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Quebec Premier Pauline Marois listens to Deputy Premier

Francois Gendron. (MATHIEU BELANGER /REUTERS)

QUEBEC

Marois scraps tuition fee hikes first day on the job

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QUEBEC — The Globe and Mail

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Her first day on the job and Premier Pauline Marois didn't lose any time scrapping former Liberal government policies: University tuition fee hikes were cancelled, a law restricting public demonstrations was repealed, Quebec's only nuclear power plant will be closed and shale gas development in the province was put on hold permanently.

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A woman with a fleur-de-lis and Quebec flag drawn

on her face shouts as she marches through the streets with protesters banging pots and pans during a demonstration in support of striking Quebec students in Vancouver, B.C., on Wednesday May 30, 2012. Students in Quebec have been protesting proposed tuition hikes since February. THE CANADIAN PRESS

video: [Quebec scraps controversial tuition hikes](#)



Quebec's Premier Pauline Marois, centre, holds her

granddaughter beside her daughter, Catherine Marois-Blanchet, after being sworn in at the National Assembly in Quebec City on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2012. REUTERS

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Parti Quebecois leader Pauline Marois addresses party supporters after winning a minority government in the Quebec provincial election in Montreal, Quebec, September 4, 2012. REUTERS Streetwise

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Ms. Marois didn't stop there. She announced the fulfilment of another election promise, saying that Quebeckers will be reimbursed the \$200 health tax they paid this year when they file their provincial income tax returns next spring.

As she imposes her brand on the provincial government, Ms. Marois is promising to act quickly on several fronts, including the demands she plans to take to the federal government.

The Premier will begin her battle with Ottawa on foreign soil. She said on Thursday that she will meet Prime Minister Stephen Harper for the first time next month at a meeting of leaders of French-speaking nations in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"I will meet Mr. Harper in Africa at the Francophonie summit, and I am sure we will be able to hold a meeting after the summit," Ms. Marois said. The elimination of tuition hikes marked a historic day for the province's student movement. The Liberal plan to increase the fees sparked a four-month strike last spring with nightly demonstrations and social unrest throughout the province. Students campaigned hard to defeat the Liberals in the Sept. 4 election.

Student leaders declared victory when Ms. Marois announced that tuition fees would be maintained at \$2,168 a year without taking back additional money the Liberals had put into student financial aid in an attempt to make the increase more palatable. Ms. Marois said the measure will not cost more than \$20-million in the current fiscal year.

The Parti Québécois government also repealed the controversial law banning demonstrations, which opponents called a violation of the right to free speech and public assembly.

"These two decisions [cancelling tuition increases and repealing the legislation] will allow us to bring back peace and re-establish rights and freedoms," Ms. Marois said.

The next move will be to hold a summit within the next 100 days on higher education to debate a new funding formula for postsecondary institutions and the possibility of tuition-free university. Ms. Marois said everything will be on the table, including her proposal to index tuition to increases in the cost of living.

"This is a big day, a historic day, and it shows that after all the demonstrations we held, when you go out and vote, you can make a difference," said Martine Desjardins, head of the province's university student federation. "It is a big day for liberty and justice."

"We were fighting against something and now we can fight for something such as the accessibility to a university education," Éliane Laberge, president of the Quebec college student federation, said of the summit on higher education.

Ms. Marois defended her government against charges that its pro-environmental policies and the cost of cancelling tuition fees and the health tax will fuel concerns in the business community that private investment might be harmed.

"We will not be an anti-business government," Ms. Marois said. "I say to the business community you don't have to be afraid of our government. We will be a very good government and we will create wealth for all Quebeckers."

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