THE CAQ IS OUT OF CONTROL

Privatization, reforms in health care and education, giving up on social housing, setbacks on issues of democracy

Leaflet produced by the **Coalition Main rouge** for the launch of its campaign: "La CAQ dérape" ("The CAQ is out of control")
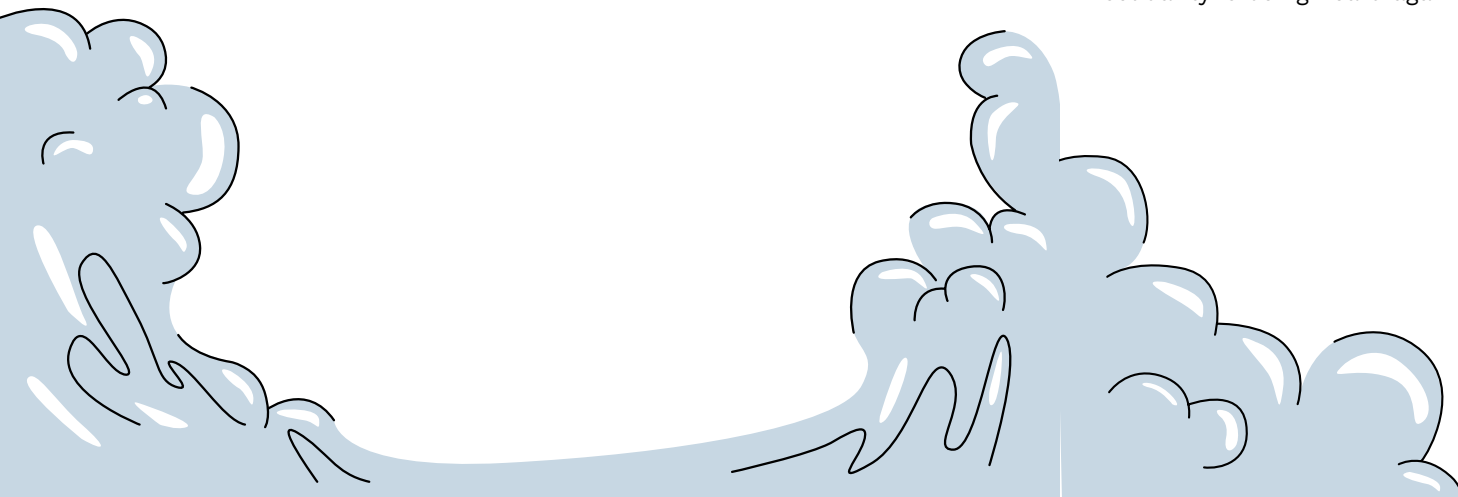
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The Coalition avenir Québec (CAQ) governed without significant opposition in its first term. When François Legault was elected in 2018, social movements were disconcerted by his approach. They did not imagine that the government was a genuine ally wanting to tackle social inequalities or climate change head-on. However, it did provide major sectoral reinvestments. These were not sufficient to compensate for the underfunding of previous years, but they marked a significant departure from the austerity of Liberal governments. At the time, it was difficult to criticize CAQ policies, except to say that it had reneged on its promise to carry out electoral reform.

Then came the pandemic. The public's attention was monopolized by public health issues, and any challenge to the government became almost inaudible. François Legault was Québec's father – taking up all the space, and clearly beginning to enjoy his ability to govern alone.

The state of emergency made it possible to govern by ministerial order, or worse yet, simply by public communications. But the pandemic episode is now behind us. Cracks have started to appear in the armour of Legault's paternalistic government. Its complete lack of interest in environmental and climate issues was demonstrated throughout last summer's forest fires, heat waves and torrential downpours, and with Bernard Drainville's famous comment "Lay off with your GHGs already!" in the middle of the 2022 election campaign. On another issue, during an acute housing crisis and with skyrocketing levels of homelessness in a number of regions, the premier and his minister for housing expressed nothing but contempt – as if everyone could "invest in real estate" to solve their problems. When a government gets used to ignoring criticism, it can develop bad habits, such as making promises during an election campaign that it has no intention of keeping.

The CAQ has shown that it must not be given a blank cheque. Today, public discontent is rising, opposition to its policies is growing. We are facing social and democratic setbacks, and we need to reassert the value of popular control over our collective institutions. We are facing attacks against our social safety net, and we need to defend its public character. As we face economic policies that favour the wealthiest among us, the voice of social solidarity is being heard again in the streets.

Only the private sector need apply

The government's will to impose its perspective through thick and thin is not without impact. The CAQ, deeply convinced of its entrepreneurial and neoliberal ideas, is in the process of dismantling our social safety net – an invaluable achievement that we built through decades of struggle, and that makes a key contribution to social justice. The government, in its zeal to make over entire sectors of our public services (or even of our social programs) to the private sector, is undermining their accessibility, their universality and their quality.

The project to create private mini-hospitals and Minister Dubé's pro-privatization reform of the health care system, the end of the AccèsLogis program, and the refusal to acknowledge inequalities in the school system illustrate the Legault government's lack of consideration for divergent views. Many of us were deeply critical of these decisions taken behind closed doors and of the spurious consultations held to justify CAQ projects. We need to remind the government that the people we elect are Quebecers' representatives, not their bosses.

Workers in the public sector and in community organizations are well aware of what's happening on the ground, and they understand the needs of the people who seek their services. They have a deeper grasp of the issues than the technocrats and ideologues currently governing us. These are the people who are in the best position to identify changes that would improve the system – and these are people who agree that a greater role for the private sector is not the solution to our problems. **Examples from Great Britain and the United States tell us that not only does private sector participation limit access to care, but it actually increases the costs borne by the government and by individuals.**

Rich people first

In addition to pursuing the privatization of public services and weakening our social safety net, **the Legault government is more and more obviously acting for the benefit of the economic elite and deepening social inequalities.**

Despite the fact that the government is strapped for cash and struggling to deliver essential services, the premier not only decided to go ahead with his costly promise of tax cuts for the benefit of the wealthy but has announced a return to austerity, while relentlessly sticking to his budget balancing targets.

After the reduction in school taxes enacted during his first mandate, another recurring $1.7 billion in lost public funds is now being channeled, in proportionally larger amounts, to the taxpayers with the highest incomes. Over 6 years, this amounts to some $10 billion that will not be available to meet public needs. And that's not counting the $3.5 billion in cheques that this same government decided to hand out at a time of high inflation, instead of introducing effective policies to help the people who are hardest hit by rising prices.

Québec's minimum wage, at $15.25 an hour, is still far from providing low-paid workers with a viable living – and we're not even talking about the obvious insufficiency of social assistance benefits. Far from being able to put money aside for their children, families with low and modest incomes must make heartbreaking choices on a daily basis, even for basic needs such as food and housing. These families are finding it difficult to make ends meet.

Meanwhile, Minister Fitzgibbon has no hesitation in distributing generous subsidies to his friends in the business world. For the CAQ, generosity is something that flows from the bottom up.

Democratic setbacks

Not only has the government failed to move forward with the electoral reform that it had promised to carry out, but since then, it has tabled bills that will reduce Quebecers' power over public institutions. In education, Bill 23 and Bill 40 give the minister excessive powers. In health and social services, Bill 15 gives private sector top guns the power to manage the system. These forms of dispossession strike us as dangerous. We believe Quebecers should have full control over public institutions and should be able to steer them on the basis of concrete realities and needs.

The CAQ's actions will make structures that are already removed from Quebecers more opaque and will strengthen the power of administrators and ministers instead of increasing the power of local communities. Worse yet, these reforms will allow ministers and private interests to interfere in the day-to-day management of institutions, to overturn decisions that don't suit them, and to punish anyone who doesn't toe the line. The possibility of voicing criticism within institutions will be greatly reduced or even eliminated, leaving a well-oiled machine that is ruled from the top. This is not the democratic model we want for our society.

Conclusion

We have an authoritarian government careening from one reform to the next, threatening our social safety net and our ability to act democratically. It's time to respond! We need to come together to protect our social achievements and avoid being dragged decades back in time. And we need to fight for a genuine ecological transition that will also bring greater social justice.

These issues affect each and every one of us, in every sector. They represent a threat to the basic principles determining the political choices that are – or should be – ours. We need to act together, across sectors, to turn the situation around and take back our public and political institutions.

THE CAQ IS OUT OF CONTROL. WE'VE GOT TO STOP IT!

STOP