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Certificate issued on April 26, 2024 to English Account NG C3 for personal and temporary display.

news-20211201-HHB-a0002269134

**Source name**

The Hill Times (Ottawa, ON)

**Source type**

Press • Newspapers

**Periodicity**

Bi-Weekly or Tri-weekly

**Geographical coverage**

National

**Origin**

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Wednesday, December 1, 2021

The Hill Times (Ottawa, ON)

• p. 10

• 811 words



Andrew Caddell

## The Quebec Liberal Party struggles for its soul

Andrew Caddell

**T**he Quebec Liberals' winning formula in the past was to be federalist and nationalist, be good stewards of the economy, keep a window open to the world, encourage basic rights, welcome immigrants, and encourage business to thrive.

KAMOURASKA, QUE.—Domi-nique Anglade is the eternal optimist. Coming out of its week-end policy convention in Quebec City, the Quebec Liberal Party gave her a ringing endorsement to develop a platform focused on the environment and a left-wing tilt to the economy. She believes this platform is her road to victory.

On the environment, the Liberals are calling for Quebec to nationalize hydro-gen energy and reduce greenhouse gases 45 per cent by 2030. On the economy, Anglade is calling for companies to share profits with employees, rely on domestic suppliers, and emphasize clean technologies.

Normally, the chief opposition party is thought of as a government in waiting. But in the unyielding politics of today's Quebec, it would be impossible to find

someone willing to put money on Anglade's Liberals beating François Legault and his Coalition Avenir Québec next year. It is unfortunate: Anglade is an engineer, and the brilliant daughter of Haitian immigrants. She speaks four languages, including German. She is the poster child for modern Quebec.

The problem is Legault's mix of charm and authoritarianism has gained the nationalist vote, and neutralized the moribund Parti Québécois and the upstart left-wing Québec solidaire. He has overwhelmingly won over the support of conservative francophones in the rural regions of Quebec, whose votes count disproportionately more than those in the cities. He has two pillars for his government: Bill 21, the so-called "secularism law" that discriminates against practicing Muslims, Sikhs and Jews; and Bill 96, his proposed language law. Never mind the thousands of Quebecers who died during the pandemic due to incompetence, or the lack of a cogent government strategy.

The Liberals, on the other hand, are dependent on urban voters, especially in

Montreal. Within cosmopolitan Montreal, the anglophone and ethnic communities have almost always skewed Liberal, and federalist. Anglade's dilemma is therefore this: appeal to anglophones and lose francophone votes, or seek out young people, nationalists, and those in the regions with a stronger pro-French message and gain seats.

Wading into this political minefield is former provincial minister of intergovernmental affairs Benoît Pelletier. Pelletier, who teaches law at the University of Ottawa, and who recently recovered from a two-month-long battle with COVID-19, wrote a lengthy article in *La Presse* last week entitled "The Quebec Liberal party has to find its soul."

In it, he offered Anglade some advice on how to win the next election. He proposed Quebec emphasize its nationhood at home and abroad, press the French language everywhere, and promote its ability to decide its own constitutional future. He suggested to be a federalist means to support greater autonomy for Quebec, and that while rights are important, "they should not be an obsession."

Pelletier is a contradiction: he sees himself as a great intellectual, and then comes forward with all the most hackneyed arguments one could imagine. He passes himself off as a federalist, only to be revealed to be what the late constitutional scholar and senator Eugene Forsey called a “hemi-demi-semi” separatist.

I heard Pelletier offer similar ideas at a McGill conference as a minister many years ago. He proposed Quebec pursue an international policy that would be the Gérin-Lajoie doctrine on steroids. The doctrine, named for late Liberal minister Paul Gérin-Lajoie, posits Quebec has the right to work in the international sphere in any area in which it is sovereign. For Pelletier, that means Quebec should be able to negotiate treaties on the world stage in health, labour, and education.

When he proposed that at McGill, he was eviscerated by longtime diplomat Paul Heinbecker, among others. Indeed, at Global Affairs, while consultation with provinces was primordial, unless the doctrine caused serious problems between Ottawa and Quebec, we just ignored it.

His final point, to throw out rights and established conventions because they are not politically convenient, is morally bankrupt. In short, Pelletier’s scrambled thoughts do not constitute a strategy.

The Quebec Liberals’ winning formula in the past, from Jean Lesage to Robert Bourassa to Philippe Couillard was to be federalist and nationalist, be good stewards of the economy, keep a window open to the world, encourage basic rights, welcome immigrants, and encourage business to thrive. It still makes

sense, and Anglade should recognize that, no matter what warhorses like Pelletier have to say.

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