

OBAMA AND THE NORTH AMERICAN FAMILY

Jeremy Kinsman

Ronald Reagan often spoke of Canada-US relations in terms of the North American "family." What are the prospects for harmonious relations in the family in the new era ushered in by the arrival of Barack Obama? Contributing Writer Jeremy Kinsman, one of Canada's most experienced foreign policy hands, observes that Canadians will recognize much of their own style of multilateralism in Obama, who is reaching out to America's friends and foes alike, a refreshing change from the unilateralism of the Bush years. This bodes well for Canada in the North American family and beyond.



Ronald Reagan parlait souvent de « famille nord-américaine » pour désigner les relations entre le Canada et les États-Unis. Quelles perspectives d'harmonisation suscite la nouvelle ère inaugurée par l'arrivée de Barack Obama ? Notre collaborateur Jeremy Kinsman, l'un des meilleurs spécialistes canadiens de politique étrangère, croit que les Canadiens se reconnaîtront dans le type de multilatéralisme pratiqué par le nouveau président américain, qui tend la main à ses alliés aussi bien qu'à ses adversaires. Fort bienvenu par rapport à l'unilatéralisme des années Bush, ce changement est de bon augure pour le Canada, au sein comme en dehors de la famille nord-américaine.

Ronald Reagan had an intuitive notion of North Americans being "family" together. The American republic and its Canadian neighbour were to him part of the same idea, sharing a continent, a new world — sunnier, fairer than the old one. Anyone who witnessed the President in the company of a North American as different from him as Pierre Trudeau wondered about the soundness of his intuition about the North American family, but Reagan happily bonded with our comparatively exotic and worldly prime minister. When Brian Mulroney came to Washington as Trudeau's successor, Reagan's Irish eyes indeed brimmed with moist and special warmth for a Canadian who seemed to see things the same way he did. The empathy gave us the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the prize of enhanced prosperity.

The economies blended, mostly through trade in goods. Canada became a larger market for US goods than all 27 EU countries taken together. In terms of economic stakes, US and EU mutual investments are considerably larger — across the Atlantic, partners sell in each other's markets, rather than to each other's markets. But in North America, business is still cross-border. The US takes four-fifths of Canadian exports and accounts for two-thirds of Canadian imports. Canada takes one-fifth of US exports and accounts for one-sixth of US imports. However, the FTA made much of that trade intra-company. Canadian and American industry don't just trade together; they

build together, in value chains, as if the whole continent were one domestic market.

Except that it isn't, really. There is an asymmetry in dependence, and vulnerability. The US part of the North American "family" is so much bigger, and simultaneously so much more involved with its superpower's role in the wider world on one hand, and its own media razzle-dazzle on the other, that Canada remains barely visible in the US. As seasoned Canadian diplomat Si Taylor wrote, "Most Americans know little and care less about Canada...and don't expect to worry about Canada-US relations."

Does indifference matter? Yes — if all the worry is on the Canadian side, largely because the US political system is so driven by a US Congress that is inherently inward-looking. Even in mostly like-minded border blue states such as Vermont, Minnesota and Washington, constituencies ready to whack Canadian exports can form in a flash if our market share creeps up too high for local competitors. Canada's historic reflex has been to try to institutionalize potentially contentious areas of continental life, so as to insure against the bigger partner with its vastly greater leverage whacking the smaller. But as the softwood lumber dispute, which roiled relations for a quarter-century, showed, this theory of insulation still requires large dollops of political influence and support within the US system, at the top of US administrations, and in Congress, where much of the trouble

occurs. The FTA was meant to provide legally binding insulation against unilateral protectionist trade impulses, often pursued through a tortuous and opaque US court process that never seems to have an end. But the binding turns out to have been loosely

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wrapped: the US Congress and the court system continue to reverberate whenever there are "exceptional" circumstances. And there always are.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, earned more than Canadian rhetorical sympathy and solidarity; Canadians sheltered tens of thousands of US travellers routed to our airports as US airspace closed down. In any event, Canadians died in the World Trade Center on September 11, and Canadian innocence expired along with America's as we confronted a changed and emphatically darker world. Among other things, Canada sent most of its deployable forces to Afghanistan.

In those first days of "We are all Americans now," few of America's friends in the world imagined that the US in its anger and its pain would try to create barriers around the US homeland as rigidly excluding as they became.

Several times, the junior senator from New York, Hillary Clinton, blamed an allegedly porous northern border for an easy way in for terrorists. Several times, Canadian officials explained that the 9/11 killers not only had not come through Canada, they had in most cases entered the US with US visas from US consular authorities.

It didn't much matter what we said. Americans were afraid, hunkered down, and a previously rather unpopular new president found that his poll numbers soared with a hard line promising an unremitting "war on terror." The border guard went up. Canadians spent billions

on new security measures but the US homeland security behemoth always wanted more. Inspections of vehicles for dangerous materials before long morphed into inspections of agricultural produce for reasons that could only be considered good old trade protection. Canadians complained, but were told that "security trumps trade" by Paul Cellucci, the first of the Bush administration ambassadors.

Canadians are generally mostly left of the US political centre, but several Republican presidents had been popular in Canada — Eisenhower, Ford and George H.W. Bush, they were moderates and internationalist, and got along well with Canadian prime ministerial partners. Canadians liked to scorn Reagan's apparent taste for simplifying the issues in a right-wing sort of way, but he still garnered a lot of affection north of the border.

George W. Bush was different. His Texas style didn't travel well, and he and his administration pursued a Christian social agenda that gave more tolerant Canadians the willies. When this was joined to a "for us or against us," unilaterally interventionist foreign policy, support for Bush plummeted in Canada, with the exception of Alberta and executive suites where the anti-regulatory zeal of Republican conservatives won popularity and the

National Post's enthusiasm for a transfer to Canadian governance as soon as the "Liberal gang" could be expelled.

Just for the record, when Jean Chrétien decided Canada would not join in the war to oust Saddam Hussein, it was not to win support in apparently pacifist Quebec. It was because Canadian intelligence assessments showed it was unlikely Iraq was still pursuing a nuclear weapons program, based on the extraordinarily thorough and intrusive inspections of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, and, to be frank, the best estimates of

US intelligence agency analysts themselves. The "slam-dunk" case for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was a top-down political choice. It was a war of choice, not of necessity, as opposed to Afghanistan, where US interests — and ours — were about to be neglected.

Much of the Canadian business community, especially the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, upbraided Chrétien for putting Canadian exports to the US in anticipated jeopardy by not standing "side by side" with "our best friend and ally." They were supported in this view by Opposition Leader Stephen Harper. But in Illinois, an obscure state senator named Barack Obama significantly said it was "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time." Increasingly, Canadians and then Americans themselves overwhelmingly agreed.

At the press conference with President Obama on February 19, Prime Minister Harper said, "Today Canada and the United States are closer economically, socially, culturally, in terms of our international partnership than any two nations on the face of the Earth — closer friends than any two nations on the face of the Earth."

If it is true, it certainly didn't seem to be during the Bush administration, when the notion of closer relations was poison, even if the Conservative

government elected in January 2006 seemed more comfortable with Washington trends than most of the Canadian public. Michael Adams wrote in *Fire and Ice* of diverging values on either side of the border.

But the US is a vast and complicated society, with different opinions and trends, which can shift in cycles. What a top British official once described to me as “this unpleasant administration” was bound to be replaced in time by a return to views with which public opinion in Canada and the rest of the world would be more comfortable.

The case for closeness Stephen Harper made is one most Canadians feel much of the time. Frank Graves of the EKOS polling company argues that although Canadians are more secular, statist and cosmopolitan, the recent pattern is toward convergence, not divergence. It would be “hard to find two countries with more similar value systems,” according to Graves.

On the other hand, his polling data reveal that Canadians would like to be less like the US in the future, suggesting that there is a wariness about too much closeness, not confined to the chattering classes. Peter Donolo says polling data of the Strategic Counsel show Canadians are much less likely than Americans to say we are “like family.” Maybe it is because Canadians are more aware of Americans than vice versa, giving rise to what Graves termed “the narcissism of small differences.” But Donolo thinks differing major social issues and emphases have enduring effects on opinion. It is for these reasons that Quebec, which used to show polling results that were the most “pro-American” in Canada, has gone to the other end of the scale.

But all would agree that the election of Barack Obama has given convergence a real surge.

As Canadian politics slid into a winter of static discontent, US citizens delivered a decisive and historic victory to a presidential candidate of such

great personal appeal that citizens of other countries around the world felt pangs of national inadequacy.

Obama promises change, and the public recognizes change in him. Moreover, he doesn’t claim that one side or the other in politics has all the answers. Canadians, living a daily forced diet of petty partisanship and governance that diced and spliced the public according to political advantage, looked with longing southward to a leader who promised and practised inclusion, who listened to both sides of an argument and who yet was ready to be decisive. That his big-picture social and economic views, as well as a world view that was internationalist and nuanced, seemed roughly in sync with mainstream Canadian opinion was icing on the cake.

Not since Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 has the decisiveness of a new president been tested in his opening weeks of office by a crisis as severe as the financial melt-down. “Nobody knows when this recession will end,” former vice-chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Blinder wrote. There could be “other shoes to drop.”

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Canada’s government was initially delusional: Finance Minister Jim Flaherty issued a self-confident economic update that, as James Travers put it, “suggested a serious disconnect with reality,” and threw our political system into a crisis.

After shutting down Parliament, the Harper government produced a budget. Its lack of an inspirational theme is striking, but perhaps not sur-

prising. Whatever Canada does is going to have to follow the lead of our American partner. As Thomas Courchene wrote in the February issue of *Policy Options*, “Canadians have never witnessed their superpower neighbour struggling day after day for its very economic existence.”

Obama didn’t waffle about decisiveness or inspiration. As he told Congress, “I came to provide the sweeping changes that this country demanded when it went to the polls in November.”

Obviously, the Canadian government would have been trying to position itself no matter who won the US election. But the possibility of a victory for Obama and the Democrats in Congress caused a particular set of worries.

- First, protectionism at the border: With the flow of goods, services and people already facing obstacles from bulked-up security regulations, the traditional spectre of protectionism commonly associated with US labour and the Democratic Party loomed as an additional threat.
- Second, energy and the environ-

ment: Canada is the largest supplier of crude oil, petroleum products and gas to the US. But the provisions of the Democrat-sponsored *Energy and Security Independence Act* of 2007 that worked against imports with “higher global warming emissions” were ominous for the expansion of Alberta’s oil sands with their larger carbon footprint, especially as the



Jason Ransom

Table talk: Stephen Harper makes a point with Barack Obama as the Canadian and US delegations look on over the soup at lunch in the Senate Speaker's dining room. Jeremy Kinsman writes that in Obama, "Canada sees foreign policy instincts it can recognize as Canadian."

presidential campaign made it clear that Obama would place a major emphasis on kicking America's energy addiction and pursuing a post-Kyoto global system that would reduce greenhouse gases significantly.

It was clear that Canada would have to develop a credible climate change policy, but just as for economic stimulus, its content would depend on what the Americans would do because there could be no effective outcome from a made-in-Canada solution on its own.

The report of the a year-long Canada-US Project at Carleton University, set up to "develop a blueprint on joint Canada-US issues," argued that the Canadian side needed to become a creative part of solutions that, wherever possible, should be common. These two issue areas should be part and parcel of re-thinking the architecture for managing North America's common economic space, including simplifying and converging respective regulatory rules and requirements.

During the course of the project, the economic-financial crisis broke —

but as the report argued, "Crisis, a convergence of national interests, and the need for economic recovery should help to bring us together."

The new president's choice of Canada as his first foreign destination was not a surprise. It would be Canada or Mexico, and Ottawa was closer for an embattled president with most of his support team still not in place. Canadian issues are also less combustible. President Felipe Calderon was invited to be the first foreign leader to come to the White House.

The signals would be those of neighbourhood, of consolidating the continental “base” before venturing out into the wider world. Obama was well briefed about the extent to which our economies are integrated, including, of course, the employment-crucial auto sector. He grasped the direct relevance of Canada to his plans to build up a new US strategy that can enhance energy security and reduce

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greenhouse gases. He had already communicated to Prime Minister Harper in their introductory phone call his recognition and appreciation for Canada’s costly role in Afghanistan.

Of course, Canada swooned on the day. The wall-to-wall Canadian news commentary (there was hardly any in the US) tried to analyze the visit’s significance, but none could rise to the day’s peak, when the president said simply, “I love this country.” He also — unusually for a US president — said the US had a lot to learn from Canada’s banking system, which had weathered the tsunami much better than anyone else’s, and a public health care system whose absence in the US is severely complicating plans for economic recovery.

On the day, Harper was good — obviously competent, to the point, an able partner for the President on issues they agreed were of paramount importance: notably the financial meltdown and its economic consequences, and the energy/climate change duality. Obama gave reasonable assurances on trade, specifically on “Buy America” provisions on public infrastructure procurement, and on challenging the thickening of the border. The notion of working together on a common economic space was advanced.

The identified need to strike a personal relationship at the top seemed fulfilled.

President Obama went back to his enormous problems in Washington, as job losses accumulate, while trying to deploy a superpower’s creative external energy to the hot spots in a world with high expectations that he will bring change. One change

apparent is that the Obama administration will be a leader in the search for a post-Kyoto international accord whose commitments are achievable and that brings China and India into the process, as well as providing technical assistance to developing countries. Senator John Kerry speaks of a “sea change” in US Senate (and public) opinion.

For his part, Prime Minister Harper went on a US media blitz to try to raise the Canadian profile, and sent down beavies of his ministers to follow up on the generalized undertakings made by the two leaders in Ottawa.

Environment Minister Jim Prentice said after his visit to Washington that we are “very much on the same page.” If we were on “the same page,” the agreement on climate change technology cooperation between the two sides when Obama visited would have mentioned the oil sands — but its commitment to joint research and development technology was exclusively directed at “coal-fired plants” for electricity generation; there is no mention of the oil sands.

We won’t be on the same page until we are ready to invest real money, even in these exceptional times, in mitigating the larger carbon footprint of the oil sands. The *National Geographic* magazine’s slamming of their pollutant effect was a wake-up call that the Conservative government

had been putting on slumber mode for precious years.

The massive Obama budget a week after the Ottawa trip calls for a cap-and-trade system for controlling and reducing carbon emissions. The Prime Minister argued at the joint press conference that his plan of “intensity targets,” which is tailored to the difficulty today of sequestering carbon from the oil sands process, amounts to the same thing, just different words.

But the US budget, if adopted, will pour \$150 billion of public money into cleaner technologies while the Canadian government hasn’t committed 1 percent of that.

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Canada needs to earn and retain the administration’s attention to key continental issues. In Washington, Canada-US issues are not considered glamorous or career-enhancing. Canadians have to show they are relevant to solutions and saving American jobs.

The Canadian side should construct a more compelling narrative for sharing a continent, and for North America’s role in the world, and sell it to the American imagination, drawing from the notion and reality of the North American family.

Robin Sears argued in a paper for the Carleton Canada-US Project that we should keep pushing the boundaries. It is essential, for example, that the border be co-managed, and not as a “dividing line.” He recommends that Canada take the lead in unilaterally getting rid of unnecessary and duplicating border irritants in food safety and transportation, and aim for a process of mutual recognition.

He and others urge we use the “hidden wiring” in the relationship, the networks of civil society and sub-

federal relationships. As a University of British Columbia meeting recently put it, there is need for a “logic of comparison,” including on key issues such as immigration, criminal justice, Aboriginal affairs, health, pensions or public education, a challenge the University of California at Berkeley

anchors our substantial economic and security interests and a global role that accentuates distinct Canadian aspirations.”

That global role and some of our relationships have different emphases than Washington’s. Our hard power role in Afghanistan has certainly caught

more than our share and will stand down in 2011. The Ottawa summit mentioned an effort to catalyze cooperation on management of the Arctic, and engagement in Latin America.

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intends to take up with UBC as a partner later this year.

As to a narrative for North America in the world, Washington is dealing with the world, and deploying real power in doing so.

It is often said that Canada could help itself on its bilateral claims to US attention if it focused on being a supportive US ally internationally, and the Carleton report quotes US ambassadors to Canada to this effect. Canadians who support this view often cite former ambassador Allan Gotlieb’s thesis about the “paramountcy” of Canada-US relations to our interests. Gotlieb has argued cogently that Canadian influence abroad on behalf of its full range of interests is in any case enhanced by evidence of a greater influence in Washington. His personal example in Washington provides evidence that Canada gains influence with wise counsel — but it has to be value-added, and sometimes contrary, as his was.

He never meant that Canada should just line up behind US policy, come what may; that would earn Canada zero influence anywhere, including probably even in Washington. Gotlieb’s also influential successor as ambassador to the US, Derek Burney, recently put the matter well: Canada should “find the right balance between a level of trust and engagement in Washington that

Washington’s attention, — as has Canada’s increased military spending.

But we can make a complementary contribution to international peace and security goals we share with the US by deploying our soft power and multilateral vocation. The Carleton report cites drawing the US into promoting the effectiveness of the “responsibility to protect” policies that Canada has promoted in the United Nations.

What’s more, Canadians draw from our own relationships in the Commonwealth and the Francophonie or Latin America (argued in this magazine by Irvin Studin) and from personal contacts such as those enjoyed by successive Canadian prime ministers with such as

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Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

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But to be helpful again, Canada has to revive its foreign policy reach beyond Afghanistan — where Obama accepts, I believe, that we have done

It is disturbing to think what President Obama, who is reaching out to Russia and making overdue conciliatory gestures to both Iran and Cuba, would make of Prime Minister Harper’s February 28 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*,

when he spoke of Russia’s “aggression” in the form of imaginary intrusions into Canadian airspace, Iranian “ideology that is obviously evil,” and “a hemisphere where we have an increasing number of real serious enemies and opponents.” It probably means that they won’t be buddies and that Obama will consult Harper, including at annual summits, one hopes, only on what he seems to know — but that does include Afghanistan, on which the Prime Minister has had cogent advice for the US about the dangers of overreaching.

Anyway, the Canada-US relationship is bigger than its principal political leaders. It is rooted in the importance of the issues — but also

in family interests — the North American family.

Ronald Reagan had that right.

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