

THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME: THE RISE OF MARIO DUMONT AND THE ADQ

Tasha Kheiriddin

The stunning election in Quebec is widely seen as a result of the Liberals' failure to capitalize on the collapse of the PQ, resulting in a surge of dissatisfied voters to Mario Dumont and promotion of the ADQ to official opposition in a minority House. But, writes Tasha Kheiriddin, there is another story, a gradual shift "from a federalist-separatist paradigm to a left-right axis." The ADQ's "autonomist" ambiguity on the national question "opens the door to a different level of debate," she writes, "one which much of the rest of the world has been indulging in since the late 1970s." It is a debate on the appropriate role of the state in the economy and in society as a whole.

L'incroyable dénouement des élections québécoises est largement attribué à l'incapacité des libéraux de profiter de l'effondrement du PQ, cette défaillance ayant provoqué le transfert d'une vague d'électeurs insatisfaits vers l'ADQ de Mario Dumont, qui forme aujourd'hui l'opposition officielle d'un gouvernement libéral minoritaire. Mais selon Tasha Kheiriddin, on a aussi assisté au passage d'un « paradigme fédéralisme-indépendance à un axe gauche-droite ». C'est ainsi que l'ambivalence « autonomiste » de l'ADQ sur la question nationale a « ouvert la voie à un débat d'un autre type », écrit l'auteure, « ce même débat auquel s'adonne le reste du monde depuis la fin des années 1970 ». À savoir le débat sur le rôle de l'État dans l'économie et la société dans son ensemble.



Common wisdom has it that there were three stories in the recent Quebec election. The first was the collapse of the Parti Québécois vote. The second was the failure of the Liberals to capture that vote. The third was the meteor-like ascendancy of the Action démocratique du Québec and its leader, "Super Mario" Dumont. On the eve of the election call in February the ADQ was polling 17 percent; by the time the votes were counted on election night, it had captured 31 percent of the popular vote, outpacing the PQ at 28 percent, right on the heels of the Liberals at 33 percent and increasing its representation in the National Assembly from 5 to 41 seats.

But there is a fourth story. It provides a backdrop to the other three, and it has been simmering in Quebec for the better part of a decade. That story is a gradual shift in the political zeitgeist from a federalist-separatist paradigm to a left-right axis. This shift has been slow in coming and is far from absolute; indeed, there is no guarantee the "national question" will never again be the pre-eminent issue for Quebec voters. But in politics pendulums always swing. Issues come and go, and the preoccupations of our forefathers often seem archaic to subsequent generations. Who today can relate to the famous King-Byng constitutional

controversy of 1926? Or the drama over the adoption of Canada's flag in 1964? Yet these were the dominant political debates of their times, inflaming passions and dividing loyalties in our houses of Parliament and beyond.

In a similar vein, after 40 years of passion, conflict and, in its earliest stages, civil unrest and violence, the Quebec separatist movement seems to be losing its fire. Two failed provincial referendums, the death of the Meech Lake Accord and the rejection of the Charlottetown Accord have left a lingering haze of constitutional fatigue over the land. A federal Conservative government committed to "open federalism" holds power in Ottawa. In Quebec, the ADQ is now the official opposition, while the PQ is now the third party, garnering its lowest percentage of the popular vote since its first election in 1970.

Ironically, Dumont cut his political teeth on the very issue — Quebec's place in Canada — that his party's success is now helping to move to the back burner. Dumont first rose to prominence in 1991 when as president of the provincial Liberal youth wing he broke with the party over its failure to endorse the Allaire Report. That document recommended a sweeping transfer of powers from Ottawa to the provinces. After its repudiation by the Liberal Party,

Dumont and its author, Jean Allaire, left to form the ADQ; when Allaire resigned for health reasons, Dumont took over as leader. He was first elected to the National Assembly as the member for Rivière-du-Loup in 1994 and subsequently endorsed the Yes side in the 1995 Quebec referendum.

On the “national question,” Dumont later moved to the more amorphous position of “autonomy.” Autonomy is not a new concept on the international scene. Politically speaking, an autonomous area is one which enjoys a degree of freedom from national authority, and it is usually defined by geography and/or the presence of an ethnic minority. Around the world there are autonomous cities (for example, Buenos Aires in Argentina, Tashkent in Uzbekistan), autonomous provinces (such as all six provinces of Madagascar) and autonomous regions (Inner Mongolia in China and the Tripura tribal areas of India are but two examples). Here in Canada, Dumont has not fully fleshed out his vision of Quebec autonomy other than to describe it as a state of “affirmation without separation.”

Dumont’s political evolution and current ambiguous stance are of concern to some federalists in Quebec. Says John Parisella, long-time Liberal insider and former chief of staff to Premier Robert Bourassa:

To a large extent Mario Dumont is a unique product of a modern Quebec. He came through the Liberal Party, which has been the party associated with the modernization of Quebec on an economic, social and political level. He left the Liberal Party on a clear confrontation between Quebec and Canada. He flirted with sovereignty without ever saying he’s a sovereigntist...and he has been very clear that the rest of the country should not

identify him as a federalist. To some extent he may represent a bigger threat to the cohesion of the country than the sovereigntists, who are so easy to target if you are a federalist.

That fear is shared by many columnists in English Canada who see in Dumont a return to the “knife at the throat” strategy used by Bourassa to extract constitutional or financial concessions from English Canada. Before the election results were even in, *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffrey Simpson speculated, “If Mr. Dumont holds the balance of power for either a PQ or

What is the role of the state in society, in the economy, in our daily lives? How do we balance demands for security with the cry for freedom, on political, military and economic levels? How do we keep up with the galloping pace of technology and the changes it brings to the way we communicate, trade and relate to one another? These are the big questions of the 20th and 21st centuries, questions Quebec and the rest of the country have failed to grapple with because our leaders were too busy trying to prevent the country from breaking apart.

Liberal government, the pressures on Mr. Harper’s ‘open’ (or ‘open cheque-book’) federalism will intensify to give more and more and more.” Following the election, *National Post* columnist Andrew Coyne wrote, “If, on the other hand, [Dumont] pushes his undefinable, unworkable ‘autonomism’ model, demanding powers from Ottawa that cannot and should not be delivered, then Mr. Harper has a problem on his hands — and so does the country.”

But others believe that Dumont’s ambiguity could be a good thing for Canada. Frédéric Tétù, a philosophy professor at Collège François-Xavier-Garneau in Quebec City, affirms:

The importance is not where he stands but where he doesn’t stand. I think people have perceived quite rightly that it’s not a priority for him. He spoke about autonomism only when he was asked about it. On the other hand Boisclair was forced to put the sovereignty agenda at the forefront of his campaign, and Jean Charest tried to use the constitutional debate as a prime source of support...From the beginning I thought Charest was shooting himself in the foot, and the results of [the] election have validated that perception.

Tétù thinks Quebecers are ready to listen to something new instead of the same old should-we-stay-or-should-we-go discussion. The ADQ’s refusal to get mixed up in that debate opens the door to a different level of debate, one which much of the rest of the world has been indulging in since the late 1970s. What is the role of the state in society, in the economy, in our daily lives? How do we balance demands for security with the cry for freedom, on political, military and economic levels? How do we keep up with the galloping pace of technology and the changes it brings to the way we communicate, trade

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Dumont himself has endorsed a re-examination of the role of the state. In 2005, he told *L’Actualité* magazine, “An honest and healthy social debate must take place. The Quebec social-democrat model is failing more every day. In the 1960s and 70s, we innovated, the state was an accelerant for young entrepreneurs. Today, it puts the brakes on innovation.”

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What is the Quebec model? It is the term for Quebec's welfare state, which, while generous, exacts a high price from its citizens and the economy. The Quebec model had its roots in the 1960s, when successive Liberal and PQ governments began using the

behind both Arkansas and Alabama. In 2005, according to the Montreal Economic Institute (MEI), Quebec had the highest unemployment rate among the Canadian provinces, apart from three of the Atlantic provinces, and an average of 6.8 percent of the

Another distinguishing feature is close collaboration, verging on the corporatist, between governments, businesses and unions. Quebec's rate of unionization is the highest in Canada — 40 percent, compared with 32 percent for the rest of Canada and a mere 12 percent in the United States. The disproportionate weight of unions in the political discourse of Quebec has encouraged high rates of labour regulation and the expansion of social programs. It has also produced some interesting terminology: Quebec is the only province in Canada to harbour a Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity.

levers of the state in an attempt to “modernize” Quebec (by transferring control over education and health care from the church to the state, for example) and establish a francophone business elite (such as through state support for Quebec-owned businesses).

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To build and sustain the Quebec model required a massive appropriation of private resources, and until recently, Quebec had the dubious distinction of being the highest-taxing jurisdiction in North America. It is also one of the least productive: in 2003 the Fraser Institute ranked Quebec 54th out of 60 provinces and states in terms of gross national product per capita,

Quebec population was drawing social assistance, compared with the Canadian average of 5.2 percent. Meanwhile, the net worth of Quebec households (their assets minus their debts) was \$61,300 in 1999 compared with \$101,400 in Ontario.

Dumont is far from alone in questioning the “Quebec model.” In the past decade a growing chorus of voices have been calling for its reform, starting with think tanks and pressure groups. The MEI opened its doors in 1998 and over the years has produced reams of research showing that Quebec's economy is underperforming because of overregulation and overtaxation. In 2001 another Montreal-based research institute, CIRANO, published the Rapport Bourgogne, which concluded that the province's economic situation had deteriorated over the past 25 years and if left on the same path would result in “more and more serious crises.” In 2006, a student organization called Esprits Libres began holding regular meetings to promote free-market ideas in the Montreal academic community. And earlier this year SOS Contribuables, a taxpayers' rights group, was launched to act as a tax-and-spending watchdog, much as the Canadian Taxpayers Federation does in the rest of Canada.

The media are also becoming more and more critical of the Quebec model. From its humble beginnings in 1998, the libertarian Internet journal *Le Québécois Libre* now garners 120,000 hits a month. In 2006 *La Presse* columnist Alain Dubuc published *Éloge de la Richesse*, a paean to wealth creation that bluntly says “Quebec is poor” and proposes a series of mostly market-oriented reforms to change this state of affairs. In 2007 two amateur Quebec filmmakers, Denis Julien and Joanne Marcotte, produced the documentary *L'Illusion Tranquille*, a scathing critique of Quebec's welfare state. Meanwhile, economist

Nathalie Elgrably appears regularly on Canal Argent and in *Le Journal de Montréal* chastising the government for excessive spending and interference in citizens' lives. And she is not alone; after the Quebec election results, her fellow columnist Richard Martineau wrote that while a strong government was necessary to advance Quebec society in the 1960s, now the state “has become fat, obese...and it is Quebec society as a whole which...bleeds itself to feed it. I believe that's why the ADQ has made such a breakthrough. Because there are more and more people who are fed up with this way of thinking.”

Finally, politicians and public figures inevitably got into the act. In 2005 former premier Lucien Bouchard and a number of other Quebec intellectuals published the Manifeste pour un Québec Lucide, calling for reform of the Quebec model. In 2006 the former president of the Montreal Economic Institute, Michel Kelly Gagnon, became head of the Conseil du Patronat du Québec, the province's most powerful employers' lobby, and wasted no time criticizing special interest groups who were impeding Quebec's economic development. In the 2003 provincial election Liberal leader Jean Charest campaigned against the incumbent PQ



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Why is this man smiling? Because he has plenty to smile about. Mario Dumont increased his share of the popular vote from 18 percent in 2003 to 31 percent in 2007, vaulting from 5 to 41 seats to become leader of the opposition in a minority legislature, with an opportunity for the ADQ to become Quebec's government in waiting. Dumont's rise, writes Tasha Kheiriddin, could reshape Quebec's public discourse away from the national question to more of a debate between left and right.

on the need for reform, and his recent electoral comeuppance can be directly traced to his failure to deliver on that promise. Charest pledged to cut \$1 billion in taxes per year and re-engineer the Quebec state by trimming its bloated bureaucracy. Instead of sticking to this plan, he delivered only a quarter of his tax pledge and barely snipped the edges off the state.

This left a political vacuum for the ADQ in the 2007 campaign — and it

filled it with policy proposals from one end of the election to the other. In his concession speech on March 26 — which sounded more like a victory speech — Dumont proclaimed that this was a campaign of ideas, and that the ADQ's ideas had triumphed. While this is not entirely accurate, it is true that the ADQ put forward many ideas, of which some were very right-of-centre. Notably, the ADQ proposed to allow choice in health care between public

and private systems and abolish school boards. It also proposed policies along the lines of Stephen Harper's federal Child Care Allowance, such as giving parents a weekly stipend of \$100.

Over the years, however, the ADQ has not been ideologically consistent. Martin Masse, founder of *Le Québécois Libre*, believes that "Mario has always had free market tendencies but they have been tempered by interventionist tendencies for the youth and the fam-

ily.” He notes that Dumont espoused a flat tax policy in the 2003 election, but that it was nowhere to be found in the current platform. Masse thinks Dumont is labelled right-wing “because he says things that used to be

of 12 years of Quebec politics in which big reforms have not been really publicly debated in electoral campaigns. It’s no surprise that Quebec voters are quite thirsty for leaders or parties that make them feel like they are listening

ing for this moment. So where does he go from here? In a minority House, compromise will be the name of the game, but based on his past record, “the nature of his flexibility is very much in question,” according to John Parisella. Paul Muller, president of the MEI and former policy adviser to Dumont, describes him as “market-leaning with a keen sense of what the electorate is willing to swallow.” In recent editorials, Dumont has been compared to everyone from Jean-Marie Le Pen to Maurice Duplessis, but in the end, he will be his own man.

For one thing is clear: Mario Dumont is a leader. He has led a party for 13 years in the political wilderness, with little money, organization or respect from

the political and media elites. Many people wrote him and the ADQ off and assumed he might leave politics altogether. Last year he was even courted to be head of the MEI, which, in light of his recent electoral success, is a job he is probably more than happy to have declined. But thanks to his electoral breakthrough, he will finally have the chance to show what he and the ADQ are made of. And he will also have the chance to build on the right-of-centre currents swirling in Quebec politics, further shifting the public discourse from the tired debates of yesterday to a new paradigm, holding the government to account and giving the Quebec model the re-examination it deserves. This is something all Quebecers — and Canadians — should applaud.

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taboo, like health care. He is the only political leader in Canada who clearly says we need to open our health care system to more private care. He has been consistent in saying that for the past couple of years.” Masse notes that after 2002, when Dumont backed away from the flat tax, his poll numbers started to drop. Taboo-breaking may indeed be key to both his popularity and his definition. “Mario breaks taboos — health care, school boards, reasonable accommodation. And anytime you say something that doesn’t conform to the Quebec model, you sound right wing.”

Frédéric Tétu thinks another element of Dumont’s success is populism: people are hungry for someone who sets out a clear platform and listens to the population. In the last 12 years, Tétu notes, successive Quebec governments have implemented four major reforms without ever subjecting them to public approval in an election: Bouchard’s “zero deficit,” which necessitated cuts to the health care system; \$5-a-day (now \$7) subsidized daycare; medical insurance reform; and municipal amalgamation. “We’re coming out

— and make them feel like they are going to advertise what they will do beforehand.” He notes that the biggest asset of the federal Conservatives in Quebec is that they are “perceived as a party which announced a program of action in a campaign and [have] been acting according to that program when they were elected.”

Regardless of whether he is a populist surfing a conservative wave or a genuine free-market reformer, in this election Mario Dumont was at the right place at the right time. Frustrated with Jean Charest and his failure to deliver on his 2003 election promises, Liberal voters wanted a change of scene but could not bring themselves to vote for a separatist party. Frustrated with the social-democratic tradition of big unions, high taxes and left-wing discourse, nationalist voters in the regions sought an alternative to the PQ, and Mario’s autonomism presented an acceptable compromise.

In that sense, Dumont is not so much leading the parade as getting out in front of it. Indeed, he has been traipsing along for 13 years now, wait-