

Obama, Canadians and Anti-Americanism

Barack Obama's smashing victory in the U.S. elections has kindled hope around the world. The first black President-elect is unquestionably a charismatic figure, a refreshing change from George W. Bush, the president who will likely be remembered as the worst American leader in a hundred years.

And Obama has been greeted by Canadians as a saviour, the leader who might "go on to become one of the great presidents of the United States, perhaps even in the same category if not personally at the same level as Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt." That was columnist Richard Gwyn's somewhat premature assessment that might better have been offered four years from now. More soberly, Marcus Gee in the *Globe and Mail* pointed to Obama's foreign policy likely following that of the Bush administration.

Gee is right. The style will change, but much will remain the same. Obama has taken a hard line on Afghanistan and wants more troops to put down that insurgency. That means there will be new pressures on Ottawa to continue or even increase its troop deployment. He has talked of smacking Pakistan if it doesn't control its northern borders better. He appears to want to re-open NAFTA, and the Democrats are trade protectionists. And away from foreign policy, Obama supports the death penalty, opposes gay marriage, and is almost as much a born-again Christian as Bush. His environment policies, moreover, while better than Bush's, seem about as radical as those of Stephen Harper's government.

So how will Obama appeal to Canadians once the rosy afterglow wears off? In particular, how will his presidency sit with the Canadian anti-American coalition, 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 months, Obama will be 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? He can't, but if history is any guide, by Spring 2009 he will be.

John F. Kennedy was hugely popular in Canada, so much so that Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, consumed with jealousy, hated him. But that did not stop many Canadians from denouncing him for the abortive Bay of Pigs attack on Castro's Cuba or from risking nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis 18 months 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 that many in Canada detested.

What this means is that Canadian anti-Americanism has never been a tap to be turned on and off. It is moved by age-old historic forces and remains endemic in Canada. The left sees the United States as the great Satan and, while President Obama might be marginally better than Bush, the forces of capitalism, even a capitalism in ruins, will oblige him to act 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 increased—and he will—the response from the anti-American left will be as vehement as if it had been George Bush asking. The shouts won't initially include the same sneers hurled at Bush – moron and ignorant cowboy – but Canadian critics 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 fat cats who financed his rise to power, etc., etc.

We will see all of this when Obama's environmental policy and his revisions to trade agreements begin to work their way through Congress. Maude Barlow, Jack Layton, and Elizabeth May 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/jobs/money/independence. Barlow has already said that the United States will go to war to secure Canadian water supplies, so no one should be surprised when she paints Obama as a puppet of corporate forces. Layton, who made Harper-Bush into almost a single word in our recent election, will by the next one find himself using Harper-Obama in the same way.

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 certain to become merely another target for those who reject America's world view.

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