



The Charest Government's Record

August 22, 2012

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The Charest Government's Record, Year One

9 Years in Power in 527 Words

2003 — The Charest government is elected by repeatedly affirming that the State is “an instrument to help citizens succeed” whose missions include health, knowledge, prosperity and security. It promotes quality services to citizens, transparency and efficiency, decentralization, partnership and accountability. It seeks to work side by side with “partners of the State”; the municipalities, community organizations and private companies who in return must be accountable to those elected to the National Assembly for the responsibilities they assume and the related resources they are allotted.

Coming into power - The government states that there is “no social consensus on what are or should be the main tasks of the State, making it difficult to match the redefinition of the role of the State with the fundamental values of Quebec society.”

The work plan of the Charest government – Over the last nine years, the public experiences the implementation of this vision of the State based on a work plan to revise structures and programs.

The key words in this plan: unloading, abolition, partnership, privatization and savings.

Public-private partnerships, outsourcing, the overtaking of activities by local and regional administrations or non-profit community organizations are just a few of the avenues to be explored. A veritable open bar allowing for budget cuts proposals with consulting firms helping the Charest government to reengineer the State.

A reengineering of the State in contempt of democracy – All of this reengineering was undertaken without public debate, without debate in the National Assembly, in back rooms sidestepping elected MPs, showing nothing but contempt for democracy. This is far removed from a reform of democratic institutions and a respect for the role of the MP.

A government which serves the free market – Today, even if the vocabulary has changed, the idea remains the same. Over the years, we have gone from a social-democratic government to a government that acts as a facilitator for private enterprise.

Slowed down by public discontent – During its first mandate, this “true crusader of economic liberalism” is forced to deal with public dissatisfaction which significantly tarnishes its public image. During its second mandate, its minority government status restricts its appetite for radical projects. It is forced to take small steps rather than rush headlong with reforms in all directions.

Another majority government in 2008 – Jean Charest wants to revive the economy, create jobs and, more than anything else, make Quebec “first in the world in the production of clean and renewable energy”. He’s thinking big and wants to be the master of mega projects: the Plan Nord, an alliance between France and Quebec on the development of manpower, a Canada-European Union agreement, a sort of free trade agreement to counterbalance Quebec’s dependence on the United States.

BUT... the spotlight ends up more on the problems of ethics and transparency, criticisms of how natural resources are being managed, disregard for groups who don’t share the government’s vision and finally the student crisis which mobilizes a significant segment of society.

Today, on the eve of the next election, it’s time to present our organization’s review of the last nine years of Jean Charest’s government. This review will revisit the issues which are of the greatest concern to the CSQ.

Education

The Charest government had put education and training at the heart of its priorities in 2009. But its management of this sector has reflected a very narrow view of education. In fact, it employed all sorts of measures and diversions to avoid addressing or acting on many of these issues. Granted, it implemented a number of initiatives to deal with several pressing issues, such as the high dropout rate among our youth. But many of these initiatives simply imposed a temporary fix on problems that demand coherent actions over the long term.

Problematic school reforms

When the Charest government assumed power in 2003, school reforms were in full swing, provoking many concerns:

- the reforms were being implemented at too fast a pace;
- the issue of not allowing primary schools to make students repeat a year;
- the disappearance of specific streams in secondary schools and skills assessment.

Resistance - The unions and parents forced the government to alter its approach. For example, we gave back schools the option to fail a student at the end of any primary cycle, not just at the end of primary school. In hindsight, we think the Charest government has slowly distanced itself from the original reforms, casting off the most controversial aspects dealing with skills assessment and the debate on the role of knowledge in skills assessment.

Special needs – Education unions fought hard to get the government to invest in special needs in their 2009 budget, two results of which were:

- a 20% reduction in ratios for grades 3 and 4 in disadvantaged regions;
- a 10% reduction in ratios for grade 3 in all other regions.

Professional services and support for struggling students were the two most important issues neglected. After repeated demands from the community, the government finally proposed a plan of action to support the success of special needs students and a review of the methods to be used to integrate these students into regular classes. This doesn't solve everything, but it's a step in the right direction.

An act to prevent bullying and violence in schools – This bill adopted by the Charest government incorporated many CSQ demands:

- Making it obligatory for school administrations to deal with complaints to protect victims;

- The implementation of measures to ensure that the action plan is publicized distributed, updated and applied in schools;
- Training in civility and “e-citizenship” for students;
- The naming of a person to assume responsibility for these matters in each school.

The dropout rate – The Liberal government has made a significant change to the reading program based on a CSQ proposal to deal with the school dropout rate. Unfortunately, the election will prevent this proposal from being realized.

Action plans to deal with failure rates and a lack of vision

To ensure the success of as many students as possible, a coherent vision of the changes which need to be made to education is essential. This vision has been lacking for the nine years that the Charest government has been in power.

At stake: a sporadic approach to the management of educational problems, with too many action plans, like those dealing with reading (three different action plans), violence, retention and academic access, special needs, etc. Many of these plans were launched to silence criticism, without any real analysis of what is actually needed.

Consequences: many stakeholders in schools feel overwhelmed by a flood of expectations arising from these action plans, unequipped to respond. Most often, the government does not monitor the implementation of these action plans which are often applied in very different ways in different schools.

Another example: in February 2011, Prime Minister Charest announced in his inaugural speech that, within five years, every 6th grade student would be doing half of their school year in English. Teacher unions reacted by denouncing this improvisation and the absence of any analysis of the impact this measure would have on student learning, the working conditions of teachers and the feasibility within the school itself. These concerns are still relevant today.

Budget cuts – This government implemented budget cuts of nearly \$600 million per year. These cuts obviously affected the service educational personnel were able to provide to students. Adult education, chronically underfunded to begin with, suffers the most. Already insufficient funding in this sector was frozen, despite the presence of far more students, not to mention Quebec’s special need for professional and technically trained manpower. Quebec is forecast to need 1.4 million such workers by 2020.

A neoliberal vision of education

The government’s vision is characterized by a desire to introduce more neoliberal governance to education (outsourcing, results-based management, performance requirements, etc.) and the decentralization of powers to educational organizations.

Examples: adding new provisions to the Public Education Act (Bill 88) aimed at encouraging partnership and management agreements between the MELS, school

boards and educational establishments. These agreements have given the Charest government the opportunity to introduce American style educational management practices by forcing school boards and schools to meet predetermined numerical targets. Not only do these initiatives not respond to the basic needs of students, they also put undue pressure on school personnel to achieve results defined in advance by the government.

Higher education

The Charest government has failed to take seriously the future of higher education in the regions, including CEGEPs. This, despite the fact that several proposals for funding and measures to ensure sustainability have been repeatedly made. The government has chosen to focus instead on imposing new rules of governance to colleges and universities and on introducing performance indicators.

The hallmark of the Charest government - Its condescension and paternalistic treatment of students and its consistent refusal to discuss the raising of tuition fees with student associations. Appropriating the themes of violence and intimidation while posing as a victim of these same things and ardently defending law and order, it chose to attempt to solve the problem with a special law which tried to gag the protestors, hoping to break the student movement and muzzle a significant segment of the public who were democratically expressing their disagreement with the government's uncompromising attitude.

The Government's Record on Healthcare¹

In 2003, Jean Charest's big promise was to fix the healthcare system.

Empty promises – The Charest government has clearly not kept its promise, the same problems are still with us and for good reason:

- A chronic lack of funding causing problems in our system;
- Tax cuts for individuals and companies reducing government revenues;
- A ceiling of 5% on increased funding of the system, of which 3.6% comes from the province's consolidated funds and the rest from the health contribution.

Rationalization of healthcare – During its three mandates, the government has focused on certain reforms to streamline the organization of healthcare, including institutional mergers (CH-CHSLD-CLSC). But we have actually witnessed a decrease in access to health services such as access to a family doctor, to frontline services, diagnostic services and surgery.

A health tax and growth of the private sector – To address this situation, the Liberal government introduced a \$200 health contribution on citizens, regardless of personal income, and significantly increased the privatization of the sector. Some examples:

- The growth of specialized medical centres for minor surgeries and allowing public institutions to sign contracts with these centres;
- The growth of public-private partnerships (PPP) for the construction and maintenance of new facilities in the health sector;
- The development of long term care facilities by the private sector and private intermediate resources;
- An increase in fees charged by medical centres ignoring the regulations;
- The development of a market for private home care services, placement agencies, diagnostic services (radiology and laboratory) and finance companies.

Favouring the pharmaceutical industry –The government has failed to control the rising costs of drugs. Despite the increasing cost of the public drug insurance plan, the Liberal government introduced policies which favour the pharmaceutical industry, systematically rejecting our demands to restrict the marketing practices of this industry and most importantly our recommendation to establish a universal drug plan and a policy to control drug costs.

¹ For a detailed version of our analysis, consult the document « Santé et services sociaux: des solutions pour un système public » available on the CSQ website.

The development and management of social programs with the private sector – Along with the privatization of medical and hospital services, the Liberal government, with the support of the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon, is setting up a public-private partnership with the creation of the Fonds pour le développement des jeunes enfants, and, in partnership with the Fiducie de la famille Chagnon, a fund to support caregivers of seniors. The government is allowing private foundations to participate in the development and management of social programs. Meanwhile, prevention and the development of social services are still the most neglected areas of the public sector, especially services dealing with mental health problems.

The problems with frontline services - The government deployed what they called family medicine groups but they failed to improve access to a family doctor or evening and weekend access to doctors. The problem remains unsolved. In addition, the proposal to provide nurse practitioner services went nowhere; the Minister failed to exert any leadership to attempt to convince general practitioners to delegate tasks to nurse practitioners.

What the Charest government has done – Within the last year of its mandate, it was active in the area of services for the elderly:

- Certification of residences for the elderly;
- Making it easy for the elderly to terminate leases when they need to move into a long-term care facility;
- A policy of aging at home;
- A special commission to address the issue of dying with dignity.

Insufficient services for the elderly – Despite these advances, the main issue remains the development of sufficient public services for the elderly, particularly in the areas of housing and long-term care as well as home services which are grossly inadequate to meet the needs of the elderly.

And finally – The government's preference for extremely hierarchical management of the health care sector with emphasis on accountability and productivity has intensified workloads for personnel. All these reforms both on the infrastructure of the organization and the organization of care and services have a direct impact on the working conditions of those who work in the health and social services sector.

Taxation, Public Finances and Management of the State

Balancing the books at the expense of tax fairness and public services

During its last term, the Charest government's performance as steward of public finances appears to be relatively good. Despite rising unemployment and the economic slowdown caused by one of the biggest financial crises since the Great Depression and a reduction of equalization payments from the federal government, Quebec managed to limit its deficits to well below the average of its principal economic partners. At the height of the crisis, Quebec's deficit equalled 1.3% of its GDP, as compared to 2% for Canada, 2.4% for Ontario and close to 10% for the United States. But this balancing of finances was achieved at the expense of tax fairness and quality public services. Is this ideological insistence on getting back to balanced budgets in the shortest possible time being used as an excuse for implementing unpopular reforms?

Taxes, fees and other regressive fiscal measures

More than a third of the deficit accumulated during the recession can be attributed to the impact of tax policies adopted by the Liberals during their two previous mandates. The government itself acknowledges that it gave up \$1.5 billion in revenue with income tax cuts and more than a billion dollars with the elimination of the capital gains tax for companies.

Meeting the shortfall with « taxes » - Minister Bachand started what he refers to as "cultural revolution" by replacing the financing of public services based on progressive taxation with a regressive approach based on user fees. Fees, consumption taxes and regressive charges are making up more and more of the financing:

- A health tax of \$200 per adult;
- A 75% increase in university tuition fees;
- Indexation of all fees, except for day care;
- An increase of the QST of 2 percentage points;
- A gradual increase of the gasoline tax of 1 cent per year;
- An increase of 4.5% in parental insurance contributions;
- An announced eventual increase of 14% in electricity rates.

Faced with opposition from the public and unions, the government backed away from its proposal to charge user fees for health care.

Public services in a Spartan regime

To achieve a balanced budget quickly, the Charest government is paring down public services. Growth in spending for social programs is being kept well below the Canadian average. With the exception of the health and education sectors which are getting budget increases just to cover rising costs, all other services entrusted to the State have had their budgets either cut or frozen. Savings are often achieved on the backs of public sector workers who have to assume heavier workloads, especially with the non-replacement of one out of two retirements. The loss of this public expertise affects not only the quality of services but also the independence of the State.

The spectre of “reengineering” still lurks

Despite Monique Jérôme-Forget's inability to identify the “fat” in government social programs and structures when the concept of reengineering and the obsession with “modernizing the State” first emerged, the spectre is back. This time, the government is proceeding directly with the abolition of about thirty organizations and agencies:

- Conseil consultatif du travail et de la main-d'œuvre;
- Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance;
- Conseil permanent de la jeunesse, etc.

Progressive social forces had to mobilize to prevent the dismantling of the Salary Equity Commission and the abolition of RECYC-QUÉBEC.

Even though the government abolished the Agence des partenariats public-privé and replaced it with Infrastructures Québec, they did not give up on the use of PPPs in the development of major public projects.

Problems Shovelled into the Future

Good news for the budget – The government finally came to an agreement on the harmonization of sales taxes with the federal government. This agreement makes \$2.2 billion available to Finance Minister Bachand, which helped him to finalize his last budgets.

Bad news for the future – Since these sums are not recurring and tax harmonization will result in the loss of half a billion dollars due to the repayment of business taxes, a \$875 billion shortfall in government finances is already forecast starting in 2014.

Ethics and Governance

The scandals surrounding political party finances and the awarding of public contracts have taken centre stage in Quebec politics. Collusion, patronage and cronyism are the words being used to describe the situation.

Conflicts of interest – This explosion is due in part to the emergence of an increasingly structured privileged club of consulting engineering firms which have established a close relationship with the Ministry of Transport with consequences revealed by the Auditor General:

- The awarding of contracts without tender;
- Non-compliance with regulations;
- Inflated bids;
- Administrative laxity;
- Lack of resources;
- A close relationship between the government and consulting firms.

Favouritism – While in power, the government has tried to patch up its integrity with a series of bills, but.... Other allegations have emerged concerning the granting of private daycare places whose owners have contributed to the Liberal Party's election fund. Once again, the government proposed a bill to tighten up regulations governing educational daycare in an attempt to demonstrate its intention to clean things up and introduce more stringent rules for private daycare services.

Investigative Commission – using ongoing police investigations as a pretext, this government resisted setting up an investigative commission on the construction industry as long as it could.

After nine years of political governance, the Liberal Party of Quebec is leaving weakened by numerous allegations tainting its integrity.

Language

Increasing use of English in the metropolitan area – The need to preserve and promote the French language for a society situated on an Anglophone North American continent and having to deal with a major push to bilingualize is a major issue. Yet, despite all the data demonstrating the status of French in Quebec, the Liberal government persists in denying reality, especially the growth of English on the Island of Montreal and in regions north and south.

The problem of “bridging schools” – These non-subsidized private schools were being attended by students hoping to eventually qualify for Anglophone public schools. The government chose to “regulate” recourse to these schools rather than ban it.

Language in the workplace – The facts speak for themselves. It is possible to live exclusively in English in Montreal. It is possible to work without speaking or understanding the French language and receive all services without speaking French. Needing to remain competitive and serve clients all over the world in several sectors, Quebec companies are increasingly using English as the language in the workplace. This is the case in the field of aerospace, pharmaceutical companies, information technology and brokerage firms in Quebec.

A refusal to intervene – Despite this situation, the Liberal government refuses to impose strict rules on the language of work, including mandatory measures on the Francization of work for businesses with 50 employees or less. These companies represent more than a third of private sector workers, including a large proportion of new immigrants and allophones.

The language of signs – When it comes to commercial signage, the Charest government refuses to act more strongly. It hides behind the OLF and behind its awareness campaign coupled with financial assistance for small businesses wanting to correct their signage.

In all cases, we are a long way from vigorous political intervention in defence and promotion of the French language.

The Economy, Jobs and Regional Development

Public Investments to Rescue the Economy

The Liberal Party began its third term in the midst of a recession affecting the entire world economy. Like all governments, left or right, Charest's new team was forced to give the State a central role in stabilizing the economy and minimizing the consequences of the crisis. By happy coincidence, the massive investment program that was launched in response to the collapse of the Concorde Overpass came just in time to enhance what had been a very moderate recovery plan. These two rapid injections of public money combined with the importance of Quebec's public sector and its diversified economy helped Quebec emerge from the crisis in good shape. When the crisis ended, Quebec actually had more jobs. In 2012, Quebec had 2.7% more jobs than before the crisis (2008) while the increase for Canada was only 2.5% and 1.7% for Ontario. It is historically significant that throughout the crisis, Quebec's unemployment rate remained lower than Ontario's. On the other hand, disappointing employment figures earlier this year suggest that the government's premature adoption of austerity measures is likely to jeopardize or slow down recovery.

We must acknowledge that the government was wise to accept the proposal from partners in the job market to enhance a job creation pact with \$500 million. This program helped support job retention and redeployment of workers during the crisis.

Plan Nord or Cayo del Norte!

The Plan Nord is the centerpiece of the economic development strategy that Charest would like to become his legacy. Taking advantage of a mining boom caused by a significant increase in the price of raw materials, Jean Charest has seized a good deal of the credit linked to the development of the North. But it must be said that when it comes to natural resources, Charest has adopted an approach reminiscent of Cuba. Not socialist Cuba, but "all inclusive" Cuba.

With the maintenance of "free mining" and the proliferation of investments in infrastructures directly related to private projects, Northern Quebec resembles an open bar. The government does everything it can to make it easy for mining companies to exploit our natural resources with few measures required of these companies to ensure economic and social benefits in these regions and Quebec. Despite a recent increase in mining royalties, Quebec remains the 5th most attractive place in the world for multinational mining companies!

Just like the all-inclusive resorts in Cuba, most of the mining projects announced by the Quebec government belong to foreign multinationals leaving little of the profits to local inhabitants. The government seems to have forgotten about all the investment that will be required to create social infrastructures (schools, hospitals, social housing and services) to serve the people in regions where this explosion will take place.

As for regulations, the government's refusal to make companies pay the \$862 million needed to restore hundreds of former mining sites ensures that this bill will be entirely borne by taxpayers. The government's failure to revise the Mining Act will continue to make it impossible for municipalities to reject undesirable mining projects in their territory.

The absence of a plan to address the manufacturing crisis

The haemorrhage of manufacturing jobs that Quebec has witnessed since the early 2000s, accelerated by the economic crisis, should have made government intervention in this area a priority. But actions to save Quebec's manufacturing sector have been characterized by improvisation and ideology. The lowering of the capital gains tax on private investment in technologies has instead allowed companies to accumulate financial assets.

On several occasions, the Liberal government has shown that it considers GDP growth to be far more important than social, cultural or environmental concerns.

The Environment

Comparison doesn't prove anything

In contrast to Harper's attitude of denial and inaction with regard to climate change, Jean Charest tries to present himself on the global stage as a champion in the fight against greenhouse gas emissions. But the facts reveal that the Liberal government's record on the environment is not so rosy.

A disappointing record

Quebec environmental groups and other ecological organizations present a mixed report of the last Liberal government's record.

Combating climate change – As confirmed by the Auditor General's report, not only is this government weak when it comes to accountability, there is nothing to suggest that Quebec will reach its target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in 2012.

Waste management – The government has adopted an incomplete policy that aims not at reducing the amount of waste produced, only the amount that goes into landfills.

Transportation – The government prioritizes cars to the detriment of public transportation. Massive investments to build the A-25 Bridge and to alter the Turcot Interchange mean that there are few resources left to develop long-awaited solutions to congestion (better commuter trains, monorail, etc.).

Energy – The promise to make Quebec a green energy superpower was abandoned with the discovery of possible hydrocarbon deposits (shale gas and the opportunity to profit from the growth of the oil sands). As regards electricity, the Charest government continues to prioritize the building of new dams instead of focusing on energy saving. And they still haven't given up on nuclear power.

All of this without forgetting that they abandoned their promise to force labelling of GMOs, shelved revisions of air quality regulations, weakened the BAPE and resumed the mining of asbestos!

The positive impact of public pressure

Despite its stubbornness and arrogance, the Charest government bowed to pressure exerted by mobilized citizens and finally came to their senses on a few issues. They backed down on the Mont-Orford issue and reversed their positions on the Rabaska Project and the adoption of the Loi contre les poursuites bâillonnées. This last piece of proposed legislation would have restricted the freedom of expression of several environmental activists and analysts who were targeted by the companies they were criticizing.

Finally, faced with its determination to develop the exploitation of shale gas, hundreds of citizen groups from small municipalities, along with artists and environmentalists,

convinced the government to agree to a moratorium and a “strategic environmental assessment”.

The Status of Women and Family Policy

Economic empowerment of vulnerable women – The Charest government was the first to form a parity committee of ministers. This parity committee should have led to fiscal and budgetary measures that contribute to the economic empowerment of women. In fact, if any progress was made during its first mandate, multiple increases in fees and consumption taxes have served to actually weaken the financial situation of many women. This is a perfect illustration of the negligence of a government which does not use gender-based analysis, an essential tool designed to ensure equitable consistency in government approaches and decisions taken by government bodies.

A step toward equity - The Act to amend the Pay Equity Act is a step toward equality for women. After several years of struggle, the government finally extended the application of the law to companies with 10 employees or less. It has also assigned additional resources to the Pay Equity Commission, reaffirming the essential role this organism plays in achieving the objective of equity for non-unionized workers as well as small and medium sized companies.

A gender equality perspective – Also the result of sustained pressure, the government’s action plan for equality between men and women acknowledges the essential role that schools can play in fostering awareness of gender relations, a perspective of equality between men and women and the impact of stereotypes in human relations.

Requests ignored – The government remained closed to demands for legislation to promote and support the balancing of family-work-school. They also failed to respond to our multiple requests for amendments to the Labour Standards Act with regards to the minimum wage to help people escape from poverty, and paid leaves of absence for family responsibilities.

Hyper-sexualisation – Ignoring many reports in the media, the government has also failed to define guidelines for advertising displays which are resulting in the hyper-sexualisation of public space. It would seem that stricter measures are needed to deal with the problem.

The confusing management of daycare services – Blunders and alleged cases of favouritism flourished during this government’s last term, as demonstrated by the Auditor General:

- 18,000 spaces allocated in 2008 in a sloppy manner, without a clear analysis of needs;
- Absence of transparency: the use of vague criteria with no accountability;

- 28% of the projects accepted did not meet the feasibility criteria of the Ministry of Families and the Elderly;
- 20% of the spaces recommended by the Ministry of Families and the Elderly were not approved by the Minister;
- Some projects were approved in areas which already had a surplus of spaces.

Consequences - A quarter of the spaces granted still do not exist. Clients with special needs, including infants, handicapped children, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their parents are still waiting for spaces and the services they require.

Social Solidarity and the Struggle against Exclusion

The Charest government's record on combating poverty suggests that it perceives this issue only from the perspective of the value of work and family. Slight improvements during its first mandates have not been maintained over the last four years.

Higher work premiums, increases in the minimum wage and increased tax credits for child support resulted in some improvements in the living conditions of workers at the bottom of the ladder and parents of low-income families, especially single mothers. On the other hand, the Liberal government did nothing for the elderly and welfare recipients. These problems were not addressed in their last term.

Minimum wage momentum interrupted – As in most provinces and American states, there were significant increases in the minimum wage between 2007 and 2010. But this momentum was interrupted in the last two years of the Liberal mandate. Meagre increases of 15 cents resulted in Quebec sliding from 2nd to 8th place on the list of the most generous jurisdictions. As a result, workers working 40 hours per week at minimum wage still find themselves below the poverty line as defined by Statistics Canada.

A 2nd Plan to Combat Poverty Disappoints

Survival of the poor – The CSQ and other members of civil society are still waiting for the second part of the promised Liberal plan to combat poverty. It was hoped that the plan would propose solutions to address several glaring inequities by denouncing the existence of categories of social welfare (those able to work, partial or permanent disabilities) that keep a portion of welfare recipients in survival mode. Deducting alimony income from what single-parent families receive from the government is another issue that we would like to see addressed.

Giving with one hand, taking away with the other – The lack of a 2nd plan was a great disappointment to both members of the Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté and members of the CSQ. Nearly half of the new funds allocated to combat poverty, a total of \$1.3 billion, will be used to finance the solidarity tax credit. It replaces the QST tax credit and the reimbursement of property taxes. In fact, this only serves to offset tax increases and fees announced by the Ministry of Finance. And the indexing of social welfare benefits only prevents the loss of purchasing power for recipients, doing nothing to reduce poverty. Finally, alimony benefits remain only partially excluded in the determination of benefits.

The Forgotten

Even more poverty – In the end, combating poverty and social exclusion has not been a priority for the Charest government. Coming out of the economic crisis, once again we see that it is the poorest that bear the brunt of the economic downturn. Since the crisis began, organizations have witnessed an increase of more than 22% in the number of people resorting to food banks.

Native communities – with the exception of those affected by the Plan Nord, the Charest government has shown no interest in the native communities. Despite acute shortages of housing, schools and public infrastructure in these communities, no durable solutions have been proposed and in many cases negotiations with the federal government have faltered.

Youth – The Youth Action Strategy launched in March 2009 has been very disappointing in terms of concrete measures to address the problem of atypical employment among young people. The CSQ and other member organizations of the Youth Advisory Committee of Emploi-Québec had identified this as a priority in government consultations. It is noteworthy as well that Prime Minister Jean Charest, who is responsible for matters that concern youth, did not participate in these consultations.

Union Rights and Labour Relations

Faced with unprecedented union solidarity and influenced by several judgements handed down by the International Labour Organization and Quebec and Canadian courts, the Charest government was forced to show more openness to union rights and labour relations. Their last term was marked by a major change in tone in comparison to the clearly anti-union postures previously adopted by the Liberals.

A historic negotiated settlement

In contrast to the unilateral decree of working conditions imposed on most public sector employees by the government in 2007, the last round of negotiations ended quickly with a genuinely negotiated agreement. The agreement provides for wage increases of 6 to 10.5% over a period of 5 years. These increases did not go so far as to enable public sector employees to make up ground lost to their colleagues in the private sectors, even with regard to fringe benefits. The agreement did, however, help to consolidate pension plans and family-related leaves of absence.

After having opposed the collective organization of daycare service educators in the family sector with legislation, the Charest government had to recognize this right by defining a special status for these workers. The government signed a collective agreement providing better working conditions for 15,000 women.

Some progress in equity

Some gains were made in job equity. The Salary Equity Act was amended to extend coverage to employees of companies with 10 or more workers. This breakthrough is flawed because the law still lacks teeth in non-unionized workplaces and monitoring mechanisms are still quite limited. After a long struggle, domestic workers who are mostly immigrants are finally covered by the CSST.

Still quietly complicit

We shouldn't assume that the Liberals are now on the side of the workers. Their complicit silence when faced with anti-union practices and abusive employers (Journal de Montréal, Couche-Tard, placement agencies and most recently Rio-Tinto-Alcan) demonstrates that they still side with the employers.

Faced with the crisis in the construction sector, they chose to divert attention toward the practices of unions instead of addressing the real problems of fraud, cronyism and corruption. The abolition of union investment in the construction sector was used as a diversion.

Retirement postponed?

Pension reforms proposed by the Liberals do little to address the need to provide everyone with a retirement free of poverty. They are primarily intended to ensure that older people keep working in order to respond to an anticipated shortage of labour. This is how we should interpret modifications to the way the QPP is calculated and the tax credit of \$1,500 offered to experienced workers who postpone their retirement.

The government acted responsibly in stabilizing the QPP with higher contribution rates. On the other hand, it still refuses to increase coverage for employees without supplementary pension plans. The proposal to create a voluntary retirement savings plan appears to be inadequate and would benefit only financial institutions and their intermediaries.

Health and safety in the workplace

In this last year, the government has introduced a bill aimed at modernizing health and safety in the workplace laws and making them applicable to domestic workers. We appreciate that domestic workers are finally covered by the law, but it seems that this modernization is more of a setback. In fact, this bill significantly transforms the role of the Commission de la santé et de la sécurité au travail, an organization responsible for ensuring the right to work in a safe environment, into a simple, efficient and business-like insurance agency, which we find unacceptable.