

DEREK BURNEY: The political mood of America

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Although the U.S. presidential election is still 13 months ahead and the Republican candidate has not yet been nominated, the political mood of America is profoundly restless and becoming increasingly polarized. According to Gallup polls a record 81 per cent of Americans are dissatisfied with the way the country is being governed. Neither Congress nor the Administration has any reason for optimism from this and similar polls, and unless there is a dramatic but unexpected upswing in the economy, approval ratings of those governing America are only likely to get worse.

While there is little doubt but that President Obama inherited an unprecedented economic mess in 2009 and that the expectations from his election were excessive, his attempts to fix major problems, particularly when his party controlled both the House and the Senate, have not worked. His Health Care reform package is bogged down in the Courts and seems to have aroused more fear than hope. Energy reform legislation died stillborn while some elements of his “green job” initiative are quite literally bankrupt and the target of criminal investigations. The protracted and uncompromising debate over the debt ceiling and the escalating U.S. deficit sullied the reputation of all Washington politicians and gave little inspiration to the public at large. Bank bailouts funded by taxpayers ignited visceral anti-Wall Street sentiments in middle and working class America, adding more fuel to the outrage directed at Washington – the “Occupy Wall Street” movement being the most recent manifestation. Persistently high unemployment (above 9 per cent) is the most serious problem but is not one that lends itself to a quick solution. For many, economic recovery seems a long way off.

The emergence of the Tea Party is symptomatic of a deeper malaise, an historic lack of faith in the capacity of the U.S. federal government to do anything. “Dysfunctional” may not be a term all comprehend but the inability of the Administration and Congress to get matters back on track is seen by many as the root of all that is wrong. Gridlock is the order of the day in Washington. Americans are losing confidence in their government’s ability to help and this undermines confidence – usually a plus in America – more generally about the economy and about future prospects. It is a time when both protectionist and isolationist sentiments are in the ascendancy.

Republican candidates for the presidency cover a wide spectrum from libertarian to populist/nationalist reflecting deep divisions within party ranks that any single nominee will find difficult to bridge. Mostly they underscore the sour national mood.

America’s ability to lead globally, whether in response to the potentially combustible “Arab Spring” and tensions in the Middle East, or the prolonged war in Afghanistan, or the new challenges posed by key emerging powers, is hobbled by disarray on the home-front. Meanwhile, countries with radically different political systems see less and less from America that they wish to emulate and offer a more compelling model to many in the Developing World. And yet, in terms of global leadership, there is no real alternative to a rejuvenated America.

For Canada, because of our pervasive, economic links and the basic political values we share, a more competent, more confident and more prosperous America is critical to our own prospects. History suggests that it would be a mistake to discount the resilience of America. During the Free Trade negotiations in the 1980s we were warned about “hitching our wagon to a falling star.” Japan was then seen in the ascendancy and deemed to overtake the U.S. economy. In the 1990s, however, it was not the American star that faded. We should, of course, cultivate and broaden economic relations with key emerging powers like China, India and Brazil. But we always need to be vigilant in securing and

enhancing our interests with the world's largest economy. That is why the Perimeter and Regulatory negotiations with the U.S. should continue as a priority.

While it is too soon to predict election outcomes or new signs of resilience, the groundswell of cynicism spreading throughout America may stimulate what Nile Gardiner of the Telegraph predicted will be one of "the biggest political revolutions in U.S. post-war history." At a minimum, the 2012 election promises to be cathartic.

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