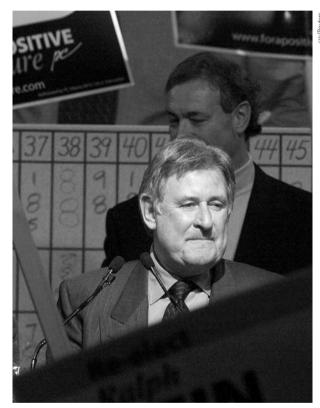
"Welcome to Ralph's World" Neo-Conservatism Takes Hold in Canada

Kelly O'Donnell*







Mike Harris

In Canada, the influence of neoconservatism, a dominant trend in today's world, needs to be studied carefully. Alberta and Ontario are two provinces where the neo-conservative agenda dominates, promoted by their respective premiers, Ralph Klein and Mike Harris. While Albertans are gen-

erally relatively accepting of the Klein government's right-wing policies, Ontarians are not as welcoming of Harris'. Although they are the first two provinces to suffer major provincial cutbacks and both have been swept by ideological changes based on right-wing mentalities, different political cultures in the two provinces and the leadership styles of their premiers account for differentiated public responses to policy. Ontario's massive public opposition to

government cuts and restructuring is due to a failure in Mike Harris' leadership, and to a political culture that supports organized interests, which can mobilize protests against the provincial government. Alberta's comparative lack of opposition to the Klein government's policies is attributable to his phenomenal popular support and to the province's right-wing political culture that abhors dissent and public criticism of authority.

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In this article, I will examine neoconservatism in the Canadian context. I shall discuss in the recent re-election of Ralph Klein in Alberta and his leadership, comparing it to Mike Harris' and then look at the implications for Canada as a whole.¹

THE RECENT ALBERTA ELECTION

"We believe those that would vote Liberal or NDP don't deserve to live in Alberta" read a sign in Winfield, Alberta. Such a sign might be considered footsteps. Canada is experiencing a dramatic shift in ideology at both the provincial and federal levels, edging further and further toward the right of the political spectrum. Alberta's premier, known to most Albertans as Ralph, is a highly adept politician. His re-election demonstrates the growing strength of neo-conservatism in Canada. Alberta, under his government, was the revolutionary province that began this well-publicized fiscally conservative crusade to eliminate government deficits and debt without raising taxes. Ontario, under the Harris

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somewhat undemocratic in other Canadian provinces. However, you must keep in mind that this is Alberta, known as the Texas of Canada. Democracy and liberty are not primary concerns in a province where the premier was quoted saying, "I believe in free speech, as long as you say the right thing."

The Klein Conservatives just won a landslide majority in Alberta, garnering 74 of 83 seats in the provincial legislature "Welcome to Ralph's World" is how Klein began his recent victory speech. The fact that they won their third term is not surprising considering that Alberta has been a virtual one-party state for the last 30 years. (Dictatorships often conduct elections in order to legitimize their regimes, do they not?) What is surprising, however, is that the rest of Canada seems to be following in the Klein government's

government, soon followed in the footsteps of Klein's "revolution" with its own Common Sense Revolution.

For the purposes of this article, the terms right-wing and neo-conservative are understood as the same. They include, but are not limited to, a fiscally conservative attitude that adopts the corporate agenda and social conservatism. Neo-conservatives seek less government intervention in society and less government in general and thus include trends like privatization of government services on their agenda. Other authors call this approach to government and economic policy neo-liberal, but I am using the term neo-conservative to describe the new way of doing politics more comprehensively. I refer to it as neo-conservative because it is a clear departure from a more traditional Conservative (Tory) approach to politics in Canada.

According to the United Nations, Canada has one of highest standards of living in the world, which many Canadians equate with our social welfare system. However, Canada is now moving away from its traditional welfare state policies. Last year the Klein government introduced Alberta's Health Care Protection Act, which allows for private medical clinics in the province. The act is a perfect example of the move toward privatization. Neo-conservatives seek to minimize the role of the welfare state in society. This is reflected by policy that reduces welfare benefits, education and health care budgets and the number of public sector employees. When examining how the two provinces reacted to their neo-conservative governments, it is important to consider how these regimes came about. Leadership is a key factor in provincial politics —particularly in this equation. While Klein and Harris differ in some ways, their similarities are quite remarkable. Both have often been greatly underestimated. While they lack much formal education, Klein and Harris have not only risen to high political office, but have managed to instigate neoconservative "revolutions" in their respective provinces. Their leadership styles and popularity, or lack thereof, and the concept of populism will also be addressed in this article. In both cases, the relationship between leader and electorate has had important ramifications for the success of the neoconservative agenda.

KLEIN

"Lauded by the Wall Street Journal, Barron's, The New York Times, and the Globe and Mail, awarded by both the Fraser Institute and the National Citizens' Coalition, poster-boy for *Saturday Night* and *Maclean's* magazines, Ralph Klein—Canada's 'original' Newt Gingrich—is big news." The Premier of Alberta is well known in Canada and around the world. His government's reforms are seen as innovative and he is viewed as a revolutionary. His political success is quite remarkable considering his modest beginnings.

Klein has not lived what one would consider a normal politician's life. First of all, he is not formally educated. He dropped out of high school and held a number of different jobs before entering politics, including working at a college, public relations and journalism. As a journalist he worked on radio and then on television as a reporter. Many people knew of Klein the journalist, and that position is often credited with allowing him to become mayor of Calgary, Alberta, Canada's fastest growing city, for three consecutive terms from 1980 to 1989. He then moved to provincial politics and has since won three elections.

Klein's unusual career path is just one of the elements that makes him a unique leader. He has achieved an amazing feat for a politician: "the public sees [him] as 'nonpolitical'." This fact is mostly due to Klein's personality, or more specifically, his public persona. He appears to be an ordinary guy. "The image of Ralph Klein as 'ordinary' is deeply embedded in the minds of Albertans as one of his greatest assets."

Klein is also very aware of the effect of the media; a natural entertainer, he likes attention and uses it to his advantage. As mayor of Calgary, Klein displayed his media savvy in his "ability to manipulate ... particularly front-line reporters and columnists, [which] stemmed from his own experiences in TV journalism."⁵

Television is a useful tool in politics; Klein's use of this medium is part of what makes him such a successful leader. "He practise[s] political leadership based largely on communication." His record demonstrates that he doesn't have a clear ideology. He determines what ideology is important, what ideology will keep him in power. Today Klein is known as the premier who fights debt and deficits. He is credited as being the "poster boy" for

tion would also have offered time to his opponents. After watching an address, the electorate would find it difficult not to believe that Klein is their friend who is doing what is right for the people of Alberta. In his latest provincial address, Klein was "interviewed" by a reporter. In fact, the reporter —if you can call him that— asked Klein predetermined questions and the premier read the answers off a teleprompter. The reporter had obviously been given the questions ahead of time. The address is not usually in the form of an interview; this alternate format was perhaps

Klein has a unique style of leadership, which includes his public persona, his use of television to convey his message, his populist airs, his corporatism, and his scape-goating.

fiscal conservatism. This is despite the fact that as mayor, Klein left Calgary with a \$1.6 billion debt. It was only after his move to provincial politics that he "became a born-again fiscal conservative." Television allows Klein to project the image that he wants to, for he is a convincing actor. Hence, his record is often forgotten by Albertans. Television is all about image, and Klein is adept at controlling his.

One of Klein's most useful leadership techniques is his annual televised provincial address. He makes his speech to Albertans across the (relatively) unmediated airwaves. His talk is rehearsed, and there are no political adversaries nearby to refute or question his statements. Klein uses a private television station, despite the fact that the public-owned station has reportedly offered him time, but the public stameant to lend it some credibility. However, for anyone who paid close attention to the broadcast, it was a farce.

Klein uses his televised addresses to simplify issues. He once used a "family" metaphor to discuss the province's economy. The province was to be viewed as a family household. Alberta was described as getting its "financial house in order."8 In this way, Klein simplified complex issues into easy-to-understand more familiar ones. Furthermore, this metaphor allowed Klein to justify his government's policies: "Once Albertans had come to accept these stories of the spend-thrift family, it was easy to convince them that cutbacks to public services were not just a necessary evil, but good medicine." These addresses provided an unmediated avenue for Klein to tell Albertans what he wanted them to believe. Klein's public status as ordinary person allowed him to tell Albertans about the difficult times ahead: "Only an 'ordinary guy' like Ralph Klein could brag about cutting people off welfare, and get away with it." Television is indeed one of Klein's greatest leadership devices.

Many analysts believe that Klein draws some of his strength from being underestimated. ¹¹ This underestimation may stem from his ordinary guy image. Amazingly, "Faults that would

been extraordinarily convincing."¹⁴ Klein remains very popular today. His "government resonates with the radical new conservatism"¹⁵ in Canada, and particularly in Alberta. It will have eliminated the provincial debt before any other province. In doing so, it has set a template for other provincial governments, such as the Harris regime in Ontario. Klein has a unique style of leadership, which includes his public persona, his use of television to convey his message, his populist

ditions congruent with the popular culture 4) which expresses a group's sense of threat 5) arising from powerful external elements. ¹⁸ It is widely accepted that populism played an important role in Alberta's political history. The question is, however, is this still true today?

The fact is that the Klein government owes its popular appeal largely to its leader, as does Alberta's Progressive Conservative Party. The provincial government took to describing itself as







have destroyed almost every politician... are tolerated with Ralph."¹²

Albertans generally tend to separate Klein from his government's policies. This is what most likely accounts for his continued popularity despite his government's harsh cut-backs. Klein's 1993 victory was impressive, given the electorate's dissatisfaction with his predecessor, Don Getty. Since then, Klein's popularity has remained very high and only dipped during the debate surrounding Alberta's Health Care Protection Act. While there has been some public disapproval of certain policies, this was at no particular political cost to Klein. 13 "After two years of 'revolution' in Alberta, opinion polls and the general political climate in the province show[ed] that the effective discourse of the Klein government [had]

airs, his corporatism, and his scape-goating. He has managed to maintain power in Alberta through popular support, despite his government's harsh cutbacks. Consequently, he is accurately described as "the most adept politician in Canada today." ¹⁶

His "followers are personally and devoutly loyal to him." This is where the idea of populism comes into question. Many analysts debate whether or not Klein is a populist. While his government is certainly not a classical populist government, it does have some populist traits. Before discussing them, the term "populist" should be clarified. Populism is defined as: 1) a mass political movement 2) based on an imagined personal (i.e., unmediated) relationship between leaders and followers 3) mobilized around symbols and tra-

Ralph's Team. The elections have largely been based around Klein himself. In one campaign, billboards all over the province read, "He Listens, He Cares" and featured a picture of Klein's friendly face. In focusing on Klein's so-called listening and caring attitude, the government "incorporated the rhetoric of listening and responsiveness into the restructuring program, arguing that its key initiatives have been shaped by Albertans themselves." ¹⁹

It is debatable whether or not Alberta was in need of Klein's heroism. His government, it is argued, exaggerated the province's financial situation in 1993 in order to create a crisis that it could use to justify its policies. "The Klein government has worked hard to rewrite history, portraying the [previous] Getty government as extravagant

spenders who drove Alberta to the brink of financial ruin... [due to] out-of-control spending."²⁰ This was the claim at the center of the Klein government's regime.²¹ This populist technique created legitimacy for its policies. "Through careful maneuvering, the Klein government has achieved astonishing political success"²² for, at the end of 1996, "Albertans ha[d] been convinced that the cutbacks of Ralph Klein's government were necessary to conquer runaway public spending."²³

While the Klein administration uses populist techniques, it is not a genuinely populist regime because "its corporatist practices are at variance with classic populism." ²⁵ Corporatism is "a system of organizing functional interests and influencing public policy that involves the incorporation into society of 'members' (individuals, families, firms, or various groups) through a limited number of monopolistic, differentiated, hierarchical and involuntary associations." ²⁶ Klein's govern-

regarding policy decisions. However, the round table discussion was a facade to legitimize the government's actions. After all, it was the Klein government that controlled both the agenda and who participated in the talks. ³¹ In addition, the government turned the results from the education round tables "inside out." "The report suggested little support for cutting kindergarten funding in half or for creating charter schools. Half a year later, the government went ahead with both. They still claimed







In addition to blaming the previous administration, Klein's government blamed numerous other factors for the province's financial "crisis," including special interest groups, such as public unions. Avoiding responsibility for one's actions by focusing the blame elsewhere, scape-goating, is often quite efficacious when it comes to politics. Furthermore, Klein defines those who accept his reforms as "ordinary Albertans"; this is a politically loaded term implying that there are Albertans who are abnormal simply because they do not support his government's policies. Klein uses terms like "communists," "whiners," and "left-wing nuts" to describe those who oppose his policies.24 By focusing the debate on an "us vs. them" mentality, the Klein government has avoided a lot of criticism.

ment is accurately described as "right-wing and corporatist, although certainly not without 'popular' support."²⁷ It has even been stated that Klein "clearly ran a government in partnership with business —government as a joint venture."²⁸

The Klein government is known for its attempts to quell its opposition in the province. This is not a populist tactic. Furthermore, "a government which claims to listen to the people, has instead centralized power, curtailed civil democracy and privatized public life." Some analysts argue that, "Klein and the people around him reinvented the structure of public discussion" in Alberta. This was illustrated by the government's 1993 "round table" discussion. In a seemingly populist move, the government sought public input

their reforms were legitimate reflections of the opinions of Albertans as gathered in the round tables."³³ Thus, while the Klein government seemed to be practicing populism, it was a facade used to justify its policies. Albertans generally tend to separate Klein from his government's policies and this is what most likely accounts for his continued popularity despite his government's harsh cut backs.

Klein is described in a variety of ways. "To his supporters, he is the ebullient maverick of the Canadian northwest frontier, a cunning and savvy loner who is reestablishing the private values and public mores of rural self-reliance and urban entrepreneurship." ³⁴ To his opponents, he is the leader who is ushering in a new form of government that threatens the welfare

state that many Canadians value. Klein is either "loved or hated [by Albertans]... there is no middle ground."³⁵

HARRIS

Not unlike Klein, Ontario's Mike Harris is described as a "down-homey guy" who is "remarkably determined." Characterized as "an outsider geographically, professionally and politically, "37 he dropped out of college and drifted between jobs for fifteen years. His

gary mayor, he oversaw huge spending increases and was widely suspected to have Liberal sympathies. Mike Harris, by contrast, is a lifelong small-government Tory who drafted his Common Sense Revolution 18 months before the 1995 election that brought him to power. All Nonetheless, he has followed Klein's lead. Harris admits that "while [his] plan was tailored to Ontario's needs, the province needed the kind of leadership which Ralph Klein had shown in Alberta," and that the "blueprint" for change is in

Being an outsider to the party elite is another similarity between Harris and Klein.

Despite this both men managed to seize the leadership of established, mainstream party organizations.

career path is quite unusual for a premier of Ontario. He taught elementary-school math and science; he was a golf-pro; he served as a trustee on a school board; and eventually he chaired the board. "This background is particularly interesting in light of Harris' later antipathy towards public education and government funding."³⁸

He has a "rigid commitment to the neo-conservative agenda"³⁹ and "is often portrayed as a conservative-at-all-costs ideologue whose overriding philosophy is to reduce the role of government wherever possible."⁴⁰ His ideology is often contrasted to Klein's: some observers believe Mr. Harris is also a more genuine conservative, in a philosophical sense, than Ralph Klein. The latter had no reputation for conservative behavior before taking over as premier—indeed, quite the opposite: as Cal-

Alberta.⁴³ There are numerous similarities between Harris and Klein. Harris' public persona is that of an ordinary guy, just like Klein's. Critics suggest that while "he work[s] hard at creating an image as a populist... the real Mike Harris [is] not quite as folksy as he appear[s]."44 Harris' populism is quite questionable, despite the fact that his government was recently reelected.

Harris is criticized by his opponents for not listening to his electorate and his government is described as authoritarian, not populist. "The right-wing ideologue and populist are evident in the scripted moments, while the rigid authoritarian with the petty streak appears when the premier strays from his game plan." Thus, "If people disagree... with his agenda, so be it. They [are] free to protest, and he [is] free to ignore

them."⁴⁶ Moreover, "For Mike Harris, consultation seemed to mean speaking with those who agreed with his views."⁴⁷ That lack of communication with the electorate has been demonstrated often during the Harris years and is perhaps a motivating factor in the electorate's various responses to the administration. It is difficult to defend the premier's claim to populism when one considers the evidence against it.

Harris is often described as a political outsider because of his middleclass origins and the fact that he comes from the political periphery of Northern Ontario. Being an outsider to the party elite is another similarity between Harris and Klein. Despite this disadvantage, however, both men managed to seize the leadership of established, mainstream party organizations with long histories in government. Even more remarkable is that they did so despite considerable opposition from their party's traditional elites. In a sense, Klein and Harris hijacked their own parties, something they could do only because their parties were temporarily in trouble, out of power and out of favor with the voters. 48 Unlike Klein, Harris is not widely regarded as having populist tendencies despite their similar outsider status. The Harris government, unlike Klein's, has faced a lot of public criticism. Critics blame the confrontation in Ontario on "the premier's abrasive personality and his government's authoritarian management style."49 At the heart of the problem "is the premier himself";50 this is the opposite from Alberta. The Harris regime seems to be plagued by confrontation. Some critics blame the speed with which the Harris government implemented reforms, underscored by Ontario's "megaweek" of legislative changes. During that week it was claimed that: "Mike Harris [might] surpass Ralph Klein as Canada's most revolutionary premier." 51 While this claim has not been substantiated, Harris' speed of reform is noteworthy.

"Harris has always maintained it was the agenda of the 'Common Sense Revolution,' not his personality or his government's style of managing public affairs, that produced four years of confrontation, violent protest and occasional riots in the streets of normally sedate Ontario."52 However, polls have demonstrated that people are not satisfied with Harris' leadership; "the character of the man in charge... is directly responsible for the problems his government has had in implementing its agenda."53 Harris, say his critics, is not living up to the expectations that Ontario voters have of their political elites 54

Harris resembles Klein insofar as he has loyal supporters. Klein, however, has not experienced the same level of personal attacks as Ontario's premier. Mike Harris has endured endless assaults on his character. He was even nicknamed "Chainsaw Mike" by Bob Rae, the former premier of Ontario. The level of public outrage demonstrated in Ontario is in part attributable to certain campaign promises that the Harris government broke: it stated that it would not touch health care and education, and once elected, proceeded to do so. Ironically, Harris once said, "I think it's reasonable that politicians who campaign in a direction or on a platform for things that are within their control, that they ought to resign or go back to the people if they in fact are going to change their minds."55

He has obviously changed his stance on the issue. This is in direct contrast to Klein in Alberta who is so confident in his recent record that he campaigns using the slogan, "He keeps his promises." Harris blames all opposition to his agenda on special interest groups. Just as Klein has done in Alberta, Harris is attempting to create an "us vs. them" mentality in Ontario. This kind of leadership technique, however, does not seem to be working as well as it did in Alberta; the evidence is in the sheer number of Onta-

IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADA

"While Alberta is not alone in embracing 'new right' fiscal policies... it is notable for the pace and intensity of its approach, making it an illuminating and timely case study in the Canadian context." The Klein government has "used its crusade against the deficit... [to initiate] a government program of social engineering, the re-ordering of societal institutions and priorities to fit a particular ideological mould that is virtually without precedent in

Harris is attempting to create an "us vs. them" mentality in Ontario. This kind of leadership technique is not working; the evidence is in the sheer numbers of Ontarians who have participated in the protests.

rians who have participated in the protests. This can perhaps be explained by Ontario's political culture: Ontario has a long tradition of group rights and unions, and other organized interests wich are much more powerful in Ontario than in union-wary Alberta.

By contrast, Alberta does not have a history of collective protest, making it easier for Klein to successfully blame any opposition on special interest groups. Thus, political culture accounts for the success of Klein's strategy in individualistic Alberta, and for the relative failure of that Harris leadership technique.

While Harris has faced massive protests, the fact remains that he continues to lead Ontario. His government was reelected in 1999. He received 45 percent of the vote. Most of his supporters were upper-middle class and urban.

recent Canadian history."⁵⁷ While six other Canadian provinces were projecting balanced budgets for the 1995-1996 year, these accomplishments were overshadowed by Alberta.⁵⁸ Alberta is now regarded as a model for neo-conservatism in Canada and elsewhere around the world. The province is viewed as a trend setter. "It isn't Ontario that is leading Canada down this path towards a market based morality... It's Ralph Klein's Alberta."⁵⁹ Ontario is following in Alberta's footsteps.

The evidence suggests that: "Alberta's greatest export used to be its oil; now, as Ontario attests, it's Klein's model of how to remake government." Moreover, "the unexpected 1995 election of Conservative Premier Mike Harris in Ontario and the reelections of two other budget-balancing premiers, Tory Gary Filmon in Manitoba and Social Dem-

ocratic Roy Romanow in Saskatchewan, indicate... that the sustained popularity of Premier Klein's tough, austere government is more than just ...quirky Alberta."61 The success of the Klein revolution illustrates a shift in ideology: "Until recently, only the lunatic fringe of Canadian politics has voiced support for the extreme rightwing ideas that underlie the pathology of American life... With the Klein government, however, these ideas have at last found a Trojan Horse for entering into Canadian public discourse and

the center of the political spectrum and moving to the right. Neo-conservatism has the potential to profoundly influence Canadian politics. It already dominates the agendas of the provincial governments in two of Canada's most important provinces.

CONCLUSION

Despite the different reactions to neo-conservatism in Alberta and Ontario, an important fact remains: both

Both Alberta and Ontario have demonstrated authoritarian tendencies. Neo-conservatism has the potential to profoundly influence Canadian politics. It already dominates two of Canada's most important provinces.

policy, and thereby fundamentally changing the nature of Canada."⁶² Canada's current status as a welfare state is in jeopardy, as is its sovereignty and democracy.

Both Alberta and Ontario have demonstrated authoritarian tendencies that threaten democracy. These tendencies include hurrying bills through the legislature to avoid debate, attempting to by-pass the legislature's authority by asking it to pre-approve cabinet decisions on blank sections of legislation and discouraging public input by ignoring certain portions of their respective electorates. These trends are quite disconcerting and have the potential to influence more than just Alberta and Ontario as other provincial governments begin to follow the Klein government's lead. Canadian ideology is shifting away from

the Klein and Harris governments were reelected. The right-wing mentality has most assuredly begun to permeate into the rest of Canada at both the provincial and federal levels. The question is, therefore, not if neoconservatism will influence Canadian politics more pervasively, but when it will, and how the rest of the Canadian public will react to it.

Notes

- ¹ Special thanks to Dr. Julián Castro Rea for his input on this article.
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- ⁹ Idem.
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- ¹⁶ Trevor Harrison, "Making the Trains Run on Time: Corporatism in Alberta," *The Trojan Horse*, op.cit., p. 123.
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- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 108.
- ¹⁹ Karen D. Hughes et al., "Public Attitudes Towards Budget Cuts in Alberta: Biting the Bullet or Feeling the Pain?," *Canadian Public Policy* 22 (3), September 1996, p. 271.
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- ²² Ibid., p. 1.
- ²³ Idem.
- ²⁴ Harrison, "The Changing Face of Prairie Politics: Populism in Alberta," p. 117.
- ²⁵ Idem.

- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 118.
- ²⁷ Trevor Harrison, "Making the Trains Run on Time: Corporatism in Alberta," op. cit., p. 119.
- ²⁸ Lisac, op. cit., p. 152.
- ²⁹ Harrison and Laxer, op. cit., p. 3.
- 30 Lisac, op. cit., p. 143.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 144.
- ³² Ibid., p. 145.
- 33 Idem.
- ³⁴ Dabbs, op. cit., p. 173.
- 35 Idem.
- ³⁶ Anthony Wilson-Smith, "The Mike Harris School of Politics," *Maclean's*, vol. 110 (45) 10 November 1997, p. 9.
- ³⁷ Brooke Jeffrey, Hard Right Turn: The New Face of Neo-Conservatism in Canada (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 1995), p. 152.

- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 153.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 157.
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- ⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 156-157.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 214.
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- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 440.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 152.

- ⁵⁰ Idem.
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- ⁵² Jeffrey, op. cit., p. 151.
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- ⁵⁶ Hugues et al., op. cit., p. 270.
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- ⁵⁹ Harrison and Laxer, op. cit., p. 1.
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