



Infommat

A Weekly Review

Friday, May 26, 2000

OVERVIEW

◆ Exports and imports regain lost ground

In March, exports and imports rebounded after February's setbacks. This first-quarter surplus was the second highest balance of payments quarterly surplus ever recorded, just short of the record surplus in the second quarter of 1996.

◆ Slight drop in consumer prices

From March to April, the Consumer Price Index dropped slightly. The decline was largely due to lower energy prices. As a result, the annual inflation rate in consumer prices fell in April to 2.1%—the lowest annual rate since last August.

◆ Consumers boost retail store sales

After declining in February, retail sales bounced back by 2.1% in March. Retailers in the automotive sector posted the strongest gain in sales. This buoyancy was also reflected in first-quarter sales.

◆ Wholesale sales rebound

In March, wholesale sales rebounded 2.0%, led by farm machinery, industrial machinery, lumber and automotive wholesalers. Ten of eleven trade groups reported sales growth.

◆ Labour productivity advances

Last year, labour productivity in the Canadian business sector advanced 1.4%, almost three times the 1998 pace of 0.5%. This productivity increase followed strong economic growth and a rapid rise in the number of hours worked. Nevertheless, the productivity gap between Canada and the United States is widening.

Exports and imports regain lost ground

In March, exports and imports rebounded after February's setbacks, reaching their highest monthly level since the beginning of the year. Canadian companies exported \$33.5 billion worth of goods, up 4.5% from February. The gain was brought on, principally, by the automobile industry. Imports rose 3.7% to \$29.6 billion.

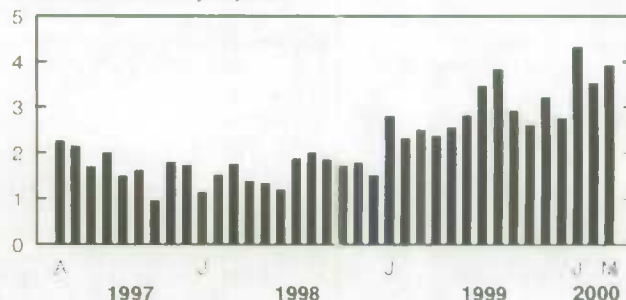
The growth in exports outpaced that in imports, so the resulting trade surplus of \$3.9 billion made for an overall surplus of \$11.7 billion for the first three months of 2000. This made it the second highest quarterly surplus ever recorded, just short of the \$12.1 billion record in the second quarter of 1996.

All sectors reported higher exports in March, the automotive industry recording the largest advance. Exporters shipped nearly \$8.3 billion worth of automobiles, trucks and parts out of the country, an increase of 8.1% over February. Production slowdowns for inventory purposes at some car plants had driven exports down 14.1% in February. Car exports alone reached almost \$4.3 billion, up 9.6%.

Shipments of machinery and equipment were nearly \$8.3 billion, an increase of 7.1%. Strong exports of aircraft to the United States and Europe accounted for about half of this gain. Exports of industrial commodities rose 2.3%. They advanced 11.9% over the last six months. Strong exports to the United States of gold, rubber

Merchandise trade balance

\$ billions, seasonally adjusted



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... Exports and imports regain lost ground

and synthetic plastics, automotive hardware, and herbicides were the main reason for this increase.

Strongly higher exports of wheat and barley to China and of potato preparations and beef cattle to the United States contributed to the 4.4% increase in agricultural and fishing exports. Canola exports declined for the third consecutive month, which made for much larger Canadian reserves. Exports of forest products recovered slightly (+2.1%) after a net decline in February. Exports of wood-fabricated products, particularly to Asia, were the main reason for the increase.

Stronger imports of electronic, computer and telecommunications equipment, after a net decline in February, boosted the machinery and equipment group (+4.0%). Imports of automotive products were up 1.6%, mostly because imports of automotive parts returned to a more normal level. Imports of trucks, especially heavy vehicles, continued to rise, while imports of cars experienced their first decline of the year (-8.2%).

Imports of industrial commodities were up 5.0%, the recovery of automotive production having led to greater imports of automotive hardware. In addition, an early spring in Canada

pushed up imports of herbicides from France, Germany and the United States. After two successive monthly declines, imports of other consumer products rose 4.6%, mainly due to increases in the category, "medical and pharmaceutical products in individual doses."

For a second consecutive month, imports of energy products experienced a strong increase, totalling 24.5% for the last two months. Some refineries replenished their stocks of petrochemicals, while high enough water levels in the Great Lakes allowed for a resumption of large shipments of coal. March also saw the first drop in prices for crude oil imports since June 1999.

The growing Canadian economy and a mild winter helped boost construction starts to their highest level since June 1994, pushing imports of forest products up 10.7%.

The March 2000 issue of *Canadian international merchandise trade* (print: 65-001-XPB, \$19/\$188; online at www.statcan.ca: 65-001-XIB, \$14/\$141) includes tables by commodity and by country. Current account data are available quarterly in *Canada's balance of international payments* (67-001-XPB, \$38/\$124). For more information, contact Jocelyne Elibani, (613-951-9647) or call toll-free 1-800-294-5583, International Trade Division. See also "Current trends" on page 7.

Slight drop in consumer prices

From March to April, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) dropped slightly (-0.4%). The decline was largely due to lower energy prices (-3.8%). The CPI excluding energy was unchanged from March to April.

As a result, the annual inflation rate in consumer prices fell in April to 2.1%—the lowest annual rate since last August—down from 3.0% in March. Although energy prices fell in April, they remained well above where they were prior to last year's upward spiral. Excluding energy, the CPI increased in April on an annual basis by 1.1%, down slightly from 1.4% in March.

In April, the energy components that exerted the greatest downward price pressure were gasoline and fuel oil. The OPEC agreement in late March to increase oil production relieved the upward pressure on crude oil prices. From March to April, gasoline prices fell 5.6%—the largest price decrease since February 1991.

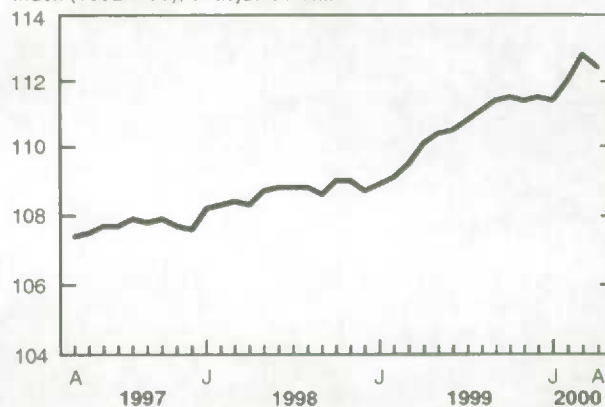
Consumer Price Index, April 2000

% change, previous year, not seasonally adjusted

	All items	Food	Shelter	Transportation	Energy
Canada	2.1	0.4	2.6	4.5	13.6
Newfoundland	2.7	0.0	5.5	6.3	19.3
Prince Edward Island	4.0	0.0	8.5	8.1	32.7
Nova Scotia	3.1	0.4	6.2	6.1	19.3
New Brunswick	3.0	0.6	5.3	6.1	17.0
Quebec	1.7	0.5	2.5	3.8	11.0
Ontario	2.2	0.2	2.5	4.5	13.1
Manitoba	2.4	2.2	2.1	3.4	8.6
Saskatchewan	2.4	0.3	3.6	4.6	12.6
Alberta	3.3	1.7	4.5	6.1	17.6
British Columbia	1.3	-1.1	0.6	4.0	14.4
Whitehorse	2.1	-0.4	3.5	4.5	17.1
Yellowknife	2.1	2.0	3.2	1.4	17.0

Consumer Price Index

Index (1992=100), unadjusted data



That contrasts with the price hike of 8.8% in March. Fuel oil prices dropped 7.8%, making April the second month of price declines after 11 consecutive monthly increases.

Also down compared with March were women's clothing prices (-3.3%). The drop was due to widespread sales in most categories of women's clothing. Price decreases are not unusual for these items in April. New vehicle prices declined 0.9%. Dealer discounts and manufacturer rebates more than offset a few increases in manufacturer's suggested retail prices and in freight costs for certain models.

Turning to the monthly increases, homeowners' maintenance and repair costs increased 1.7%, the largest rise since September 1999. Mainly, the advance occurred because special sale prices returned to regular prices and because of higher manufacturer and

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... Slight drop in consumer prices

wholesaler prices. Fresh or frozen beef rose 2.9%—the largest monthly rise since March 1988 (+3.2%). The supply of beef was down due to the ongoing liquidation of cattle herds, as well as to increased foreign demand. Also increasing in April, mortgage interest costs went up 0.5%. That was the same rate of increase as in March, and the eighth consecutive month that mortgage interest costs rose.

Consumers boost retail store sales

After declining by 1.0% in February, retail sales bounced back by 2.1% in March to a record high of \$22.8 billion. Spending in retail stores has generally been growing since the beginning of 1996.

Retailers in the automotive sector posted the strongest sales gain in March (+4.3%). When sales by motor and recreational vehicle dealers—the largest component in the sector—are excluded, the increase in total retail sales is 1.0%. Sales also increased for clothing stores (+2.9%) and furniture retailers (+1.7%). In these three sectors, the sales advances reported in March more than offset the declines they suffered in February. Sales were lower in general merchandise stores (-0.4%) and almost unchanged in drug stores (-0.1%).

With the exception of Prince Edward Island, retailers in all provinces and territories reported higher sales in March. Retail sales in Prince Edward Island paused in the early months of 2000 after an exceptionally strong performance in 1999.

As a result of the March advance, retail sales posted a healthy 1.9% increase in the first quarter of 2000 compared with the last quarter of 1999. Retailers in the automotive sector posted the largest quarterly gain. In this sector, higher gasoline prices continued to affect service station sales, resulting in a 7.0% jump in the first quarter. Strong demand for big-ticket items continued to push up sales by motor and recreational vehicle dealers (+2.8%).

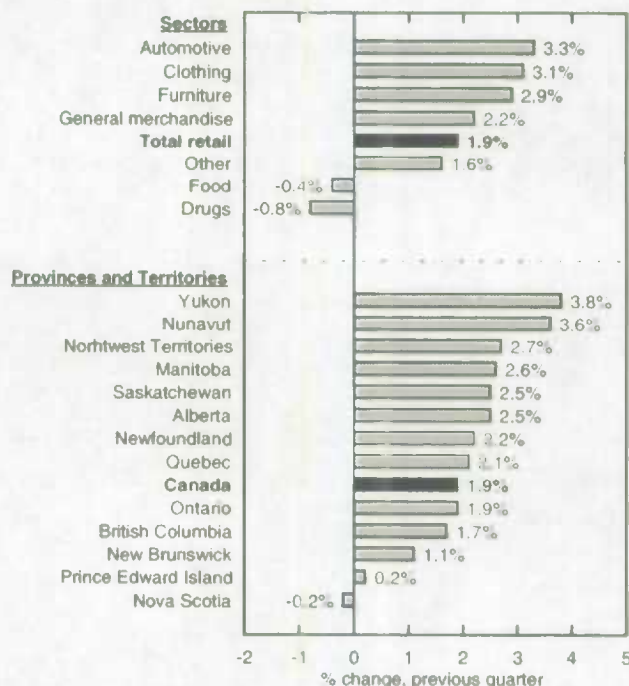
Retail sales, March 2000
Seasonally adjusted

	\$ millions	% change, previous month	% change, previous year
Canada	22,826	2.1	6.7
Newfoundland	371	2.6	3.9
Prince Edward Island	100	-1.3	8.7
Nova Scotia	708	1.4	5.9
New Brunswick	583	5.1	8.5
Quebec	5,306	3.5	4.6
Ontario	8,693	2.0	7.9
Manitoba	783	0.8	3.8
Saskatchewan	678	1.7	7.2
Alberta	2,610	1.5	9.2
British Columbia	2,915	0.4	5.6
Yukon	29	2.5	9.3
Northwest Territories	34	3.7	5.8
Nunavut	16	5.4	8.2

Compared with April 1999, lower prices were seen this April for fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, computer equipment and supplies, and new vehicles.

The April 2000 issue of *The consumer price index* (62-001-XPB, \$11/\$103) is now available. For further information, contact Client Services (613-951-9606; fax: 613-951-1539; info@statcan.ca), Prices Division. See also "Current trends" on page 7.

Retail sales, first quarter of 2000



In the first quarter of 2000, consumers increased spending in all types of clothing stores, especially shoe stores (+5.7%) and other clothing stores (+4.1%), which include family and children's clothing stores. The clothing sector as a whole posted its largest quarterly advance (+3.1%) since the third quarter of 1994. A reduction in the number of department stores in the second half of 1999 may have contributed to the substantial sales increases reported by more specialized clothing stores in recent months.

Retail sales in the territories and in the Prairie provinces grew by at least 2.5% in the first quarter of 2000 compared with the last quarter of 1999. After posting the weakest annual gains of 1999, retail sales in the Prairie provinces picked up considerably in the first quarter of this year. Sustained consumer demand continued to push sales up in Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia.

The March 2000 issue of *Retail trade* (print: 63-005-XPB, \$21/\$206; online at www.statcan.ca: 63-005-XIB, \$16/\$155) presents the full report. To order data, or for general information, contact the Client Services Unit (1 877 421-3067 or 613-951-3549; retailinfo@statcan.ca). For analytical information, contact Paul Gratton (613-951-3541; gratpau@statcan.ca), Distributive Trades Division.

Wholesale sales rebound

In March, wholesale sales continued their long-term gradual climb by rebounding 2.0% to \$31.6 billion. This marked the largest monthly percentage increase since October 1998 (+3.2%). However, with sales of \$93.9 billion, the first quarter of 2000 ended up 1.2% over the previous quarter—the first time the quarterly increase has slipped below 2% since the fourth quarter of 1998.

Sales of farm machinery—mostly in Ontario and Quebec—jumped 27.5%, after a 17.6% drop in February. This group's sales have generally been declining since the fall of 1997, and its inventories since the fall of 1998. Inventories slipped 0.2% in March and were almost 9% smaller than a year earlier.

In contrast, sales of industrial machinery, equipment and supplies rose 2.4%, their fifth consecutive monthly rise. Sales in Ontario were the chief contributor. These wholesalers have generally been increasing their sales for several years, and the last three quarters have seen consistently strong advances of more than 3%. March sales were almost 14% above those of March 1999.

Wholesale trade, March 2000
Seasonally adjusted

	\$ millions	% change, previous month	% change, previous year
Canada	31,603	2.0	8.7
Newfoundland	222	-1.0	7.2
Prince Edward Island	52	-1.8	6.1
Nova Scotia	575	-1.1	5.4
New Brunswick	398	-0.1	7.5
Quebec	6,407	4.7	6.9
Ontario	15,667	1.1	8.2
Manitoba	872	-1.9	-1.8
Saskatchewan	966	1.2	19.6
Alberta	3,069	2.8	16.3
British Columbia	3,349	2.6	9.0
Yukon	10	0.8	-8.9
Northwest Territories	13	-31.1	10.0
Nunavut	2	-5.2	-4.4

Wholesalers of lumber (especially in Quebec) and building materials sold 4.6% more in March than in February, offsetting February's 5.2% decline. Sales in the first quarter of 2000 were 2.5% above the fourth quarter of 1999—the seventh consecutive quarterly increase—and 24.0% above the second quarter of 1998. This is the longest string of increases among all trade groups. Residential construction remains at historical highs, likely due to rising employment and earnings and to fears of interest-rate hikes.

The automotive group's sales rose 1.5%, following two months of increases of only 0.1% each. Quebec wholesalers contributed significantly to the advance. Sales for the first quarter of 2000 were 0.8% higher, the sixth quarterly increase in a row; increases in the other quarters, however, ranged from 2.0% to 8.2%. Though inventories have tended upward, their value fell 2.3% in March, the first decline in six months.

Wholesalers of computers, packaged software and other electronic machinery were the only group to post lower sales in March (-0.6%). They were also the only group to show back-to-back quarterly decreases, 2.5% in the first quarter and 3.6% in the prior quarter. They are still feeling the effects of delayed spending by large corporate customers.

Wholesalers in Quebec and British Columbia recovered to lead the way from the setbacks they suffered in February. In British Columbia, the sales growth was based on strong sales in the food, auto, and lumber trade groups. Wholesalers there have seen sales generally rise since late 1998. Sales declined in all four Atlantic provinces. Nevertheless, sales in these provinces have generally been rising.

For the first time since May 1999, inventories decreased (-0.2%) to \$42.0 billion. The overall value of inventories has been advancing strongly for several years. The inventory-to-sales ratio, which measures the duration in months that inventories will last, decreased from 1.36 in February to 1.33. A shift this size has not occurred since November 1998. The change reflects the shrinking inventories and rising sales. The ratio has remained at the 1.35 range since mid-1999.

The March 2000 issue of *Wholesale trade* (online at www.statcan.ca: 63-008-X1B, \$14/\$140) presents the full report. To order data, or for general information, contact Client Services (1 877 421-3067 or 613-951-3549; wholesaleinfo@statcan.ca). For further analytical information, contact Greg Parsons (613-951-0062; parsons@statcan.ca), Distributive Trades Division.

Labour productivity advances

Last year, labour productivity in the Canadian business sector advanced 1.4%, almost three times the 1998 pace of 0.5%. This growth in productivity followed strong economic growth and a rapid rise in the number of hours worked. For example, the goods sector's growth in output accelerated from 2.1% in 1998 to 4.5% in 1999. Mainly, this was sustained by manufacturing, where output growth rose from 3.9% in 1998 to 6.2%, and where hours worked rose 3.8% last year. Manufacturers' productivity rose 2.4% in 1999, rebounding from a decline of 0.3% the year before, when there were strikes.

Productivity growth is an essential element affecting the long-term performance of businesses. During the last decade, the average annual increase in productivity (+1.1%) was virtually the same as in the 1980s (+1.2%) and in the 1973-to-1981 period (+1.2%). However, these growth rates were well below the annual growth of 3.7% seen from 1966 to 1973.

In 1999, the business sector's real gross domestic product (GDP) grew 4.7%—the second-highest growth rate in four years. It was also considerably above the annual growth rate between 1989 and 1999 (+2.2%). However, it remained below the 3.2% average seen from 1981 to 1989. Hours worked climbed more

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... Labour productivity advances

rapidly last year (+3.3%) than in any of the prior three years. Nevertheless, the growth rate in hours worked in the 1990s was below the 2.0% annual average recorded in the 1980s. In 1999, the rate of increase in hours worked was identical in both manufacturing and services (+3.8%).

The goods sector's productivity growth in 1999 was twice as fast as the service sector's (+2.1% versus +1.0%). Between 1989 and 1999, service industries increased productivity at an annual average rate of 0.7%, compared with the goods industries' 1.6%. From 1997 to 1999, productivity in services rose for three straight years, mainly because of strong performances in communications, wholesale and retail trade, finance, insurance and real estate, as well as accommodation, food and beverage services. In 1998 and 1999, service industries outpaced goods industries in both output and hours worked.

Hourly compensation increased last year by 1.6%, almost the same growth rate as labour productivity. As a result, wage-cost pressures in the Canadian economy were kept to a minimum. Unit labour costs increased only 0.2%—the lowest growth rate in the past four years, and well below the annual averages of the last three decades. Lower unit labour costs were seen last year in all primary industries, in communications and other utility industries, and in wholesale trade. In manufacturing, unit labour costs declined 0.7%, compared with a 3.1% increase in 1998.

Through most of the 1990s, GDP per capita grew more slowly than labour productivity because job growth lagged behind population growth. But this has now changed. From 1997 to 1999, growth in real GDP per capita exceeded growth in real GDP or output per job (a less-precise measure for labour productivity). For example, in the overall economy last year, real GDP per capita climbed 3.3%, whereas real output per job rose just 1.3%. This change occurred because the jobs-population ratio increased last year (+2.2%) by the largest amount since 1988. As well, 1999 marked only the second time in the 1990s that this ratio increased by more than 1.0%.

Productivity growth in Canada was around half what was seen in the United States over the 1978-to-1999 period (+1.0% versus +1.8%). Preliminary estimates for recent years suggest that the productivity gap is widening: Canadian labour productivity over the last four years has grown at a cumulative rate of 4.2%,

Note to readers

In this article, the term productivity refers to labour productivity. Productivity is a measure of production efficiency that most economists regard as the foundation of a country's standard of living. Labour productivity is closely related to the remuneration paid to employees. It grows both when businesses become more efficient and when businesses increase the amount of machinery and equipment and advanced technologies used by each worker. The labour productivity data and related variables have been revised back to 1961.

Labour productivity, or real gross domestic product (GDP) per hour worked, is the ratio between output and hours worked. Economic performance as measured by labour productivity must be interpreted carefully, since these estimates reflect changes in other factors of production as well (e.g., capital).

Unit labour cost is the labour cost per unit of output. It is calculated as labour compensation divided by real GDP. Unit labour cost increases when labour compensation per hour worked increases more rapidly than labour productivity. It is widely used to measure inflation pressures arising from wage growth.

Real GDP per capita is often used as an indicator of the evolution of a population's standard of living.

whereas the United States has seen labour productivity grow 11.5%. Comparisons of labour productivity between Canada and the United States have been affected by recent changes to definitions and statistical methods there. No corresponding revisions were made in Canada.

Even before the U.S. revisions, however, their productivity growth between 1996 and 1999 was above that seen here. In 1999, labour productivity in Canada grew by 1.4%, slightly above its average over the 1990s. The new U.S. estimates show a labour productivity growth rate of 3.2%, considerably above its long-run average.

For further information, contact John Baldwin (613-951-8588; fax: 613-951-5403; baldjoh@statcan.ca) or Tarek M. Harchaoui (613-951-9856; fax: 613-951-5403; harcetar@statcan.ca), Microeconomic Studies and Analysis Division.

Labour productivity statistics for the business sector

	1966 to 1973	1973 to 1981	1981 to 1989	1989 to 1999	1996	1997	1998	1999
	% change							
Labour productivity	3.7	1.2	1.2	1.1	-0.1	2.4	0.5	1.4
Real GDP	4.9	3.3	3.2	2.2	2.4	5.2	3.3	4.7
Hours worked	1.2	2.1	2.0	1.1	2.5	2.7	2.8	3.3
Labour compensation	9.7	13.4	7.7	4.0	3.9	8.4	6.6	5.0
Hourly compensation	8.4	11.1	5.5	2.8	1.4	5.5	3.8	1.6
Unit labour cost	4.6	9.8	4.3	1.7	1.6	3.0	3.3	0.2

New from Statistics Canada

Annual estimates of employment, earnings and hours 1983-1999

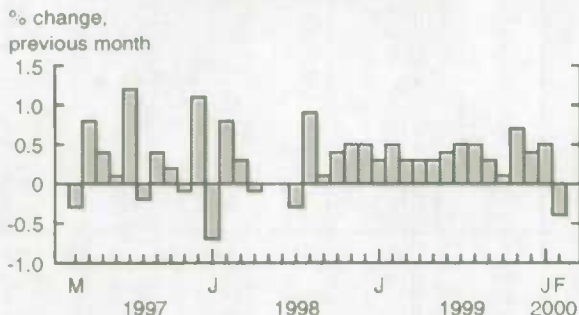
The Survey of Employment, Payrolls and Hours has released its most recent *Annual estimates of employment, earnings and hours 1983-1999* in electronic format. The new CD-ROM makes use of the Beyond 20/20 Professional Browser, which enables users to manipulate, visualize and quickly understand the data and its associated trends. The CD-ROM also contains a preformatted publication covering the years 1987 to 1999, which can be printed using Adobe Acrobat.

The CD-ROM contains data tables for more than 200 industries at the national, provincial and territorial levels, with information such as employment, average weekly and hourly earnings, average weekly hours and total weekly payrolls. Also included is the *Help-Wanted Index 1981-1999* supplement.

Annual estimates of employment, earnings and hours 1983-1999 (CD-ROM: 72F0002XCB, \$150; CD-ROM and paper: 10-3009XKB, \$185) is now available. For more information or to order, contact the Client Services Section (613-951-4090; fax: 613-951-4087; labour@statcan.ca or order@statcan.ca), Labour Statistics Division.

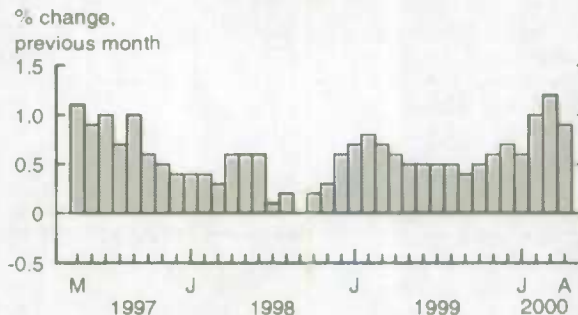
Current trends

Gross domestic product



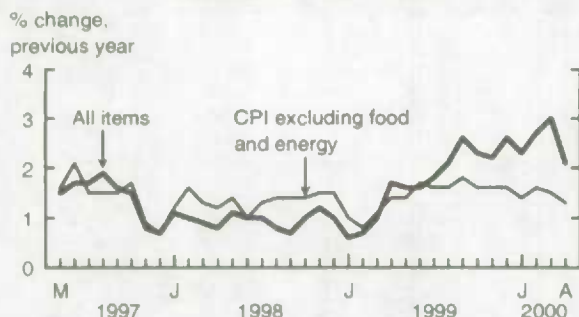
Economic activity receded for the first time in 19 months in February, declining 0.4%. The decline followed three months of strong growth.

Composite Index



The growth of the leading indicator slowed from 1.2% in March to 0.9% in April. Household demand lost some of its vigour and financial markets slowed.

Consumer Price Index



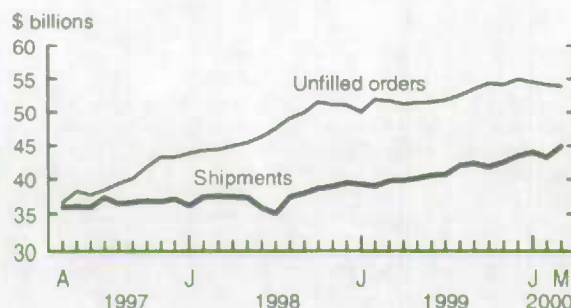
Consumer prices for goods and services were 2.1% higher in April 2000 than they were a year earlier. Excluding food and energy, prices rose 1.3%.

Unemployment rate



In April, the unemployment rate remained at 6.8% for a fifth consecutive month.

Manufacturing



Manufacturers' shipments rebounded 3.8% in March to \$44.9 billion. The backlog of unfilled orders decreased 0.3% to \$53.9 billion.

Merchandise trade



In March, the value of merchandise exports rebounded 4.5% from February to \$33.5 billion. Imports climbed 3.7% to \$29.6 billion.

Note: All series are seasonally adjusted except the Consumer Price Index.

Latest statistics

	Period	Level	Change, previous period	Change, previous year
GENERAL				
Gross domestic product (\$ billion, 1992)	February	766.8	-0.4%	3.8%
Composite Index (1992=100)	April*	161.6	0.9%	8.2%
Operating profits of enterprises (\$ billion)	Q4 1999	43.9	7.8%	27.1%
Capacity utilization (%)	Q4 1999	86.8	1.3†	4.0†
DOMESTIC DEMAND				
Retail trade (\$ billion)	February	22.3	-1.1%	4.9%
Department store sales (\$ billions)	March	1.48	-0.4%	1.8%
New motor vehicle sales (thousand of units)	March	134.9	6.5%	8.8%
Wholesale trade (\$ billion)	March	31.6	2.0%	8.7%
LABOUR				
Employment (millions)	April	14.86	0.0%	2.9%
Unemployment rate (%)	April	6.8	0.0†	-1.4†
Participation rate (%)	April	65.8	-0.1†	0.0†
Average weekly earnings (\$)	February	622.42	0.4%	2.8%
Help-wanted Index (1996=100)	April	167	-2.3%	7.1%
INTERNATIONAL TRADE				
Merchandise exports (\$ billion)	March*	33.5	4.5%	16.3%
Merchandise imports (\$ billion)	March*	29.6	3.7%	12.5%
Merchandise trade balance (all figures in \$ billion)	March*	3.9	0.4	1.4
MANUFACTURING				
Shipments (\$ billion)	March	44.9	3.8%	13.0%
New orders (\$ billion)	March	44.8	4.5%	13.3%
Unfilled orders (\$ billion)	March	53.9	-0.3%	4.2%
Inventory/shipments ratio	March	1.28	-0.03	-0.01
PRICES				
Consumer Price Index (1992=100)	April	110.1	-0.4%	2.1%
Industrial Product Price Index (1992=100)	March	126.6	0.6%	5.5%
Raw Materials Price Index (1992=100)	March	142.7	2.0%	33.1%
New Housing Price Index (1992=100)	March	102.5	0.1%	2.0%

Note: All series are seasonally adjusted with the exception of the price indexes.

* new this week

† percentage point

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A weekly review

Editor: Tim Prichard (613) 951-1197; prictim@statcan.ca
 French version editor: Caroline Olivier (613) 951-1189; olivcar@statcan.ca

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Division/Title of publication	Period	Catalogue number	Price (\$) (issue/subscription)
AGRICULTURE			
Livestock statistics updates, vol. 2000-001	April 2000	23-603-UPE	45/149
Production of poultry and eggs	1999	23-202-XIB	29
CULTURE, TOURISM AND THE CENTRE FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS			
Education quarterly review	May 2000		
Internet		81-003-XIE	16/51
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