

Canada-US Relations After Obama's Hundred Days

How will Barack Obama's pursuit of his aims sit with Canadians once the rosy afterglow of the new and charismatic leader's ascension to power wears off? In particular, how will his presidency sit with the great Canadian anti-American coalition, many Liberals, the New Democratic Party, the Greens, the Bloc Québécois, and all those raging grannies of whatever age who despise the United States and all its works?

Not well, is my guess. Certainly in the first few months, Obama has been cut some slack. How can one attack an African-American leader who has created a political coalition of whites, blacks, and Latinos strong enough to turn red states blue? How can a silver-tongued orator with charisma to burn be denounced at once? How can a leader who has introduced as much change in months as other presidents in years be assailed? He can't, but if history is any guide, by, say, Summer 2009 he will be.

If they could vote in U.S. elections Canadians would be Democrats. But that has never given Democratic presidents a free ride. John F. Kennedy was hugely popular in Canada, but his popularity did not stop many Canadians from denouncing him for the abortive Bay of Pigs attack on Castro's Cuba in 1961 or for risking nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis a year-and-a-half later. Bill Clinton was similarly cheered by Canadians after his 1992 election victory, but those on the left soon complained about NAFTA and his use of American troops around the world, and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien tried hard to camouflage his good relations with the Arkansan. It wasn't only Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan or Dubya, in other words, that many in Canada disliked.

What this means is that Canadian anti-Americanism has never been a tap to be turned on and off. It's not dead today; it's only sleeping. It is moved by age-old historic forces and remains endemic in Canada. The Canadian left sees the United States as the great Satan and, while President Obama is surely better than Bush, the forces of capitalism, even a capitalism in ruins, will always oblige the U.S. President to act forcefully to protect American global and continental interests.

So when President Obama calls Prime Minister Stephen Harper to ask that the Canadian troop commitment in Kandahar be sustained after 2011 – and he will – the response from the anti-American Canadian left will be as vehement as if it had been George W. Bush asking. The shouts won't initially include the same sneers hurled at Bush, but Canadian critics, I suspect, will attack the United States and the Obama administration with equal fury. Over time as Obama fails to live up to expectations – no one could meet the high hopes he has created – new personalist slurs will emerge. Obama is too young, too inexperienced, a captive of the industrial states/the auto companies/the stuck-in-the-mud unions/or the Wall Street fat cats who financed his rise to power, etc., etc.

We will see all of this when Obama's environmental policies and his "America first" revisions to trade policy begin to work their way through the Administration and Congress. Maude Barlow, Jack Layton, and Naomi Klein will denounce the policies, whatever they may be, as either inadequate or too much and point to a clause or two that, they will say, shows that the Americans are trying to steal Canada's water or jobs or money or independence. Barlow has already suggested that the United States will some day go to war to secure Canadian water supplies, so no one should be surprised when she paints Obama as a puppet of corporate forces. She will. Layton, who made Harper-Bush into almost a single word in our recent election, will by the next one likely find himself using Harper-Obama in the same way. He will. And Naomi Klein has already denounced Obama as a corporatist/imperialist. She will continue to do so.

In other words, nothing much will change. Canada is a small nation living next to a superpower. Our national interests are not always the same as those of our giant neighbour, and there is a long-lived predisposition to shout at the U.S. to raise nationalist passions here. Obama is on his Canadian honeymoon today, but tomorrow he is almost certain to become merely another target for those who reject America's world view. Canadian attitudes almost demand this.

Historian J.L. Granatstein writes on behalf of the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute.