

BLITZKRIEG

The 1997 Canadian Elections

Julián Castro Rea*

Only three years and six months after taking office, on April 27, 1997, the Canadian government headed by the Liberal Party asked the governor general—the representative of Queen Elizabeth II, head of the State of Canada—to dissolve parliament and call general elections. June 2 was chosen as the date for thirty-sixth general elections held since Canada became a federation in 1867.

Although Canada has a parliamentary system inspired in the British tradition (the Westminster model), which in principle grants the government the right to decide when elections are to be held, in practice, administrations have called elections in their fourth year in office, before the five-year legal limit has concluded.

The reason for this early call to the polls is that the Liberal government wanted to take advantage of the conjunctural situation favorable to its reelection, and probably to strengthen its position beyond the year 2000 as well. The Liberals' expectations were based on the following considerations:

- a) The governing party had been heading up the voter preference polls since the end of last year.
- b) Lack of credible governmental alternatives for most Canadians.

- c) The need to strengthen their position and win a clear mandate for a constitutional convention that, by law, the Canadian government should call this year to revise the terms of the 1982 reforms.

Leading up to the elections, one of the shortest electoral campaigns in the history of Canada took place, lasting less than five weeks. According to electoral reform legislation in effect since December 1996, a minimum period of 36 days is required between the time parliament is dissolved to hold elections and the day of the vote itself (previously at least 47 days were required). The government opted for the minimum time period. The election campaign really lasted only 34 days, since campaigning is suspended 48 hours before ballots are cast. For the parties, then, it was truly a *Blitzkrieg*.

HOW THE ELECTIONS WERE ORGANIZED

Voting takes place in Canada based on the British system: single member constituencies and the highest vote getter wins the race. This system has a series of consequences for electoral arithmetic, some positive, others negative.

- In general, it results in governments with a clear majority, armed, therefore, with clear political mandates. In other words, it favors governability. This is because the way ballots are counted favors the majority parties to the detriment of smaller parties.

* Researcher and coordinator of the Canadian Studies Department at CISAN.

Translated by Peter Gellert.

Map 1
1997 Canadian Elections
Time Polls Closed



- For the same reason, it encourages a disparity between the real popular vote as expressed at the polls and the contending parties' representation in parliament.

- On an organizational level, the 1997 Canadian elections were innovative with respect to previous balloting: the number of seats in the House of Commons increased from 295 to 301, due to demographic growth. In addition, four districts were added in Ontario and two in British Columbia.

- As a result of the December 1996 electoral reform, for the first time an attempt was made to counteract the effect of the country's vastness on voters decisions. Six different time zones span Canada, which means that before the 1997 elections, the results in the eastern provinces were known before the western regions of the country had finished voting, allowing residents there to know the electoral trends before casting ballots (since preliminary results, which differ little from the definitive tally, are known half an hour after the polls close).

The reform legislation establishes different times for closing the polls in the different time zones, so that results are available at approximately the same real time nationwide (see Map 1).

In the Newfoundland and Atlantic time zones, the polls closed at 8:30 p.m., with preliminary results available half an hour later. Although the electoral law prohibits the mass media from announcing results beforehand, these were available on the Internet between 4:30 and 5:00 p.m., two hours before the polls closed on the West Coast (Pacific time). But the eastern provinces only represent 11 percent of the seats in the House of Commons, which cannot indicate nationwide tendencies. The majority of the vote was concentrated in the eastern time zone (most of Ontario and Quebec), in which the three largest cities—Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa—are located. In this zone, the polls closed at 9:30 p.m., and therefore results from there were only known at 7 p.m. in the Pacific time zone, which was when the polls were closing. The hour the polls closed in the two other zones (Central and Mountain) was adjusted to coincide with the 7:00 p.m. deadline on the Pacific coast.

- For the first time, Canada used a system of permanent voter registration. Until 1993, before every election, more than 100,000 voter registration representatives visited all Canadian homes—as well as hospitals, old age

homes and prisons—to create the voter registration rolls. This process was done massively for the last time in 1997. The decision to create a permanent voter registration list faced opposition from many Canadians who feared a loss of privacy if the government had a single computerized list containing personal data on all adults in the country.¹

• To finance the campaigns, Elections Canada, the agency in charge of organizing the vote, fixed campaign spending limits for the parties based on the number of registered voters. In 1997, the limit was Can\$11 million per party on a nationwide level. In addition, there was an authorized limit per candidate, which fluctuated between Can\$50,000 and Can\$78,000 per riding, depending on the number of voters, the size of the riding and population density.² This year, despite the short campaign period, the parties and candidates together spent about Can\$100 million—Can\$21 million more than in the previous federal elections in 1993—a record figure for an election in that country.³

THE CONTENDERS

Elections Canada registers the parties that wish to participate in the elections. These parties maintain their ballot status independently of whether they get to elect candidates to parliament, as long as they run at least 50 candidates in as many districts, that is, a sixth of the total. As opposed to the United States, in Canada parties are prohibited from promoting hatred and/or engaging in insults or discrimination based on race, ethnic origin or religion.

Although 10 parties were registered for the 1997 elections, running a total of 1,672 candidates, undoubtedly

the most important were the five parties with parliamentary representation.⁴ These parties are:

1. The Liberal Party of Canada, currently in office. Its leader is Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.
2. The Progressive Conservative Party voted out of office in the 1993 elections. This party together with the Liberal Party of Canada, are the country's two historic political parties, the only currently existing parties that date from the nineteenth century. The Conservative leader is Jean Charest.
3. The Bloc Québécois (BQ), created in 1990 with the explicit aim of promoting independence for Quebec from the halls of the Canadian capital. As of March 15, 1997 its leader is Gilles Duceppe.
4. The Reform Party, a right-wing populist party established in 1987, whose support and electoral base corresponds to discord in the western provinces, particularly Alberta and British Columbia. From the beginning, its leader has been Preston Manning.
5. The New Democratic Party (NDP), a socialdemocratic formation that represents the Canadian parliamentary left. For the second time the party is led by a woman, this time Alexa McDonough, since October 1995.

The current Canadian ideological spectrum is not very clear. Traditionally, the Conservative Party occupied the right end of the field, the NDP the left, and the Liberal Party the center. The emergence of new parties and new socioeconomic realities has undercut these distinctions. The Reform Party replaced the Conservatives on the right, with a fiscally and socially ultraconservative program. Meanwhile, the Liberals, once in office, forgot their campaign promises and put a priority on reducing the public deficit, moving against the Canadian welfare state. The NDP maintains, not without reason, that there are currently three national parties that are competing for the right-wing end of the spectrum—the Liberal, Conservative and Reform

¹ Mario Cloutier, "Una opération de 10 millions afin d'économiser le double," en *Le Devoir*, 10 June 1997, 8. The permanent voter registration list is inspired in Mexico's voters rolls and was drawn up with the advice of Mexican electoral authorities, as admitted by Jean-Pierre Kingsley, chief electoral officer of Elections Canada in an interview by the author in June 1995.

² Data provided by Jacques Girard, attorney, executive director and general counsel at Elections Canada, May 14, 1997.

³ Ross Howard, "Parties Set to Spend \$100 Million," in *The Globe and Mail*, 14 April 1997.

⁴ The other parties are, in order of founding date, the Green Party, the Christian Heritage Party, the Natural Law Party, the Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada and the Canadian Action Party.

parties— while there is only one on the left —the NDP— that continues to call for the state to promote economic activity and fight inequality through social programs.

Dynamics of parliamentary life have also experienced a strange twist of fate since 1993. In that year's elections, the largest minority was the Bloc Québécois, which therefore obtained the title of "Official Parliamentary Opposition." It's paradoxical that a party that rejects the Canadian federation, with deputies elected exclusively in Quebec, was the government's official parliamentary intermediary, acting in the name of all Canadians.

In addition, the main parties have defined regional bases of support: the Liberals in Ontario, the Reform Party in the West and the Bloc Québécois in the province of Quebec. This situation led to a dynamic of constant confrontation and little cooperation in parliament, since what a party would gain is seen as a loss for a region in which it has a small presence or none at all.

THE CAMPAIGNS

As a result of the parliamentary system, Canadian voters can express their preference through only one ballot, for the candidate for member of parliament (M.P.) from their district. Therefore, when voting, they should take various factors into account: the candidate's profile, the ideology of the party he belongs to, the probabilities that his party will win the elections (and, in this case, form the government and have access to power and resources for those it represents), and the profile of the party's leader in case he becomes prime minister. Of course, the parties use these factors in a way in which they gain the greatest advantage.

As a result, the personality of the party leader is an element that may or may not be utilized by campaign strategists. If in 1993, the Liberals generously hedged their bets on Chrétien's personality, in 1997 they practically didn't do so at all, because three and a half years of his administration damaged his reputation due to accumulated errors. The main failings of his government were not having fulfilled the election campaign promise of eliminating the value-added tax, known in Canada as the Goods and Services Tax, poor performance on job creation —supposed-

ly a priority of his administration— and budget reductions that have affected the quality of medical service.

On the other hand, the Conservatives placed considerable emphasis on the character of their leader, Jean Charest, an excellent speaker in both English and French and 25 years younger than Chrétien. The Conservative strategy was successful. Charest's excellent performance in the televised debates (Monday, May 12 in English; Tuesday, May 13 in French) boosted the popularity of the Conservatives, who not only tried to convince undecided voters, but also went after disgruntled Liberals. However, the leader was even more popular than the party, which is not very productive in the Canadian electoral system.

As in the 1993 elections, in 1997 the main concern of Canadian voters was unemployment. In a poll conducted in September and October 1996, 46 percent of those surveyed mentioned unemployment as the number one priority for the future administration.⁵ This should not be too surprising, since despite the Liberals' 1993 campaign promises for an ephemeral government program to create jobs through construction in infrastructure projects, and the incipient economic recovery following five years of economic crisis, the unemployment rate remained persistently high, with a national average of 9.9 percent of the economically active population.

In December 1996, in a television program with live questions-and-answers, Chrétien declared that unemployment was not the government's fault, that finding a job is a question of luck and people should move if they cannot find a job in their place of origin. These responses cost Chrétien public censure for his lack of understanding and indifference concerning unemployment, attitudes that were in marked contrast with his election campaign promises three years earlier.

Voters' second most important concern were aspirations for Quebec independence, which they correctly viewed as a threat to national unity. Of those polled, 42 percent view the issue as a priority. The parties responded from very different points of view in the campaign debate.⁶

⁵ Rae Corelli, "How Very Different We Are," in *Macleans*, 4 November 1996.

⁶ See Susan Delacourt, "Unity Returns as Passionate Issue," in *The Globe and Mail*, 22 May 1997.

The Liberals tried most to avoid the issue. For them, the results of the October 1995 referendum on Quebec were a big blow. Although Québécois voters in the end rejected independence, the margin with which they did so was too narrow, 50.58 percent vs. 49.42 percent, a mere 1.6 percent difference. These extremely close results were a rude wake-up call for Canadians outside Quebec concerning the real strength of support for independence and belied Chrétien's triumphalism. For many voters, the prime minister did not keep his promise of resolving the conflict that has pitted Quebec against Ottawa for more than 30 years. Jean Charest and Preston Manning moved in to exploit voter frustration, accusing Jean Chrétien of incompetence on the question.

The Reform Party represented the hard line on this issue. It opposes any concessions to Quebec in terms of recognizing a special status for the province within the Canadian federation. Scorning the caution expressed by the other parties, the Reform Party did not mind opening the Pandora's box and place Quebec independence at the center of the campaign debate. This is easily understood, since it had little to lose in the French-speaking province where it had practically no candidates, and it had much to gain in possible support among more intransigent voters in the West. Therefore, party leader Preston Manning appealed to the sentiments and prejudices of English-speaking Canada, especially in the western provinces, against demands from the Québécois population.

The party most interested in raising the issue was, of course, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), because it is directly tied to its *raison d'être*. In the French-language televised debate, when the question was raised and Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe moved to present his group's proposal, the moderator fainted and the debate had to be abruptly postponed. The BQ lost a precious opportunity to halt the decline in voter support. Even so, the main battle for Quebec's 75 seats was between the Liberals and the BQ, with the Conservatives in third place.

Another important issue in the election campaigns was reducing the public deficit and taxes. The current Liberal government had given priority to reducing the deficit, which stood at Can\$42 billion when it took office. Its efforts met with success. This year the party

promised to reduce taxes, thus appropriating an important slogan of the Conservatives and the Reform Party. But the deficit reduction was carried out at the cost of a drastic cut in public expenditures, particularly transfers from the federal government to the provinces, which has translated into a decline in social services, especially health care. And it is on this flank, of course, that the other parties were attacking the government, particularly the NDP, which pledged to maintain a balanced public budget, while at the same time promoting job creation.

A theme closely related to this issue is medical insurance, whose universal character and quality has distinguished Canada in the international community, especially when compared to the United States. The opposition accuses the Liberals of having gravely damaged this pillar of Canadian national solidarity because of their obsession with reducing the deficit, of which Can\$7 billion was slashed from funds budgeted for health care. And once again, the NDP tried to distinguish itself from the other parties with its promise to expand the health system, which would be financed with a major increase in taxes on corporations and high-income groups.

RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES

With a voter turnout of 66.7 percent, 80 new M.P.'s took office on Parliament Hill. As can be seen in Table 1 and Chart 1, the Liberal's gamble on calling early elections was successful, although relatively so. While the Chrétien administration managed to convince voters to approve of its work in office and ratify its mandate, the margin of vic-

*The Liberals won,
not because citizens were satisfied
with their performance but
rather because many saw
no other alternatives.*

**Table 1: Election Results
June 2, 1997***

Parties	Seats	% Popular Vote
Liberal (LP)	155	38.33
Reform (RP)	60	19.39
Bloc Québécois (BQ)	44	10.68
New Democratic (NDP)	21	11.06
Progressive Conservative (PCP)	20	18.86
Independents	1	1.69

* Voter participation.

Source: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

tory it obtained in the House of Commons was drastically reduced. While before the elections, the Liberals controlled 175 of the 295 seats, they now have 155 of the current 301 spots. If in 1993 they obtained 42 percent of the popular vote, in the 1997 elections support fell to just 38 percent. Chrétien himself had problems holding on to his seat, winning by less than 1,000 votes. The opposition will be stronger and, as a result, the government will have less maneuvering room. It should especially proceed cautiously in submitting important legislative proposals to a vote since, according to the rules of the parliamentary system, the government must resign if a bill reflecting an important part of its program or with budgetary implications is rejected.

Before deciding to call early elections, the Liberals should perhaps have heeded the words of a 10-year-old British schoolboy who, in a natural sciences exam, when asked how spoiled milk can be avoided, replied, "Keep it in the cow."

One possible explanation of the Liberal's narrow victory can be found in the opinion polls. These indicated that Canadians in general do not have much confidence in their current government. In a poll conducted in September and October 1996, when the Liberals' popularity stood at 55 percent, half of those who planned to vote for the Liberals said they would do so because they didn't like

the other parties. In March 1997, 73 percent of those surveyed said they felt deceived because the Liberal government did not fulfill its campaign promises. In other words, the fact that the Liberals won is not because citizens were satisfied with their performance in office, but rather because many did not see any other alternative.

As opposed to the previous parliament, in which the main opposition were the M.P.'s supporting Quebec independence, at present the bulk of the opposition can be found on the right wing of the political spectrum. This result is a corollary of the undeniable rise of conservative ideology in Canada during the 1990s. The right wing first permeated the federal parliament, with the massive presence of the Reform Party; later they became a force in provincial politics, with radical Conservative administrations in Alberta (since 1992) and Ontario (since 1995); and finally they began to influence national policy decisions, when the Liberals adopted the policies to cut public spending promoted by the right. The government's critics argue that as a result of these policies, the state and the fabric of Canadian society are in decline, a consequence of having sought both a balanced budget at all costs as well as international competitiveness, which benefits, above all, large corporations.

Although both parties are right-wing, a distinction must be made between the Reform Party and the Conservatives. The Conservatives are descendants of the British Tories, who defined the Canadian political panorama in the nineteenth century. Toryism is colored by premodern aristocratic notions and is implicitly nourished by the ideas of well-known conservatives like Edmund Burke and Benjamin Disraeli. According to the Tories, different classes and social groups are organically linked and have mutual responsibilities. Their idea of government rests on the idea of the "common good." A "good government" should respond to the community's needs, not particular interests. Those governing —be they elected, designated or having inherited their post— should act on the basis of this principle, tied to the social obligations imposed by their office, but autonomously of the particular groups or interests they represent.

The idea of the "common good" is key for the Tories. Although they defend individual liberties, they sustain

that the collective has the right to restrict them if such liberties enter into conflict with society's welfare. Therefore they defend a strong and centralized government, which can involve itself in all social spheres when the "common good" so justifies it. As a result, many Conservatives have promoted social programs in Canada.⁷

The Reform Party, on the other hand, is right-wing populist, composed of those who firmly believe in individual liberty as an absolute value and mistrust activities of the state, which they conceive as a necessary evil. From this flows their criticism of government intervention designed to tend to the population's needs. The Reform Party wishes to radically limit public spending as a means of eliminating the deficit and reducing debt. It opposes the official policy of two national languages, as an expression of its rejection of a special status for the province of Quebec within the Canadian federation. The party maintains nativist⁸ theses and calls for restrictions on immigration. In addition, it is socially conservative on questions such as the death penalty, minority rights and abortion. In short, it is a current marked by right-wing individualism and intolerance toward differences, in contrast with the Canadian conservative tradition. Due to the party's decidedly conservative message, its greatest support comes from rural rather than urban areas, even in the West.

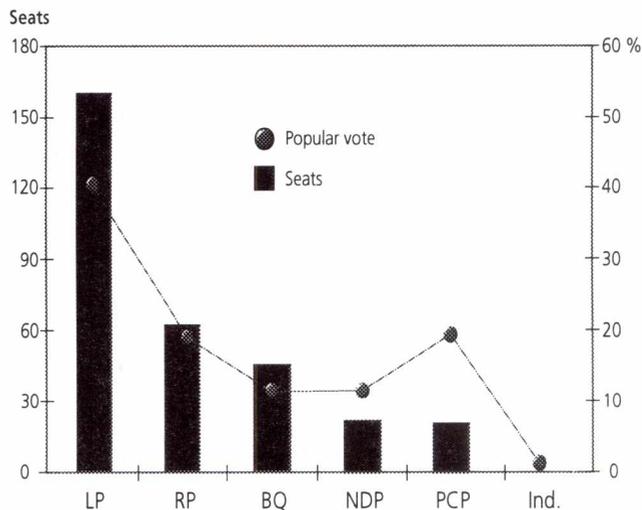
The Conservatives have very frequently denied rumors or commentaries in the press concerning a possible merger with the Reform Party. However, it is the Reform agenda that is leaving its mark on national and provincial government actions. This trend will even deepen now that the Reform Party has become the official opposition after winning 60 seats in the House of Commons. As opposed to the recent victories of the left in Great Britain and France, based on the results of Canada's recent federal elections, the future would seem to include a deepening of rightist tendencies in political life, and the same trend in public policies.

Again, the vote was marked by regional variables. The provincial base of support of the three main parliamen-

⁷ See Charles Taylor, *Radical Tories. The Conservative Tradition in Canada* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982).

⁸ By nativism, we mean an ideological outlook that gives priority to those born in Canada over recent arrivals (immigrants).

**Chart 1: Election Results
June 2, 1997**



Source: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

tary parties —the Liberal Party, Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois— was consolidated. Following the elections, the regional political panorama appears as shown in table 2 and map 2.

The Liberals again obtained their greatest electoral support in Ontario, where they won 101 of the 103 ridings. This means that almost two-thirds (101 of 155) of the Liberal's parliamentary caucus comes from Ontario. In other words, the Liberal Party will govern the entire country based on a mandate received essentially in a single province. And a province that, in addition, is the seat of the country's capital and whose provincial capital, Toronto, is Canada's largest city. Ontario is also the country's most populated and richest province. This situation feeds the frustration of many Canadians who feel condemned to a Canadian federation they accuse of being centralist.

The Conservatives achieved a modest rebound thanks, above all, to the votes they received in the Atlantic provinces and Quebec. In the latter, the charismatic Conservative leader Jean Charest gained popularity and votes for his party at the expense of the BQ's novice leader, Gilles Duceppe. However, most of the Conservatives' support comes from the Atlantic provinces, where they won 13 out of 20 seats in their current caucus. The main losers in this region were the Liberals, who in 1993 won 31 of

**Table 2: Distribution of Seats in the House of Commons
By Province and Party, 1997**

Province	LP	PC	R	NDP	BQ	Ind.	Total
Newfoundland	4	3					7
Nova Scotia		5		6			11
Prince Edward Island	4						4
New Brunswick	3	5		2			10
Quebec	26	5			44		75
Ontario	101	1				1	103
Manitoba	6	1	3	4			14
Saskatchewan	1		8	5			14
Alberta	2		24				26
British Columbia	6		25	3			34
Northwest Territories	2						2
Yukon				1			1
Total	155	20	60	21	44	1	301

Source: *Maclean's*, 9, June 1997, p. 19.

the 32 ridings and now just have one. Apparently, the patience of the Canadian Atlantic coast, a relatively poor region, vulnerable to cutbacks in social programs, had reached its limit.

As with the Conservatives, the NDP managed to penetrate the Liberal bastion in the Atlantic provinces. The Nova Scotia origin of the new NDP leader played a role in this. In addition, although the party only has a total of 21 seats, it is the only party that can really boast of having a truly national presence, from East to West, from North to South.

Once again the Reform Party consolidated its presence in the western provinces, particularly Alberta and British Columbia. It also achieved an important vote in Saskatchewan, a province with a social democratic tradition, normally resistant to right-wing parties. The Reform leader Preston Manning managed to gain support in the Canadian West as a result of his intransigent approach to Quebec. Unfortunately, the party's new status as Official Opposition guarantees that the dynamic of regional confrontation that existed in the previous parliament will persist in the new one as well.

The pro-independence Bloc Québécois, which invariably only presented candidates in Quebec, won 44 of the province's 75 seats. Even though its strength declined by nine seats and 10 percentage points of the popular vote, it continues to be the most representative parliamentary force in Quebec. Its popular vote in the province fell from 49 to 39 percent, which could very well represent a decline in support for independence. A recent study showed that about a fourth of those who voted in favor of independence in the 1995 referendum voted in 1997 for the Conservatives and not the BQ.⁹ That is why the pro-independence forces might strike while the iron is still hot, and issue an early call for elections to prepare a new referendum on sovereignty. They can count on a polarization of positions that the Reform Party will continue to provoke in the House of Commons, as the BQ leader openly admitted.

The new Liberal cabinet had to do without the presence of two ministers, who lost the elections in their respective ridings: Doug Young (defense minister) and David Dingwall (health minister). Although the number of min-

⁹ Richard Nadeau, et al., "Le chef et la cause," in *Le Devoir*, 4 July 1997.

Map 2
Regional Bastions of Canada's Political Parties



isterial positions increased from 24 to 27 and several portfolios had to be shifted, Chrétien maintained the key ministers in their posts: Paul Martin in finances, Lloyd Axworthy in foreign affairs, John Manley in industry and Stéphane Dion in Canadian intergovernmental affairs. His most important new recruit was Anne McLellan, from Alberta, named as minister of justice. This nomination has been interpreted as a reaction to the growing strength of the Reform Party in the western provinces and its hard line on Quebec.

The new minister will have to deal with a case the federal government has pending before the Supreme Court, whether Quebec independence should be handled as a question of international law, as the pro-independence forces contend, or domestic law, as the federal government maintains. If the Supreme Court sides with the federal government, it will immediately have to decide if Quebec could withdraw from the Canadian federation without the consent of the nine other provinces. For the time being, Minister McLellan has not expressed any opinion different from those formulated by her colleague

Stéphane Dion, namely that the consequences of choosing independence should be clearly presented to the Quebec voters. Moreover, if Canada can be divided, so can Quebec, so as to allow those parts of the province that do not wish to be part of Quebec to remain within the federation.¹⁰ And, of course, McLellan supports the federal government's position on the dispute pending before the Supreme Court.¹¹

Briefly stated, Canada will usher in the twenty-first century with a renewed yet weak government, with a pluralist parliament, although divided by regional criteria, with a strong opposition but leaning to the right. This is not very encouraging given the approaching convention to review the terms of the 1982 constitutional reform. They indicate difficult times ahead for the institutions, people and unity of this vast North American country. ❖

¹⁰ This approach is known as "partitionism." See Claude G. Charron, *La partition du Québec. De Lord Durham à Stéphane Dion*, (Montreal: VLB, 1996).

¹¹ "Le Canada ne peut être tenu en 'otage,'" in *Le Devoir*, 26 June 1997.