in favour of sovereignty, a PQ government would remain open and responsive to labour movement demands.

Partnerships: From Lever to Brake

The sense of unions having some pull within the PQ government had some material foundation. The government introduced a payroll tax on large firms to fund workplace-training initiatives, and created local economic development boards where labour had a seat. Most notably, while neighbouring Ontario was resolving its budgetary deficit by slashing programs and confronting its public employees, Québec adopted quieter and more consensual arrangements. This difference was symbolized by convening two multi-stakeholder summits in 1996 to find ways of reducing the provincial deficit without raising taxes while also reducing unemployment. In return for agreeing to balanced budgets, the unions leveraged assurances that the government would work on job creation, as well as specific promises of spending on community development and of adopting a family policy including a low-cost universal daycare system.

These strategies nevertheless lost momentum as the decade progressed. Consistent with critiques of progressive competitiveness, employers used the emphasis on consensus to head off policies they opposed, especially in the absence of sustained labour movement mobilization and education. The 1996 Summits became a symbol of this critique. The employers' associations after all managed to impose the parameters (zero deficit, no tax increases) in advance of the summit. While the unions could point to some wins (community development, family policy), this came at the cost of accepting a significant downsizing of the public sector (as part of the zero deficit pledge), even as employers

washed their hands of firm commitments to creating jobs. Similarly, when Labour Code reform came on the agenda in 2000, including the possibility of changing certification rules to make organizing in the private service sector easier and limiting union avoidance strategies like contracting out, partnerships again became a brake. The government insisted that changes had to account for the competitive pressures of the North American environment, and had to achieve a broad consensus. Employers could therefore use the language of partnership as a veto, refusing to accept changes due to their presumed impact on competitiveness (Charest 2004; Graefe 2007).

While the results of partnership were decidedly mixed and took the lustre off progressive competitiveness, the leadership held to the strategy. Criticisms of the approach within the labour movement did mount, and left union activists experimented more seriously with small parties to the left of the PQ such as the *Rassemblement pour une alternative politique* (RAP) and the *Union des forces progressistes* (UFP). These parties fused a number of left sectarian parties, but enjoyed an additional lift in harnessing activists from the anti-globalization movement, which hit a peak in organizing the mass protest against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001. However, the union leadership's bigger problem was the PQ government's waning interest in such approaches, again pointing to the problem of pursuing a strategy of concertation without the union-party linkages found in the countries inspiring this strategy. In its final mandate (1998-2003), the PQ government continued to promote social consensus, but its thinking about development moved away from the idea of social partnerships for competitiveness. Certain reforms, such as those related to regional health boards, indeed rolled back previous gains in stakeholder representation.

To replace partnerships, the PQ looked to European debates about knowledge-based economies, and the idea that one could balance liberalized, market-driven development with smart social investments in social cohesion and human capital. Rather than encouraging concerted action at the heart of economic organization, the idea was to free up private sector entrepreneurial energies while proactively working to create the skills, trust and inclusion that would enable that entrepreneurialism to take more productive forms. The PQ government therefore looked favourably at innovations in child policies and benefits, and poverty reduction strategies precisely because they fit policy thinking about competitiveness in the knowledge-based economy. These moves were applauded by the union movement as improvements to the social wage. Nevertheless, they came from a strategy of playing to a broader middle-class electorate, rather than of responding to a labour agenda of building a union voice into development decisions (Graefe 2011).

The New Millennium: Stuck in the 1990s?

By the last days of the PQ government, the labour movement was cruising on a strategy with declining political influence and showing little effort to either renew it or rethink the forms of political engagement that could bring it into being. However, one needs to be careful with this critique. As René Charest (2009) has argued, it is to simplistic to adopt *ad hominem* attacks on the Québec unions as bureaucratized organizations, completely co-opted to the status quo, willing to sacrifice their members' interests in order to maintain their privileged status as a social partner. Instead, he suggests we consider how unions are contradictory organizations that have been caught in a capitalist offensive to

roll back wages, benefits and other protections, in a context where capitalism itself is hegemonic. In such a context, and like other social movements, unions must choose between a strategy of open confrontation, which may wreck the movement, or of trying to conserve resources and capacities for a more propitious time.

The critique here is more modest: it is that the labour federations have not developed an encompassing vision of development that might inform a political strategy beyond reactive responses to individual issues. In addition, they have not re-assessed their methods of engaging the political in light of a new conjuncture. Even a strategy of conserving resources requires ongoing capacity building so that those resources can be effectively deployed in new contexts.

The election of Jean Charest's Liberal government in 2003 represented a more radical attempt to change labour's political standing. In an "open letter" to Québecers in October 2003, Charest publicly decried the "corporatism" of the Québec model as a plum protecting privileged insiders and as an impediment to necessary changes in public policy (Laforest 2007; Boismenu, Dufour and Saint Martin 2004). His government accelerated the introduction of private sector management practices in the public sector, stepped up the use of public-private partnerships for major infrastructure projects, and rolled back concertation in local and regional health boards and local economic development councils. In terms of the social wage, the government flirted with winding up the antipoverty strategy and raising daycare fees in proportion to parental incomes, although there was a successful push-back in both cases.

In the realm of labour relations and labour policy, there were two major challenges in the Charest government's first year. The first was a change in the Labour

Code's provisions concerning subcontracting, making it easier to shed union accreditations when contracting out work. The second was a unilateral re-organization of union representation in the health sector, coupled with laws preventing the unionization of certain workers in the family and intermediary health resources sector (Charest 2009: 178). These moves elicited a strong mobilization across the union federations, from blockades of bridges, roads and ports in December 2003 to the mobilization of 100,000 people in the 2004 Montreal May Day parade. Yet, when the possibility of a general strike arose in early 2004, the FTQ pulled back due to its reservations of challenging the supremacy of Parliamentary power, and this momentum was lost.

This withdrawal could easily be presented as a betrayal, but the mobilizations of 2004, extended with the university and college student strike of February-March 2005, helped tame the Charest government's neoliberal zeal. Nevertheless, this did not exclude further anti-labour legislation, such as Bill 43, passed in December 2005,which imposed collective agreements on public sector employees and withdrew their right to strike until 2010. Despite this attack on freedom of association, the response was muted and centred on punishing the Charest Liberals in the 2007 provincial election (Charest 2009).

The use of an electoral strategy of punishing the Liberals, without building the alternative with which to beat them, has not produced tangible gains. The Liberals were re-elected as a minority government in 2007, but the PQ suffered a severe setback as the neoliberal *Action démocratique du Québec* (ADQ) party surged to become official opposition. The minority Liberal government proved fairly centrist in its politics, shying away from increasing user fees for public services or openly privatizing health care, even as it received reports promoting such changes. Re-elected with a majority in 2008, and

faced with the global financial crisis, the Liberals returned to a right-wing platform of public sector austerity to quickly balance the budget. The austerity budget of 2010, including health premiums and user charges, elicited strong public mobilization despite a restrained union reponse. They were keeping their powder dry for negotiating public sector contracts, hoping to avoid a repetition of the Bill 43 debacle. This did lead to a negotiated contract, albeit in a situation of limited mobilization of the membership, resulting in a financial settlement that failed to reverse declining real wages in the public sector (Mandel 2010).

It is notable where push-backs succeeded. Unions were important in forcing the government to follow through with anti-poverty initiatives (Noël 2004) and to preserve the province's universal, low-cost childcare system (Jenson 2009). In the latter case, union success came from marrying workplace action in the form of one-day strikes, with a strong mobilization of parents.

These are classic forms of “outsider” politics, of mobilizing the power of protest to shape state policies, whether against “worker unfriendly” initiatives or in favour of friendly ones. The unions have also continued to be insiders in institutions of concertation, albeit with mixed results. The unions have maintained their place in labour market training and health and safety (Haddow and Klassen 2005). The replacement of local development and employment boards by councils of local elected officials has reduced union presence at that level, although less institutionalized participation in these continues in some localities (FTQ 2006). But whereas these were once sites for developing positive-sum practices supporting Québec’s version of progressive competitiveness, they are now at best supports for maintaining the status quo. Without a

shared pro-active vision for these spaces of dialogue, concertation becomes a tactical tool for preventing the erosion of previous gains. Just as it prevented the ratcheting up of labour market protections in the later years of the PQ, so it may slow the ratcheting down (Haddow and Klassen 2005).

The relationship with partisan politics therefore remains a stumbling block for the Québec labour movement. The provincial Liberal party has changed significantly since the late 1980s. Given the decline of sovereignist mobilization, there is no need to present itself as including all sectors of society. Additionally, after twenty-five years of neoliberal statecraft, it is less vulnerable to charges of breaking with the institutions and relationships inherited from the Quiet Revolution, and faces economic actors who have retooled their outlooks and strategies around the neoliberal normal. And unlike the late 1980s, it is faced with a credible right-wing challenger in the steadfastly neoliberal ADQ, and it can draw on the intellectual resources of right-wing think tanks and networks that did not exist twenty years ago.

Turning to the PQ, the unions are faced with the problem that in this morose period for the national project, the project itself is being redefined in ways that are sometimes inconsistent with union aspirations. The close if sometimes strained relationship between labour and the PQ has become increasingly distant. The lesson PQ strategists drew from their 1994-2003 government was that pleasing groups to the left was self-defeating, as they ultimately always ended up demanding more from the government rather than helping it get re-elected (Facal 2003). Linkages to the unions limited the PQ's free hand in crafting policies aimed at the middle class.

After the PQ's defeat in 2003, party leader Bernard Landry allowed the formation of a club within the party called the *Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec Libre* (SPQLibre). This club assembled some high profile former union leaders, both to create a stronger social democratic voice within the PQ, but also to maintain political unity among sovereignists by improving the PQ's credibility as a progressive party ("La création" 2004).

However, in March 2010, the PQ's national executive decided to expell the SPQLibre from the party, following open criticism of several policy decisions moving the PQ away from a social democratic vision. The PQ has also upset the labour movement on numerous issues, including making it known that they found public sector salary demands to be too high and in demanding budgetary austerity through the financial crisis despite the obvious ramifications for public services and employment.

This falling out with the labour movement is part of a growing conservatism within the sovereignist movement. The progressive nationalism of the 1990s was based on expanding the nationalist tent to include as many constituencies as possible so as to increase the movement's base. The nationalism of more recent years is more interested in activating the sovereignist movement's core by playing on markers of identity and belonging shared by the historic French Canadian community (Lisée 2007). The thrust of measures such as a Québec identity bill has been to partially close a previously very open definition of 'the nation'. But it is not surprising that a more conservative definition of "who belongs" is tied to a more conservative vision of what social transformations might result from sovereignty (Noël 2007).

This, however, raises a bigger question of how to engage with nationalist politics, one that reared its head at the federal level. After the surprise NDP sweep and the collapse of the sovereignist Bloc Québécois (BQ) in the 2011 federal election, the labour movement is suddenly in an odd circumstance. The formation of the BQ in 1990 provided a handy solution to the previous absence of a progressive nationalist party on the federal stage. While the BQ was not formally a social democratic party, it could be relied upon to take stances similar to the NDP, albeit while demanding greater provincial autonomy in social policy. Its leader from 1996 to 2011 was Gilles Duceppe, a former CSN staff representative. When the NDP lost official party status from 1993-1997, the BQ became the consistent voice defending unemployment insurance and collective bargaining rights. The sudden collapse of the BQ is thus alarming on two fronts. First, the FTQ endorsed the BQ and it was clear that the CSN and CSQ were very comfortable giving their own tacit support, yet the party ended up losing party status, removing the channels of influence that the unions had cultivated within federal politics. While the new contingent of NDP MPs included union activists and even the former president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (Nycole Turmel), the relationship between the top union leadership and the federal NDP could best be described as "polite but strained." The second cause for alarm is what the BQ's collapse signals for the progressive nationalism of the 1990s, which the BQ continued to incarnate far more than the PQ. The loss of the BQ provides another warning sign that a renewed vision of development, including its engagement with nationalist politics, is long past due in the labour movement.

There are nevertheless signs of hope for renewal on a variety of fronts. Most substantively, there have been party building experiments involving fringes of the labour movement. The *Conseil Central de Montréal Métropolitain* (CCMM) of the CSN had a hand in sustaining *Québec Solidaire* (QS), an amalgamation of left-wing splinter parties, certain elements of the anti-globalization movement, and elements of the women's and the community sector (Dufour 2009). This party has had limited success at the polls, but did manage to elect of one of its charismatic spokespeople, Amir Khadir, to the National Assembly in 2008. In Montreal, a new civic left-wing party, *Projet Montréal* (PM), emerged as a viable third party, benefitting from public disgust with the taint of corruption on the municipal scene. This party, which marries ecological and urban quality of life issues, drew in part on Montreal-based union networks (Latendresse 2009).

However, union participation has not been central in either QS or PM, and stronger union involvement has tended to follow political success rather than precede it. They remain weak as vehicles for promoting a particular labour agenda *or* as organizations with accountability to the labour movement. Rather, they have usefully injected some renewed thinking about social democratic, ecological, and occasionally socialist alternatives to contemporary neoliberal capitalism, both in terms of public policies and of democratizing the political process.

Conclusion

The strengthening of independent left-wing currents in Québec does not automatically create a stronger left. If it fails to build organizations that can effectively compete for state power, or force existing organizations to change their programs and strategy, or

change the terms of social conversations about what is possible, there may not be a lot to praise in it. One possible interpretation of the QS experience is that it has made clear to the PQ that it can ignore the left and only lose a marginal level of electoral support. While it has given the left a clear voice in the National Assembly with Amir Khadir, and provided space to articulate a left platform, the net effect, given the current electoral system and the institutional strength of the PQ as a party machine, is to lessen progressive influence over partisan politics. The value of this interpretation depends on strategy and vision: if the point is that a party with occasional social democratic reflexes is useful for slowing neoliberalism and providing some gains (such as childcare and poverty reduction), then it is credible. If the point is that the gains will be ever weaker without staking out a firmer set of demands that seek to go beyond neoliberalism and indeed challenge capitalism, then the interpretation is less persuasive.

Absent attempts to rebuild power within the PQ, or to make a headlong investment in building QS, one is left with a status quo that looks increasingly like that in other provinces: one finds a union movement with a weak pull on its members' political loyalties, increasingly informal ties with a party of the centre-left, and a largely reactive outsider strategy of lobbying and demonstrating.

That is not to say that Québec labour simply becomes the same as elsewhere. There are institutionalized legacies in terms of relations to the state and to parties that will not simply evaporate. The fact that the PQ never had a formally institutionalized link to the FTQ gives the character of party-union relations a different flavour than labour-NDP linkages elsewhere. The success in obtaining representation within partnership institutions also bequeaths the opportunity for Québec unions to use insider strategies.

And while the national question provides less access to the state than in the 1970s to the 1990s, it does create a different structure of possibilities for political action. To be sure, the lessons of Québec labour in politics remain more historical than current, and tied mostly to questions of walking the tightrope of social partnership and of nationalism.

It is here that the absence of a larger strategic vision becomes a major limitation. Deciding which institutions and relationships from the past are worth protecting and which ones need to be reinvented necessarily relies on a vision of what the labour movement wishes to achieve. However, beyond the need to protect past gains in social policy and industrial relations, and largely reactive calls for industrial policy and adjustment strategies for troubled industries, there is noh compelling overarching vision for Québec's contemporary labour movement.

Notes

[i] The Quiet Revolution is usually dated from the victory of the Liberal Party in the 1960 Québec general election. This marked a period of major change in Québec society, including the rapid development of the state, the recentring of nationalism from an ethnic and cultural "French-Canadian" basis to a more political and territorial "Québec" basis, and a greater openness to exploring new ideas and lifestyles (McRoberts 1988).