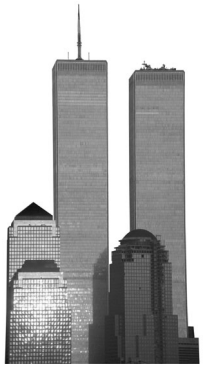
ANDRÉ BLAIS: PROBABLY NOT MUCH WILL CHANGE



André Blais is Professor of Political Science at the University of Montreal, specializing in electoral systems, electoral behaviour and electoral participation. He is currently studying voters' decisions whether or not to vote, various electoral systems, and the 1993 Canadian federal election. The subjects of his most recent books and articles include ethics, public sector employment, voter turnout, direct presidential elections, the Reform Party and electoral formulas. He talked with William Watson on Oct. 16.

André Blais est professeur de sciences politiques à l'Université de Montréal et spécialiste des systèmes, de la participation et des comportements électoraux. Ses recherches actuelles portent sur le phénomène de l'abstention, les modes de scrutin comparés et l'élection canadienne de 1993. Ses derniers ouvrages et articles traitent d'une variété de questions dont celles de l'éthique, de l'emploi dans le secteur public, de la participation électorale, du scrutin présidentiel direct, du Reform Party et des formules électorales. William Watson s'est entretenu avec lui le 16 octobre.

William Watson: How did you find out about the bombings? What was your experience?

André Blais: I was in London. It was just after a conference. I was supposed to fly back on the following day, on the Wednesday. I was coming back to my hotel from a wonderful art gallery. And on the street a bunch of people were looking at the TV, in some kind of store, I guess. I realized it was showing the towers crumbling. I just couldn't believe it so I ran to my hotel and started watching BBC to see what was going on. It looked surreal.

I didn't have any immediate reaction, except to think about the crude implications for myself, which were that I was sure there would no flight on the following day. And I tried to call Air Canada and the airport to see what was going on.

William Watson: What was that like? When did you finally get out?

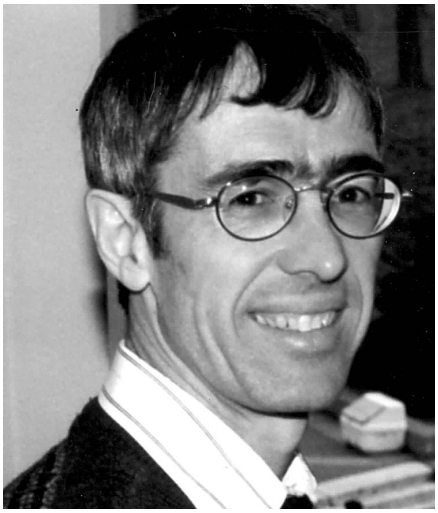
André Blais: On the Sunday. So I had planned to spend two days in London, and I had to spend six days. It wasn't awful, of course! Basically, I had to waste a couple of hours every morning, just to try to get some information, to call Montreal and my family and also to see how I could get any contact with the airport because it was difficult to get through on the lines to get any information. Sometimes I would get information, other times I wouldn't. And then I'd go to the Canadian embassy, on Trafalgar Square. And I would meet other Canadians and exchange views and so on. But besides that, this was an opportunity to visit London. So I felt it was, in a way, not bad at all.

William Watson: I assume everybody in London was talking about it?

André Blais: Yes but, you know, I was alone. So you don't talk to many people. I did talk to some people at the Canadian embassy and to Canadians there. One or two arrived at the American embassy, and there was this place where all the people went and lined up to give flowers and so on. Then I talked to a few Americans, on the spot. These were the moments when I could chat with other people. In fact, this was one of the toughest aspects of the experience. I needed to talk. It was very, very tough not to talk. I talked to people at home, with my family a little bit, and a few strangers. But besides that, I didn't have any opportunity to talk.

William Watson: When did you start thinking about it as a political scientist? I found, I'm ashamed to say, that within a couple of hours I started to think about economics.

André Blais: I think I had exactly the same reaction. It took very little time to think as a political scientist. My first reaction was that I tried to understand why the terrorists did it. In fact, I was surprised that quite a few people on TV were saying that they could not understand it. I guess my view is that it is easily possible to understand why people would want to



André Blais

destroy a society that they despise.

I was also trying to understand how the terrorists had calculated the probability of success, whether they anticipated the Americans' reaction and so on. I started thinking on those terms very, very quickly. But I must say that's one thing I still don't have a good grasp on. What did the terrorists expect? What were the chances of success? What were the chances of failure? And did they anticipate the Americans would react massively and precipitously or not?

William Watson: Would they expect the Americans to take such a hit without a response or were they trying to provoke a response to stir things up in their part of the world?

André Blais: My assumption is that they wanted to provoke. And massively and rapidly. And I suppose they were only partly successful. I also tried to anticipate the reactions of Arab countries. I don't have a good understanding of what the terrorists expected on that front. There is a possibility that they just went too far, and that because they went too far, the whole episode will prove to be a complete failure from their own perspective. On that, I guess I still don't know.

At the time, I was so surprised by all of this that my inclination was to suppose that there was quite a bit of luck involved in their success. This is why I wasn't fearful at all, either in London or coming back on the plane. But with these anthrax incidents now, I'm revisiting that perspective. Perhaps the terrorists are a bit more powerful than I thought.

It was easier for me to understand the Americans' reactions. They reacted cautiously and this was exactly what I expected. I'm one of those who believes that Bush is much better than most people tend to think. He is pretty good at choosing good advisers and following their advice. And I think Colin Powell played a very important role.

William Watson: You said you were perplexed that people couldn't understand what would lead to the hatred. We do seem able to understand that people could hate a civilization. We just can't understand that they hate *our* civilization.

André Blais: You know, it's not a problem for me at all. I must be very relativist. What's a bit more difficult for me—not a bit more, a lot more—is to understand how is it that people would be willing to commit suicide. This is why I am still intrigued about the probability of success of the whole operation. How is it that none of the 19 terrorists, at the very last minute, decided it wasn't worth it and tried to back out? For me committing suicide looks to be a very, very demanding choice.

William Watson: It was denounced as a cowardly act, and in some sense it is, but to fly a plane into a building! Consciously!

André Blais: For me, it's not cowardly at all.

William Watson: It must require nerves of steel.

André Blais: Absolutely. Though another question I still haven't answered: were all these people aware of what they would be doing, or not? I'm inclined to believe that probably some of them were not.

William Watson: They were along for the ride but unaware until the last minute that they were going into the buildings?

André Blais: Yes, that's my assumption. That people would come to hate a society that is so rich and perceived to be so materialist, I find very easy to understand. That this hate should be so strong that they were willing to commit suicide is more difficult.

William Watson: Can we move now to your thinking about the longer-term effects of this event on our society and the way we live?

André Blais: My standard reaction is the usual one for me, which is to go against the conventional wisdom. So my initial reaction is that it won't have that lasting an impact. The honest answer is that I really don't know. But my gut reaction is to say probably not much will change. I got annoyed with all those people who were saying "everything will be different after Sept. 11." A lot depends on the outcome of the whole thing. And the problem is that we still don't know enough about how organized these terrorist groups are, and what resources they have and, especially, how much money they have.

William Watson: Is money such a problem, if they come from the area of the world we think they come from?

André Blais: I think it's still a problem. If they have only, let's say, a few million dollars, that's not a lot in many ways. If there is to be a war over a period of five years, it's probably not enough. If it's more than that, perhaps. But it's not clear to me that these terrorist groups have that much money. They certainly have more than a million, but my guess is that they have less than a hundred million. And it seems to me that these things require a lot of money.

My impression is that Tony Blair is part of that generation of social democrats who still believe that the Left made a terrible mistake in World War II—it was too soft with Hitler—and that it won't repeat that error again.

If they are going to be destroyed, perhaps the impact will not be quite the same, though the anthrax affair, especially, leads me to think that there will be some durable impact. We will certainly be more concerned with security than we have been. Because my generation was born after the war, it was prone to think that we were in a peaceful society and that nothing could happen. We will now think a bit differently.

William Watson: But we are the generation that lived with nuclear terror for three or four decades. Wasn't there, deep in the back of our minds, a worry that something would go horribly wrong?

André Blais: For me, the Cold War was always a very abstract thing. I never felt it, really. Perhaps I was overoptimistic but the war didn't seem to me to be a real, concrete threat. After Sept. 11 security is probably going to be in the back of my mind for a pretty long period. In that sense, I think there will be enduring change.

William Watson: What do you think of the Canadian government's reaction? If you think Sept. 11 may not have a big long-run effect, then maybe we should not take dramatic steps, but take those steps that we think are necessary.

André Blais: I think it probably won't have dramatic effects if the war is won. But for the war to be won, for terrorism to be eradicated, my impression is that you need to take pretty big steps. I am one of these people who've been traditionally very concerned about freedom of expression and so on, but am willing now to put security ahead of that. So I understand and support the government's basic approach.

Now, initially, of course, Chrétien was very prudent, and it was very striking to compare him with Tony Blair, whom I watched for a few days in Britain. I was impressed by Blair's eloquence and so on. And the contrast was pretty stark with Canada. But, it probably makes sense in a way that the two leaders reacted differently. The contexts are very different, and a case could be made that Mr. Chrétien's reaction was the proper one.



"...WE SHALL NEVER SURRENDER."

William Watson: What do you think explains the Blair reaction? He's really got out in front in this whole thing.

André Blais: The standard explanation is political calculation. A cynical response is that there has to be some reason to do this, and this could be an opportunity, for instance, to try and eradicate terrorist elements in London, or perhaps even to get at the IRA. That's not my interpretation, however. I'm of those who think that ideals are extremely important in politics. I think that Blair is personally convinced that terrorism is a very important threat, and that we've got to do something very radical to eradicate it.

My impression is that Blair is part of that generation of social democrats who still believe that the Left made a terrible mistake in World War II—it was too soft with Hitler—and that it won't repeat that error again. So my own interpretation of Blair's gesture is perhaps a naïve and idealistic one, that it reflects his personal convictions, first and foremost. And it is because he is so convinced that he is so eloquent.

William Watson: If he can fake all that, then he's a real political genius.

André Blais: It was just so impressive just to watch him and listen to him. He was very, very compelling.

William Watson: And Chrétien? What do you think would be behind his reaction? Just that he's naturally cautious?

André Blais: That would be my view.

William Watson: What do you think the effect of this will be on Canadian politics?

André Blais: I think that we will invest a bit more in defence and in security and that immigration policy will be slightly tightened. But that's about all. Again, I don't think this will be a sea change in Canadian politics. But in some areas, especially defence, it might be quite important.

William Watson: And everything is subject to reevaluation if there is a big terrorist incident here?

André Blais: Oh, yes. If many Arab countries were to leave the alliance, for instance, that would be very different. The other thing about which I don't know enough are the potential consequences of this in Israel. That could have an impact on us as well.

William Watson: If many of the Arab countries do leave the coalition, if the war is widened, that's going to put the Chrétien cabinet and govern-

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ment under pressure?

André Blais: That would become very, very tough.

William Watson: Some of the polls immediately following Sept. 11 suggested slightly different reactions in Quebec than in the rest of the country. Do you see any difference in the polls that you have been reading?

André Blais: I didn't see these polls. I was overwhelmed with things to do when I got back. But in my view differences with respect to American sentiments are very slight overall. There might be a bit more anti-American sentiment in Quebec, but just a bit more. At the same time, on issues like free trade, Quebec was always a bit more supportive. But my overall impression is that there is probably little difference. I have observed, especially among students, a pretty high level of anti-American sentiments. I had forgotten that this exists everywhere, and this was a good reminder for me. Even in Britain, there is a substantial minority—it is a minority, but it's a substantial minority—of people with strong anti-American sentiments. And I had more or less forgotten about this.

William Watson: Is it mainly on the political Left that you see this view?

André Blais: It's not only on the political Left but it's mainly on the Left. It's there, and we should not forget about it.

William Watson: It's typically thought to be more of a problem in English Canada because we're more insecure about our cultural identity.

André Blais: Yes. But at the same time, it's a characteristic of the Left, and the Left is a bit stronger in Quebec. The two effects probably cancel each other out, more or less.

William Watson: Have you found yourself tilting against conventional wisdom in any other way?

André Blais: In Britain, when I was watching BBC, the immediate reaction of many observers was to say that this indicated a failure of America's isolationist policy. Now the Americans would see they didn't have a choice, they had to get involved and try to deal with the big international problems. But I had a different reaction. If I were an American, I might feel that the main reason why the United States was attacked, and not another country, was because the Americans *were* involved in trying to find a solution in the Middle East. The reason the Americans have to find a solution is in part because there is a substantial minority of Jewish Americans. Many other countries, Canada, for instance, free-ride on the us on this. They let the us try to solve a very, very difficult problem essentially on its own. One potential reaction would be for the U.S. to become even more isolationist, to forget about the Middle East and to try to become more energy-independent.

William Watson: If they weren't involved, they wouldn't be attacked.

André Blais: I suppose there are two interpretations for why they were attacked. One is they are involved in the Middle East. The other is they are the richest country. I assume that the two factors are at play, that it's a combination of the two. And also the idea that because they are the richest, they are the most materialist—which I think is a misperception. Because we should not forget that the Americans are the most religious people.

William Watson: Much more than any European country. And they are also more fundamentalist.

André Blais: Exactly. So that's another paradox of the situation. The Americans misperceived to be materialist. And that's one reason they were attacked, because the World Trade Center was such a symbol of that materialism.

William Watson: Thank you very much for doing this.

The Blair Doctrine Don't overreact some say. We aren't. We haven't lashed out. No missiles on the first night just for effect.

Don't kill innocent people. We are not the ones who waged war on the innocent. We seek the guilty.

Look for a diplomatic solution. There is no diplomacy with bin Laden or the Taliban regime.

State an ultimatum and get their response. We stated the ultimatum; they haven't responded.

Understand the causes of terror. Yes, we should try, but let there be no moral ambiguity about this: nothing could ever justify the events of 11 September, and it is to turn justice on its head to pretend it could.

The action we take will be proportionate; targeted; we will do all we humanly can to avoid civilian casualties. But understand what we are dealing with. Listen to the calls of those passengers on the planes. Think of the children on them, told they were going to die.

Think of the cruelty beyond our comprehension as amongst the screams and the anguish of the innocent, those hijackers drove at full throttle planes laden with fuel into buildings where tens of thousands worked.

They have no moral inhibition on the slaughter of the innocent. If they could have murdered not 7,000 but 70,000 does anyone doubt they would have done so and rejoiced in it?

There is no compromise possible with such people, no meeting of minds, no point of understanding with such terror.

Just a choice: defeat it or be defeated by it. And defeat it we must.

Tony BLAIR, Brighton, 3 Oct. 2001