

Engaging Communities Around Austerity and Alternatives in Quebec

Lessons from Thirty Years of Consultations

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ABOUT US

Austerity and its Alternatives is an international knowledge mobilization project committed to expanding discussions on alternatives to fiscal consolidation and complimentary policies among policy communities and the public. To learn more about our project, please visit www.altausterity.mcmaster.ca.

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Introduction

The term austerity has risen to prominence to capture the exercises in fiscal consolidation following the 2008 financial crisis. However, for polities that were not as heavily hit by that crisis, such as Canada as a whole or the province of Quebec, the austerity agenda holds heavy echoes of earlier moments of neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state: it is less about needing to cut the state in response to an active fiscal crisis, and more about needing to cut to avoid a debt/deficit crisis in an ill-defined medium-term. Given the relatively lack of success in derailing the austerity agenda, it may be worth looking at earlier responses to retrenchment, in terms of how they might help us think differently about the limitations of recent responses.

This analysis considers a particular form of political organization and action found in Quebec, namely the cross-provincial community consultation. The Quebec community sector is led by a small number of peak organizations that stand on top of regional and local “concertation tables” that federate individual organizations. In times of uncertainty or crisis, these peak organizations have engaged in large-scale, official cross-community consultations, trying to capture the views of local actors in terms of what is happening in their communities, and in the process to mobilize these actors around shared understandings of problems and of possible solutions. These consultations usually result in a report that helps define the organization’s political direction, but also increase the extent to which political demands are seen as reflecting a strong organizational consensus.

In particular, this analysis compares the consultations held in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the Mouvement d’éducation populaire et d’action communautaire du Québec (MÉPACQ), Solidarité Populaire Québec, and as part of the Québec féminin pluriel process, with the more recent ones held in 2015-2016 by the MÉPACQ and L’R des Centres de femmes. It will pay particular attention to the alternatives to austerity that are framed through the consultations and the politics that they propose. In addition, it will consider how the earlier consultations led (or did not lead) to success in developing alternatives, and where the more recent consultations have led so far.

Setting the Stage: Austerity in Quebec

Discussions of austerity in Quebec have a somewhat unreal character to them. The 2008-2009 financial crisis had limited impact on the province. At most, provincial GDP shrunk from \$311B in 2008 to \$309B in 2009, before growing every subsequent year. Unemployment increased from 7.2% to 8.6% from 2008-09, and



then declined into the 7-8% range in subsequent years. The financial crisis did push the budget deficit from balance in 2008-2009, to running deficits of about 1% of GDP from 2009-2011, with a return to most surpluses in 2014-15.

However, the global discourse of needing to rein in public indebtedness did resonate with longer standing tropes by the political right in the province, particularly around the weight of the province's debt and the limits this imposed on plans to cut taxes or to invest in public goods that might increase international competitiveness. In the mid-1980s, a first wave of attempts to restructure the Quebec state made frequent reference to the problem of the debt, and the fact that annual deficits were being used to cover current expenses rather than making longer-term investments. This view was intensified with the budgetary pressures induced by the early 1990s recession and the attendant double-digit unemployment rates. At the turn of the century, a bipartisan collective of former politicians (including former Premier Lucien Bouchard), economists and other opinion leaders, had warned of the need to act as soon the bailiff would be at the doors, and Jean Charest's subsequent provincial government created a "Generations Fund" that earmarked some hydroelectric revenues for paying down the debt. Heading into the 2008-2009 recession, the free market right had moved on to making tax cuts and privatization the core of their demands, but that changed back to the problem of public finances after the recession.

Despite the fact that a crisis in public finances was a hard sell, and the need for state retrenchment to balance an already nearly balanced budget visibly untrue, the government did engage in a very tight budgetary policy, keeping expenditure growth at or near the rate of inflation, including for health, social services and education (Graefe and Rioux 2018, 169). Indeed, the province's conservative fiscal policy would seem to explain some of its recurrent budgetary shortfalls, as anemic growth in aggregate demand contributed to revenues coming in under projection (Graefe and Rioux 2018).

In response to this, a number of social movement actors adopted the frame of austerity to categorize the government's budgetary policy, in the hope of developing an anti-austerity politics. This included the Institut de Recherche et d'Informations Socio-Économiques (IRIS) think tank, which created an Observatory on the Consequences of Austerity Measures in Quebec to catalogue the impact of austerity measures on service cuts. By early 2018, they had catalogues over \$4B in cuts post-2014. More substantially, two important provincial peak organizations, the MÉPACQ and the L'R des centres de femmes, undertook province-wide consultations with their member organizations organized specifically around the theme of austerity.

These consultations were not in themselves unusual, but form part of a standing repertoire within the community and women's movement. As these movements are organized by federating local organizations into regional or sectoral



tables, which are then federated into peak level organizations, the representative legitimacy of these peak organizations in engaging the state is founded on ongoing practices of discussion and consultation. At moments of particular strain or challenge, one response is to engage in province-wide consultations. These can take a variety of forms, ranging from having formal “commissioners” receiving testimony from citizens and local organizations, to having the staff or members of local organizations participate in structured workshops to reflect on challenges and propose ideas for change. These consultations can be traced back at least as far as Solidarité Populaire’s consultations in the 1980s, as well as those of the women’s movement’s Pour un Québec féminin pluriel consultations at the turn of the 1990s.

The persistence of an official discourse of necessary austerity, and the periodic return to the formula of the province-wide consultation does open the question of whether the comparison of earlier consultations with current ones might provide some lessons or insights for evaluating the potential and limits of the most recent consultations. To that end, we will consider three consultation processes from the 1980s and early 1990s, and compare them with the most recent examples. There is a two-fold interest in this comparison. First, one can consider whether the alternatives arising from these consultations move beyond protest to propose an alternative set of social and economic arrangements. Second, one can consider whether the form of response is a promising one for overcoming barriers to alternatives.

Back in the Eighties and Nineties

The early to mid-1980s were a morose time for the Quebec left, marked by the failure of the 1980s referendum, the imposition of the Canada Act in 1982 against the wishes of Quebec, the Parti Québécois’ (PQ) turn to an austerity politics in its second term (including unilaterally reopening public sector collective agreements to impose significant salary concessions), and the landslide victory of an openly revanchist Quebec liberal government in 1985. Both the 1981-85 PQ and the post-1985 Liberal governments mobilized arguments about necessary austerity. The need for austerity was justified on a number of grounds, including the size of the debt (whose servicing had become more costly with the sharp rise in interest rates), as well as a more general argument that Quebec had developed a culture of statism that was suboptimal in terms of crowding out private sector wealth creation. These arguments were in turn harnessed to state budgetary policies that involved cuts in funding for social policies, including those delivered by community organizations (for a fuller discussion see Graefe 2016).

Solidarité Populaire du Québec was a first attempt at building a resistance to this retrenchment project. Formed in 1985, it brought together community and union groups that were seeking to protect the universality of existing social



programmes. Its first major initiative was the creation of an Itinerant Popular Commission in the spring of 1986 to “study the everyday consequences of State disengagement and to invite people to engage in the debt on this important societal choice (SPQ 1987, 5). The four commissioners held hearings in eight cities in January and February 1987, received 130 briefs and met with 250 groups in the popular sector.

In its report, the Commission presented the social programmes at risk of state cuts as the result of collective action of unions and other associations, and thus as the political expression of the collective nature of society. It thus presented the move to cut the state within a broader framework of incomplete democratization, where the move to cut state services or to instrumentalize community groups to replace the state, was a step backwards. Instead, the process of democratization needed to continue through a renewed emphasis on full employment and the extension of social services. It was not enough to maintain a welfarist “protector state” that did not leave space for citizens and their initiatives – the state needed to be democratized by offering service users a voice in decision-making (SPQ 1987, 97. 106-107). Despite hearing a vast array of different ways forward, the key points of consensus coming out of the SPQ Commission were the need to develop a meaningful “right to work” – a right to stable, well-paid, valorizing work, a guaranteed income assured through a higher minimum wage, and an expanded range of free and accessible public services.

It cannot be said that this Commission undermined the Bourassa government’s restructuring strategies of the late 1980s, although it was part of a concerted response to that government’s agenda of state change that may have helped derail it. It did place its opposition within the context of an alternative vision of democratizing the state and ensuring good work for all, and thus looked forward to a second set of provincial consultations in the early 1990s about the “Québec qu’on veut bâtir” (Solidarité Populaire, 1992).

This second set of provincial consultations ran soon after the MÉPACQ’s own cross-provincial consultations of organizations involved in popular education and autonomous community action. The MÉPACQ’s member organizations requested an initiative to provide a renewed vision of society that they could rally around. Starting in the winter of 1991, over 140 groups were consulted, and then various regional and sectoral tables worked through drafts ahead of the adoption of a statement in the fall of 1992.

In terms of development, the MÉPACQ (1999) decried that “the social is made dependent on the economic, and the latter is developed according to the decisions of a small handful of possessors.” In its place, it demanded “an economically and socially just society where the distribution of wealth and the organization of work allows everyone, individually and collectively, to fully flourish.” This society would be built around full employment, fair taxation, accessible



education and equitable social policies. In many ways, the vision here was a return to pushing the post-war welfare state forward in the direction of redistribution and de-commodification, while addressing its exclusions related to discrimination against various subaltern groups and in terms of ecology.

A third example comes from the Quebec women's movement, reacting both to the crisis of the welfare state as part of the 1990s recession, and the exclusion of women's representatives from the Bélanger-Campeau Commission. As the president of the National Women's Forum, Germaine Vaillancourt noted, "At this point of time where Quebec is called on to make choices and to embark in a constitutional process it is important for us as women to work in solidarity to define the parameters of the society that we want" (Forum national des femmes 1992, 1). This took the form of meetings with over 1300 women's groups across Quebec in the winter of 1992 around a consultation document aiming to "enlarge women's reflection [beyond specific day to day struggles around issues like access to work or poverty] and to systematize it in order to give a significant weight to the voice of Quebec's women" (Forum national des femmes 1992, 3). These consultations led to the creation of a novel economic vision that centred social utility rather than competitiveness, and emphasized improving work and living conditions through improving and consolidating unpaid and poorly paid labour in community based caring services (Forum Pour un Québec féminin pluriel 1994, 74-81).

Recent Consultations on Austerity

The sorts of consultations undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s continue to be undertaken, although not always on the specific topic of austerity. Nevertheless, both the MÉPACQ and the L'R des Centres des femmes have engaged the topic of austerity more directly since the return of the Liberals to power after 2014.

L'R des Centres put together an animation kit on austerity for its 15 regional tables, which gathered the views of the 225 women sitting on them. To this was added the testimony of 198 women reached in women's centres and public spaces across the province, as well as 8 roundtables with 78 participants discussing strategies for compensating for the impacts of austerity in their daily lives (L'R des Centres 2016, 12-13). The report captures in fine grain detail the multitude of ways that austerity has an impact on the lives of women, and by extension how it increases demands on women's centres, even as the latter lose funding or spaces of regional political representation. Unlike the reports of the 1980s and 1990s, or indeed the organization's own reflections on their placement in an alternative development strategy (Belleau and D'Amours, 1993), these reflections on austerity were largely defensive, without providing much space for enunciating an alternative project of development.



A somewhat similar case can be made concerning the MÉPACQ's engagement with austerity (. While the MÉPACQ has not held formal consultations on this topic, it has invested considerable energies in plugging the popular and community education sector into anti-austerity coalition work, and in preparing the idea of the social strike. It has also sought to engage the concept of austerity in parallel to the education and mobilization of its base around the perceived atrophy of the government's policy of recognizing and supporting autonomous community action. The MÉPACQ's explainer on austerity treated it as a form of neoliberalism and of right wing politics, building a law and order state, as compared to the Left's project of building a redistributive state tending towards equality. Perhaps related to not following a process of consultation, the MÉPACQ's alternatives are not that strongly framed. They seek to find new resources for the state, and call on community mobilization to "develop alternatives that lead to genuine social justice" (MÉPACQ 2015, 7). The strategy of the alternative is not greatly developed. This is similarly the case in a later pamphlet noting that the projects of fighting against austerity and for better funding for community action are one in the same, in the sense that the funding will not come until the project of austerity is defeated (MÉPACQ 2016). In this later case, there is more development of the idea from the 1980s and 1990s that public services reflect a collective inheritance, but less placement of the defensive fight against austerity within a broader struggle for an alternative social order.

Conclusion: Lessons for Overcoming Impediments to Alternatives to Austerity

These five examples are interesting in underlining that the alternative to less is more. In other words, in all cases, but to varying extents, taking action against cuts included a critique rather than an embrace of the status quo ante. This allowed for a counter discourse that went beyond cataloguing specific cuts to particular programmes or clientele, to embrace a larger collective project of democratization. It also allowed for a more complex relationship with the state: austerity is not about less state, so much as a reconfiguration of the state away from projects of collective emancipation. So posed, it allows groups to mobilize not only in defensive battles against austerity, but also towards a broader set of values. It may be that the consultations of the 1980s and 1990s did this better than more recent ones, because they seemed to have more self-confidence in the possibility of achieving their alternative. They could look back to the long Quiet Revolution, including the PQ's first term, and they could look forward to a potential "new founding" given the strength of the sovereignist movement. In the current moment, finding a way to keep hope for major social reform alive is a major challenge for avoiding the



impediment posed by simply searching for a return to less punitive budgetary policies.

A second lesson is more organizational. The back and forth between base level groups, the regional or sectoral groups to which they belong, and their further federation in provincial level organizations, is important. In their Marxist analysis of social movements, Cox and Nilsen (2014) are interested in how locally felt problems can spur learning processes that can be scaled up through campaigns into projects that might name the “totality” and develop hegemonic potentials for replacing existing structures of power and inequality. The examples here certainly fall short of this revolutionary end point, but they do indicate ways that investment in thorough consultation processes renews movement capacity. By bringing contemporary lived experiences into a structured dialogue, provincial organizations are able to telescope the scaling process, even as they are made aware that their representative and mobilizing capacity requires a constant updating of language and vision in response. These organizational lessons help shed light on the relative successes of the student movement in the Maple Spring, who developed a set of institutions to bridge the local and the national (see Pineault 2013), compared to the much better resourced public sector unions, whose top-down structures choked off local mobilization and imagination in the 2015 Common Front negotiations (eg. Lacoursière 2016).



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