

# THE AGE OF OBAMA: CANADA AND THE US

David T. Jones

Barack Obama came to Ottawa, packed a lot into seven hours on the ground in Canada and was home at the White House in time for dinner. But his visit, quick as it was, was a point of departure, a turning of a new page in the relationship between Canada and the United States. The priorities: recession and recovery, the environment and energy, Afghanistan and global security. From Washington, former diplomat David Jones shares a US perspective on the visit and a look ahead to the Obama years between our two countries.



Barack Obama aura passé à Ottawa sept heures très fructueuses avant de rentrer à la Maison-Blanche, à temps pour le repas du soir. Car même très courte, sa visite a marqué un nouveau départ dans les relations canado-américaines, voire un tournant axé sur les priorités suivantes : récession et reprise économiques, énergie et environnement, Afghanistan et sécurité internationale. Depuis Washington, l'ancien diplomate David Jones rend compte de cette visite du point de vue américain et anticipe l'effet des années Obama sur les liens entre nos deux pays.

Canada's and Ottawa's mini-frenzy on February 19 provided the equivalent of a mid-winter vacation, a Winterlude, for Canadian attention. You now have seen "the elephant" — and even better, the elephant came to you for a cameo appearance and viewing, said that it loved you and wants to come back — when it's warm.

But this is just the beginning of the beginning. Without emphasizing gloom and doom, there are Chinese curse years of the "may you live in interesting times" vintage ahead. Canada may have four years relating to President Obama; it may have eight years relating to him, but whoever leads Canada needs to keep perspective in the relationship. It is not prophecy but history that leads to the conclusion that Obama will never be more popular than he is now, and the problems he and the US government face have us making peace rather than fostering enmity.

Here are some summary points coming out of the President's one-day visit to Ottawa.

*Not looking for a fight.* One can conclude from the Prime Minister-President exchange and press conference, that there are few divisions between them regarding the problems at hand. Those who were eager for stiff "body language" or sound bites suggesting dissonance or disdain were disappointed. There are big, big economic problems around the globe, and tertiary concerns (see Omar Khadr) are just not going to get attention.

*The Stupid Economy.* We are not in another Great Depression, but doubtless we are enduring the worst eco-

omic circumstances of our lives. And while in technical terms (as of March 2009), the statistics regarding unemployment or inflation are not as bad as in some earlier recessions, the fear is that worse, much worse, is still to come. We may be fortunate and have a relatively rapid recovery toward the end of 2009, but in reality any economist who says he knows what is going to happen is either duplicitous or delusional.

Thus both the United States and Canada are engaged in massive fiscal stimulus packages ("mutually beneficial stimulus measures") and support for ailing (read "automobile") industries. But Canadians recognize that they cannot recover unless the United States (and the rest of the world) does. Consequently, Canadians can only hope that US efforts are successful in promoting banking/lending revival; it is faint comfort that their own banks, having rejected the go-go fiscal innovations of the past decade, have largely avoided the "went-gone" consequences of such activity.

*No beggar-thy-neighbour trade war.* We are headed for neither "Buy America" restrictions on Canadian exports into the United States nor a reopened North American Free Trade Agreement. The President reinforced his commitment to adhere to treaty agreements, i.e., NAFTA, and his interest in decanting this can of worms is minimal. The Prime Minister admitted that NAFTA permits limited ways one can have domestic preferences and purchasing policies — but there was no expectation that Canadian exports will be limited.

Indeed, the *sotto voce* exchange during the primary campaign between an Obama adviser and a Canadian official was correct: Obama's attacks on NAFTA were campaign rhetoric designed for Rust Belt state electorates. At most, one might anticipate a "review" akin to that undertaken by the Chrétien government when entering power in 1993. Ostensibly committed to reopening and rewriting the

on economic growth and employment." Reportedly the much bruted-about "carbon capture" sequestration adds 30 percent to the cost of energy produced, and doing it efficiently is in the never-never out years. Washington's desire to reduce reliance on imported energy really means reducing reliance on energy from outside North America. Yes, it would be nice if all energy could become pure as the driven

ment security and border control. It is not that Ottawa hasn't spent for enhancing security, but media attention invariably fastens on the poor souls denied entry through ludicrous error, communities divided by new fences, Predator drone surveillance of Manitoba or discomfited citizens enduring holiday delays. The impression conveyed is of hard-hearted thugs in uniform harassing poor-little-me

Canadians rather than a sophisticated effort to keep our societies secure from terrorism.

**Perhaps the smartest words Prime Minister Harper spoke during his press conference with President Obama were that "the view of this government is unequivocal: threats to the United States are threats to Canada...Let there be no illusion about the fact that we take these security concerns as seriously as our American friends."**

agreement during his campaign, Jean Chrétien's Liberals found harmless devices to manage the "letter" of such a review without affecting previously agreed substance. In a similar vein at their joint press conference, Obama pointed out that if the NAFTA side letters on labour and environment are meaningful, they could be incorporated into the main agreement. But here also the expectation was that such action would be done the way porcupines make love: very carefully. The Obama administration knows that its essential trade challenges are with Asia rather than within North America. NAFTA works; don't break it.

*Climate change and other environmental concerns.* Despite gusts of rhetoric, what will actually be done with energy/environment appears to be highly limited. The commitment to a "US-Canada clean energy dialogue" is really an agreement to begin to commence to start...something. Inexpensive energy is an economic basic for prosperity. With that truism as a given, the US coal "pot" is not going to be damning the Canadian tar sands "kettle" as black. President Obama said bluntly that in dealing with climate change, we must make "sure that in the midst of a severe recession that it's not having too much of an adverse impact

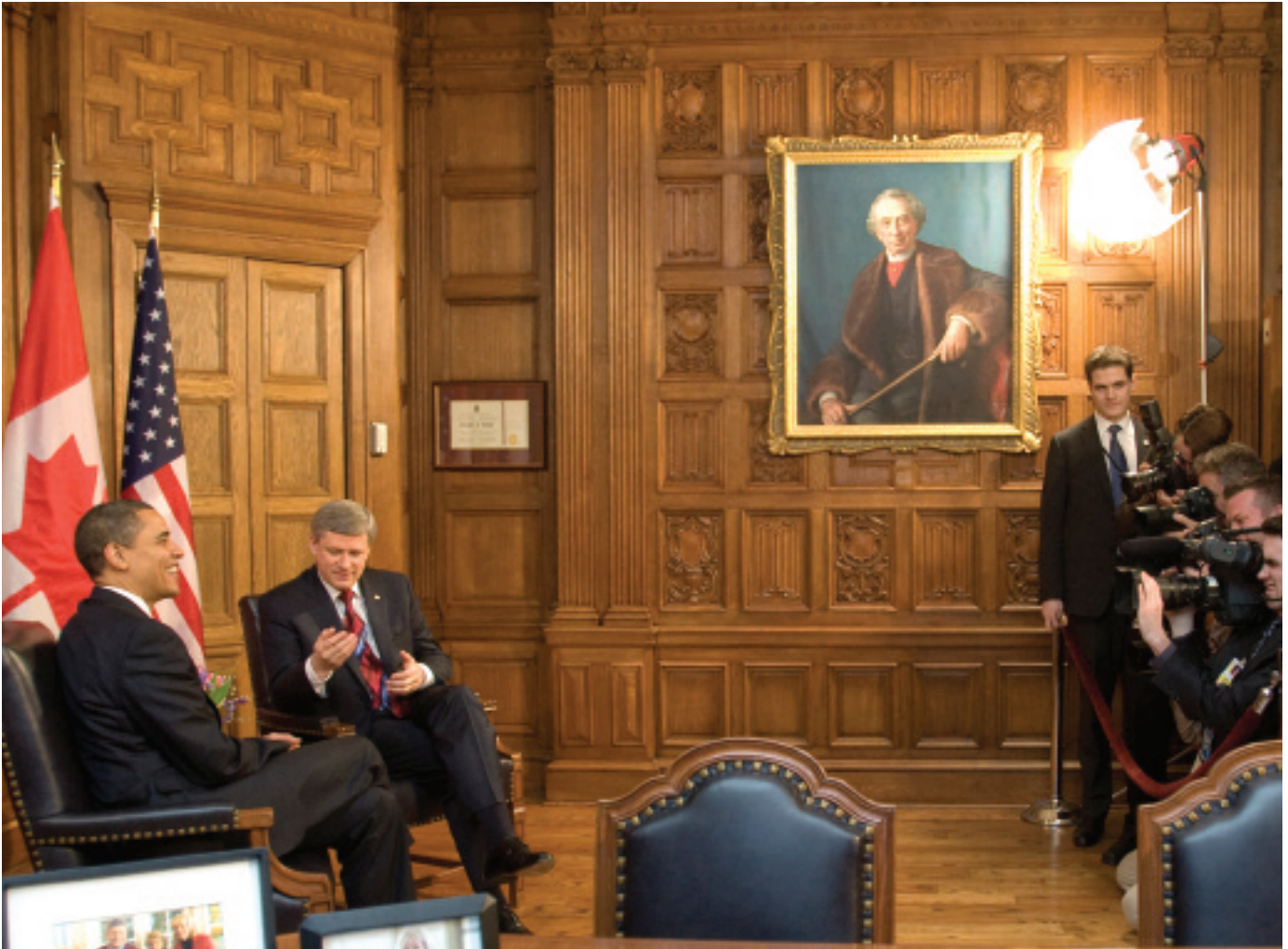
snow (at an affordable price), but the political impetus regarding the environment as reflected in domestic polling has dropped — and with it the pressure to do something expensive in a time of economic recession.

*Border security.* Perhaps the smartest words Prime Minister Harper spoke during his press conference with President Obama were that "the view of this government is unequivocal: threats to the United States are threats to Canada...Let there be no illusion about the fact that we take these security concerns as seriously as our American friends." Yes, we can and should be concerned that a "thickening border" could inhibit trade and social interaction. Yes, we can lament long lines of tourists and commercial trucking at border crossing points. And, yes, we can devote some of our stimulus package to infrastructure designed to ease border transit. But security still trumps trade and that reality should not be forgotten.

Nevertheless, Americans have long had the impression that Canadians think us paranoid about security when we should merely be neurotic — and consequently had to be dragged kicking/screaming into accepting procedures for greater docu-

But zero-defects border security must be a primary consideration for the Obama administration. The reason is obvious; perhaps the only enduring domestic accomplishment of the G.W. Bush tenure is that there were no further terrorist attacks on the United States following September 11, 2001. Whether such a fortunate record was the consequence of good luck, terrorist incompetence, draconian and secretive domestic intelligence operations, vigorous military operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, or some combination of the foregoing, it is a reality that certainly was not expected on September 12, 2001. Should there be another attack on the United States, the Obama presidency will bear the politicized onus — and Ottawa should be hyper alert to avoid any possibility that such an attack originated in Canada. Spending on security combined with verbal reinforcement of Canadian concern will be cheap at the price.

*Afghanistan.* We have a *modus vivendi*. The US is in the process of a comprehensive review of its policy toward Afghanistan — a review that appears likely to add upward of 30,000 troops to US forces there. The US is well aware of Canada's 2011 term limit on its commitment to Afghanistan — but that is a commitment longer than those of most of the rest of the coalition forces currently in country. So there was no need now



Jason Ransom

Under the watchful gaze of Sir John A. Macdonald, Prime Minister Harper and President Obama sit for a photo op in the PM's Centre Block office at the start of Obama's visit of February 19. "Professional respect, even mutual congeniality," writes David Jones, enhances the relationship between prime minister and president.

to ask for any further extension — and Obama didn't. If necessary, there will be quite enough time to request Ottawa to reconsider a commitment, at least in the development/training categories.

A substantial portion of the US troop reinforcements are likely to be based in conjunction with Canadian forces near Kandahar. This collocation will reinforce professional collegiality and give both countries' military forces renewed experience operating together in combat — a circumstance not really seen since the Korean War. Moreover, in facing NATO allies at the April summit,

Canada and the US (as well as the UK and Netherlands) will be urging greater alliance commitments of combat forces without "caveats" for action in Afghanistan.

*Do personalities matter?* And finally there is the always intriguing question of whether it really matters if presidents and prime ministers "get along." (It's coupled with the ancillary question of whether the nature of an ambassador is marginal or significant.)

To be sure, it is better that the president-prime minister relationship be marked at least by professional respect, even mutual congeniality, rather than thinly veiled contempt.

And we have had both the congeniality and the contempt between our heads of government — certainly the latter, as anyone with historical knowledge of Diefenbaker-Kennedy, Johnson-Pearson and Nixon-Trudeau-Reagan will recall. Nor has it really been persistently helpful to have had obviously congenial relations, particularly not for Tory PMs, as Canadian distaste for Mulroney actually tended to heighten domestic anti-Americanism, given his close relations with Reagan and the first George Bush (Bush 41). The fact that these warm relations generated positive bilateral benefits for Canada —

e.g., the acid rain treaty and NAFTA — appeared irrelevant.

On the other hand, it is difficult to say that the largely positive Chrétien-Clinton relationship (which was almost a semi-secret closet friendship) particularly benefitted either country. The eight-year (1993-2001) Clinton presidency was one largely of calm seas in both economics (NAFTA) and foreign affairs, when views were largely coincidental (Haiti, former Yugoslavia). On the other hand, Liberal leaders were

and he made a point that he had Canadians on his staff (would a Canadian PM be so daring?). For the near term at least (and perhaps for two terms), Obama will be globally charming; Canada under Tory or Liberal leadership (and Michael Ignatieff appears comparably compatible with Obama) can be part of America's solutions rather than part of its problems — if it so desires.

Regarding our respective ambassadors, much as an ancien diplo-

**The US is well aware of Canada's 2011 term limit commitment to Afghanistan — but that is a commitment longer than those of most of the rest of the coalition forces currently in country. So there was no need now to ask for any further extension — and Obama didn't.**

never comfortable with George W. Bush (Chrétien declined to come to Washington to join other foreign leaders for Bush's post-9/11 address to Congress), and Liberal contempt was not even thinly veiled following the coalition's regime change in Iraq. Still it is hard to detail specifics to any charges that the substance rather than the atmospherics of the relationship deteriorated. The Harper-Bush relationship was very low-key. Being publicly nicknamed "Steve" by "Dubya" was not career-enhancing for Prime Minister Harper, but it was also clear that the Bush administration carefully avoided potentially toxic issues (missile defence) that might have damaged the Prime Minister. The major bilateral benefit was the elimination of previous slanging Liberal rhetoric.

Thus the Harper-Obama relationship, while one in which the cornerstone has just been placed, has at least started collegially. Obama's casual back pat for Harper was unstudied; Obama is hardly a Canada scholar (recall that he thought Canadian senators were elected), but he has Canadian ties, with a half-sister and brother-in-law living near Toronto,

mat would like to extol their vital nature, such would be an exaggeration. Likewise, a career professional diplomat would prefer to see career professionals heading embassies, but again (albeit with regret) one must admit that such professional credentials are not necessary for success. What is most useful is that our ambassadors be politically well connected within their home capitals and avoid gratuitous insult. That is, they can pick up the phone and speak directly with the most senior cabinet secretaries/ministers and deliver their concerns and conclusions without bureaucratic filtering. In that regard, Canadian ambassador Raymond Chrétien, Prime Minister Chrétien's nephew, was perfect: While he was a career diplomat, US officials could assume, correctly, that he could speak as needed with "Uncle Jean," and when he delivered a message to US officials, it was coming with whatever senior-level imprimatur was required. In contrast, Frank McKenna, a political appointee, was out of the PM Paul Martin loop, and was widely ignored in both capitals. US ambassadors in Ottawa such as Jim Blanchard, Paul Cellucci and David Wilkins had been senior political actors in the United

States before their appointments and remained tightly connected with the administration. Canadians could be confident that they could deliver Ottawa's concerns to the appropriate ear in Washington and when they spoke, they would not be gainsaid by the administration.

We anticipate the appointment of a US ambassador to Ottawa, Ambassador Wilkins having departed with the Bush presidency. However, there is no requirement for the incumbent Canadian ambassador in Washington, Michael Wilson, to be replaced. Wilson, ambassador for three years as of March 13, is low-key, competent and very well versed in economic issues as well as being a Tory insider; his sole ostensible liability is

his political-professional association with the Bush Republicans, but it may not be considered toxic.

Fifteen years ago, with the end of the Cold War and the coincidence of a Democrat president and a Liberal prime minister, analysts could sanguinely conclude that the bilateral relationship had never been better. Subsequently, the "best friends, like it or not" sobriquet describing the relationship was distinctly in the "not" portion of the cycle. We not only agreed to disagree, we frequently did so disagreeably.

At this juncture, with a new president driven by domestic economic concerns, there is good potential for what might be regarded as "new normal" relations. To be sure, there will be the "events" that foil all predictions (a resurgence of mad cow disease or the SARS epidemic or a virulent avian flu), causing economic and border problems, but, albeit with fingers crossed, we can anticipate a return to a bilateral relationship marked by managers rather than ideologues.

*David T. Jones, a former minister-counsellor at the US embassy in Ottawa during the Clinton years, follows Canada-US relations closely from Washington.*