

Quebec Students and a Maple Spring

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Wednesday, May 09, 2012

<http://politicsrespun.org/2012/05/4663/>

What do you think about the [student strike in Quebec](#)?

What do you think of the [Manifesto for a Maple Spring](#)?

Some of the Politics, Re-Spun crew explore it from each of our perspectives:

1. Are people naive to expect the Quebec tuition protesters to be the leaders of a Maple Spring to expand the Arab Spring from 2011 through Canada this year?

There are very different conditions in Canada and Arab world, obviously. Nonetheless, it's clear that protest, insurrection and civil disobedience have re-entered the public imagination as a legitimate form of participatory politics. As such, I don't read the "Maple Spring" moniker as a suggestion that our political establishment is on par with what the Egyptian or Tunisians had to put up with. I think of it more as a solidarity "nod." All the same, political corruption and dissatisfaction is political reality around world—splitting hairs seems less important than actually organizing and mobilizing to "kick the bastards out!" - Jasmin

I honestly think it's naive to think that we can just "import" the western-named Arab spring into Canada to have it become the rather awesomely named "printemps érable." So much of what has led to the uprising in the Arab world - along so many hundreds and even thousands of deaths - is probably specific to more local currents of strife and oppression and resistance. So, to say that thousands of Quebec students will lead a revolution that will depose a dictator, all in the face of amazingly oppressive action from a military force set on killing them? Yeah, no. Have the Québec student protests reignited a feeling of resistance to the imposition of government policies that many don't agree with? Yes, absolutely. - Kevin

I think naive is a word that is more of a gauge of a person's attitude than a word describing the effect of the protests. If we are hopeful that the mobilization and activism in Quebec this spring can inspire the rest of Canada, then we're not naive. If we are pessimistic about how much this sentiment can spread then perhaps it is naive to think this. We should also keep in mind that how the Arab Spring worked there will necessarily be different here. Note the hundreds of cities around the world that tried to create their own Tahrir Square when the Occupy Movement started didn't generally succeed. So if there is to be a Maple Spring, we need to draw from recent and past experiences and look at what worked and hasn't worked in Quebec and make our own way forward. - Stephen

2. Should the Quebec protesters be less confrontational?

Define "confrontation." From everything the press has been reporting, most of the cases of violence were the result of ridiculously over-zealous and brutal police actions. Still, these kids have fought the

government, at the very least, to a stand-still. Again, I'm not sure what we mean by confrontation but clearly street mobilizations work: you don't ignore a movement of that size, no matter how much the corporate media may attempt to mock, belittle and dismiss them. - Jasmin

No. They've tried to ask nicely, they've made their submissions to government, and Charest has just told them to f--- off. If you're non-confrontational and no one listens to you, and then you're non-confrontational and the government dismisses you, are you going to be non-confrontational when the stuff you're opposing is put into place? This whole "be viciously non-confrontational!" strain of freaking out seems to suggest that people should just say "No, please." and not do anything when they're completely ignored. - Kevin

I think confrontation is the soul of protest and civil disobedience. With more than a dozen people arrested this weekend [blocking a coal train](#) at the 49th parallel, we see that choosing to not confront means always limiting the extent of power the people will try to exercise. I expect this to be a summer of protest against pipelines, in support of sound environmental policies and against contemptuous federal government policies. Confrontation in various degrees needs to be on the table.- Stephen

3. Are they starting a class war?

They're not "starting" one, because the rich in this country, as in most of the world, have been waging a class war against the poor and working classes for generations. But they may very well finally be recognizing this, and thinking of themselves as a class to boot. This, in any case, is a positive development. - Jasmin

No idea. How are you defining class war? How would the Quebecois and Quebecois define class war? - Kevin

I think the class war started centuries ago when the elites decided to go Monty Python and the Holy Grail on the historical 99%. Fish don't know they're in water. Most of us don't understand the shifting sands of income quintiles to know that the rich have been getting insanely richer in recent decades while the poor and the middle income groups are suffering. The class war went from cold to hot a few times in recent centuries: the rise of democracy [sic], the union movement during the industrial revolution, the detente after the Great Depression, the 1960s in Canada, then the neoliberalism of the last few decades. - Stephen

4. How will/should the Occupy movement in Canada pick up from what the students have started in Quebec?

It comes down to numbers and sympathy. Those early protests in Montreal were excellent at showing parents, elders, teacher and Professors coming out in solidarity with the students. Only after did we really see the concentrated anti-protest narrative from the media, once they realized how big this thing had grown, and that the protesters actually enjoyed a considerable amount of sympathy from the public. As such, the Occupy movement is faced with a classic dilemma: how do we grow our movement and how do we appeal to the greatest number of people, without selling out our principles? I'm not sure I have the answers to these problems, but a more coherent and pointed agenda would be near the top of the list, I believe. Setting short term, local goals as well would go a long way towards winning support and growing the movement. - Jasmin

No idea. Despite my experience in the student movement, and my passion for student activism, it's worth remembering that students occupy a politically privileged and bracketed existence - they're allowed, anticipated, expected to be more radical than the rest of society *because* they're in school; other segments of society do not have the same privilege to the same degree. And given that the Occupy 'movement' is no longer a media darling, while I'm sure much good and honest effort will be expended, I have no idea what will come of it. - Kevin

Quebec is a black box for much of English Canada. We don't know how they operate or what their cultural styles are in protest. We need to seek out their wisdom: how did they organize themselves, what are their principles and priorities, how do they make decisions, how do they design tactics, what do leaders do? They're clearly the most successful protest event in recent memory in Canada so we should look at what works there, how the rest of Canada is similar and different and apply lessons accordingly. Do you hear me, Occupy Movement? This is where we should be going. - Stephen

5. Will Charest go for a quick spring election before his poll numbers plummet before a 2013 election?

I doubt it. I think politicians are like most students, in this respect: I'll do it tomorrow! If anything, you'd think his popularity would be at a low point now. 2013 at least gives him time to distract everyone from their step-down regarding the tuition. - Jasmin

Question presupposes an outcome - what if his numbers go up because of the hausse de scolarite? There are some reports that suggest this would happen - and I don't know enough about Quebec politics to comment. - Kevin

If Charest can get a spinnable win this spring or by the fall, possibly. If not, he may need to buy as much time as possible before going to the polls, as late as December 2013. Much depends on how the students convert they message into one that resonates with the non-student voting population, and what kind of alternatives there are to the Charest Liberals, which is in part affected by the fluctuating state of the BQ and PQ and general separatist voting movements. - Stephen

6. Why isn't the corporate media covering the quarter million students protesting?

Same reason they didn't cover the Occupy movement. It's not in their interests. It sets a dangerous precedent, showing people that can actually change the political environment if they organize and demonstrate in numbers. That's not the sort of behaviour you want to promote if your life's blood depends on a depoliticised body politic. In Canada, politics is supposed to be a spectator sport and the media simply will not stand for the "fans" rushing on to the field. - Jasmin

They are in Quebec. The student federations' press conference announcing the tentative deal was carried province wide and attracted international attention. They're just not covering in the rest of Canada. - Kevin

Corporate media, being corporate, is neoliberal by nature. Their for-profit agenda favours low taxes, low public funding of services and high user fees with a liberal dose of privatization. There is nothing for them to gain from credibly presenting what is happening in Quebec to the rest of the country. I think

we're looking at some pretty widespread censorship through omission. - Stephen

7. What kind of political evolution do you want to see in Canada this year?

Most of all, I'd like to see the same kind of street mobilizations happening across the country as we have seen in Quebec. At the very least we though should see some major indictments to come out of the whole "robo-calls" saga but that seems increasingly unlikely. A couple toppled Provincial governments also never hurts. - Jasmin

Not enough room to comment here. Some democracy might be nice. - Kevin

I want to see a renewal of civil power: citizens asserting their rights to take part in policy formation in the face of cynical, soft fascist, contemptuous governments with anti-worker, pro-carbon energy agendas. I'd like to see line-ups of people wanting to get into the visitor galleries of legislatures. I want to see the people paying attention to the Occupy Movement, which itself needs to express its ideals more effectively to the broader 99%. I want to see people in the streets to support first nations pursuing political, economic, social and environmental justice. That's all. - Stephen