

# SMART PARTNERSHIP: BUILDING ON THE OBAMA VISIT

Colin Robertson

Crisis creates opportunity. Geographic propinquity and a global network reflecting our pluralism give us a unique sensibility and sensitivity. No other country can play the American game as well as Canadians, but then no other country has the American interests of Canadians. Barack Obama has opened a door that Canadians can turn into a “smart partnership,” taking our relationship with the United States to a new, rewarding level. It means a “permanent campaign,” but with national leadership the stars are aligned: Obama’s popularity within Canada; a pragmatic Pearsonian leading the opposition; engagement amongst the provinces. Canadians can join the Americans as architects and engineers of revitalized bilateral and global institutions.

Les crises sont une occasion de changement. La proximité géographique et le réseau mondial témoignant de notre pluralisme nous procurent des perspectives et une sensibilité uniques. Aucun pays ne peut jouer la partition des Américains aussi bien que le Canada puisque aucun pays n’a d’aussi grands intérêts que les nôtres aux États-Unis. Le président Obama a ouvert à notre intention la voie d’un « partenariat intelligent », susceptible de renouveler et de raffermir nos liens avec les États-Unis. Et les étoiles semblent justement alignées pour ce genre de « campagne permanente » : popularité du président américain dans notre pays, pragmatisme « pearsonien » du nouveau chef de l’opposition libérale et engagement manifesté par les provinces. Les Canadiens pourraient ainsi se joindre aux Américains en tant qu’architectes et ingénieurs d’une revitalisation des institutions bilatérales et internationales.



*Having been in a number of these meetings over the years, I just found the tone really excellent...It was really — it was a very strategic discussion...heavily focused on the economy and then next on Afghanistan and Pakistan...You just didn’t get the kind of smaller-level bilateral kinds of problems; it rarely came up. There was just I think a lot of confidence and a sense that this was a good partnership and that they were very upbeat about the direction that things were going.*

US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, press briefing a board Air Force One en route from Ottawa to Washington, February 19, 2009

For productivity and inspired engagement, the six hours that President Barack Obama and his senior team spent in Ottawa on February 19 will be hard to beat. It was done with panache — from the runway greeting by Governor General Michaëlle Jean through the substantive meetings with Prime Minister Stephen Harper to the departure lounge discussion with Opposition Leader Michael Ignatieff.

The attention to detail — from the flags in the Hall of Honour to the Canadiana menu served at the working lunches for the principals and accompanying staff — will set the standard for future presidential visits. The spontaneous

“I love this country” uttered by the President at the end of the news conference, the presidential detour into the Byward Market to take home maple leaf cookies for Malia and Sasha, were yet more indications of the tone of excellence, described by Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg during the media debriefing on the trip back to Washington.

We now have a substantive program with an invitation to serious Canadian involvement on international peace and security, on border management, and on a “clean energy dialogue.” We have an opportunity to match Obama by thinking big, being bold and forging a “smart partnership” with America that recognizes our common interests, but mindful that Tip O’Neill’s famous rule that “all politics is local” buttresses the Canadian interests through a permanent campaign directed at Congress and at the state and local level.

President Obama is operating on a warp speed timetable, conscious that his window of opportunity is already beginning to close. We should take our inspiration from his chief of staff, the savvy and canny former Chicago congressman Rahm Emanuel, who famously observed, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.” Less repeated but equally applicable to the Canadian situation is the rest of

his observation: "Things that we had postponed for too long, that were long-term, are now immediate and must be dealt with. This crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you could not do before."

The Founders constructed the American system on what James Madison called "competing interests" and "public passions." Traditional diplomatic practice with its ritual and

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protocol, relying on the State Department and, occasionally, the executive branch, to look out for our interests is not relevant. To advance and defend Canadian interests in a relationship that daily grows more intermestic requires a permanent campaign with a role for all.

In recent years, responding to the need to make the case for Canada in Congress and regionally, the federal government has ramped up its advocacy efforts by increasing the number of Canadian consulates in the United States from 15 to 23, creating an advocacy secretariat within the Embassy and permitting parliamentarians to use their travel privileges to include visits to Washington. The framework created by the Obama visit will re-establish a pattern of regular bilateral encounters between ministers and, hopefully, at least annual bilateral sessions between the Prime Minister and President.

These steps are right and necessary but they are not enough. We should aim, for example, to have Canadian representation in every American state by the 2010 elections to advance our interests and to signal early warnings of measures that will adversely affect our trade and investment. Parliamen-

tarians' travel should also be widened to include district visits with their congressional counterparts. We also need to recognize that including time for golf, fishing and hunting is a vital glue in cementing personal relationships and underlines the Canadian bond with nature and our North.

The provinces, recognizing that their own interests require engagement, have vastly expanded their own "diplomacy" through bilateral

engagement as well as through active participation with regional and national conferences of governors and state legislators and in forums like the Energy Council. Alberta sets the standard with ongoing initiatives like "Alberta on the Smithsonian Mall," its Washington office, headed by consecutive former ministers, and through taking a leadership role in the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region (PNWER), a public/private association with the active involvement of state and provincial executives and legislators, backed up by a robust secretariat. Its Secretariat, under the far-sighted leadership of Washington Governor Christine Gregoire and British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell, enabled the creation of the "smart driver's licence" that Homeland Security has accepted as a valid travel document for cross-border travel. As an effective model for regional cooperation, PNWER should be examined by the Atlantic premiers and New England governors and in discussions around a similar organization for the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway provinces and states.

Government does not need to lead on everything. Industry and labour

also have a responsibility for involvement. Chambers of commerce and associations such as the Business Roundtable and Canadian Council of Chief Executives play a constructive role. The Canadian American Business Council is particularly effective and we should encourage the creation of state counterparts like the Canada Arizona Business Council.

The focal point for Canadian advocacy is Congress and it needs to be an all-hands approach, coordinated, but recognizing that while the messages should be congruent and complementary, the voices can be different. Play the game the American way, including the use of lobbyists and lawyers, because that is the way it works.

Each one of the 535 members of the House and Senate needs to be targeted, especially in their district, because on any issue they can be either adversary or ally. We may not have money or votes but we can talk about the seven million jobs created by growing trade and investment.

The most challenging issue will be forging a coherent Canadian position and strategy on the clean energy dialogue. It will also be the most necessary as the Obama administration is moving rapidly, if incrementally, to define policy and determine a cap-and-trade strategy with an eye toward December's Copenhagen climate change conference. Obama has invited Canada to participate in this process. Until now, both national governments have played defence both internationally and in the face of domestic critics.

Alberta's oil sands are the prime target of the environmental lobby and they've enjoyed some success through successful lobbying for a resolution by American mayors (June 2008) and the congressional passage in 2007 of section 526 of the *Energy Independence and Security Act*, the intent of which is to keep the US government, which is the single largest fuel purchaser in the US,

from buying fuel derived from the oil sands, liquid coal and oil shale. The March issue of *National Geographic* portrays Alberta's oil sands as "dark satanic mills," with spectacular photos of sludge-covered tailings ponds, the site of media attention last year after a flock of ducks made an unfortunate and final landing there.

Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach put the situation in perspective when he observed recently to the Arctic Gas Symposium, "The oil sands account for less than one-tenth of one percent of the world's greenhouse gases, or to put it another way about half the greenhouse gases produced by the City of Hong Kong each year. And US coal-fired electricity production accounts for about 60 times the annual emissions from the oil sands."

But as we witnessed over "clear-cutting" of the mythical Great Bear Rainforest and "environmental genocide" on both the Alaska North Slope and James Bay energy projects, reason takes a back seat to emotion regardless of the facts. Hollywood has now entered the picture and the screening of films like *Tar Sands: The Selling of Alberta* and the Oscar-nominated *Downstream* means that ragging the puck is no longer a viable option.

The Obama administration is already giving definition to its approach. The economic stimulus package includes about US\$80 billion in spending, loan guarantees and tax incentives aimed at promoting energy efficiency, renewable energy sources in a smart grid system (which will also benefit Canada), higher-mileage cars and coal that is truly clean. These investments effectively amount to the biggest energy bill in American history. Obama has appointed Todd Stern, who served as Kyoto Protocol coordinator in the Clinton White House, as special climate envoy. He signed executive orders allowing California and 16 other states to impose auto emissions standards that are more stringent than

the federal requirement and put into effect new fuel efficiency targets for automakers. EPA administrator Lisa Jackson has reversed the Bush administration's decision not to regulate the carbon dioxide emissions from new coal-burning plants. The EPA is expected to act for the first time to regulate carbon dioxide, buttressed by an order by the Supreme Court to make a determination whether carbon dioxide is a pollutant that endangers public health and welfare.

My own advocacy on Capitol Hill from 2004 to 2006 included a very brief lobby of then-Senator Obama on Devils Lake, but even in our short conversation it was clear that the environment is something he cares about. As state senator he was active in efforts to clean up Lake Michigan. As US senator, he was a leader on legislation to prevent the spread of invasive species and protect against water diversions on the Great Lakes. Obama championed environmental issues during the campaign and vowed to reduce climate-altering carbon dioxide emissions by 80 percent by 2050. The day after his election, he told Governor Arnold

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Schwarzenegger's climate conference in Los Angeles, "My presidency will mark a new chapter in America's leadership on climate change that will strengthen our security and create millions of new jobs in the process."

Aware of the President's personal commitment to clean energy, the Prime Minister will give it commensurate attention, mindful of Canadian interests. The Acid Rain Accord depended on Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's personal interventions with Presidents Ronald Reagan and, later, George H.W. Bush. The overlapping jurisdictions between the federal

and state/province authorities mean that the scope of the new challenge will be similar to both the Great Lakes water cleanup and the Acid Rain Accord.

In sharing public policy experience, the examples of British Columbia with a carbon tax and Alberta's \$2-billion investment in carbon capture and storage will be instructive. In research, there is already a long history of joint cooperation. During his Ottawa visit, President Obama pointed specifically to the carbon sequestration project under way that takes carbon dioxide produced at a synfuels plant in North Dakota and pipes it to hollowed-out underground oil fields near Weyburn, Saskatchewan.

As a first step, Canadian negotiators should seek American agreement on a reasoned, science-based approach that begins with a factual description of the carbon footprint of the Alberta oil sands and American coal. This will provide both a reality check to environmentalists' mythology and a common base for what will be the more difficult challenge, forging a coherent Canadian strategy. Complete convergence between

provinces and the federal government is unlikely. Similar circumstances did not prevent either the Acid Rain Accord or the Free Trade Agreement.

The Obama administration faces a similar challenge — both with the states and within Congress, where the battle is likely to be less on partisan than on geographic lines, with opposition coming from the coal-consuming and southern refinery states. Legislation is likely to resemble a slab of Swiss cheese with its concessions and allowances sectorally and regionally. It will be up to individual states to set their permit and licensing regulations. Inevitably, these will reflect local

realities. The EPA has already signalled that it will use the California CAFE (corporate average fuel economy) standard and that inevitably has a bandwagon effect on the rest of the states.

**O**n Afghanistan, we have both place and standing and, in particular, experience in the application of both diplomacy and development. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in her Senate confirmation testimony, declared the 3Ds — defence, diplomacy and development — would henceforth constitute the main elements of the Obama administration's "smart" diplomacy. We have much to share. In addition to our justly praised armed forces, Canada's "boots on the ground" have always included diplomats and development experts. With the launch of the Holbrooke mission, we can provide useful diplomatic intelligence from our own networks and experience and the acknowledgement that the Afghan situation involves regional considerations, especially Pakistan.

More importantly, we are increasingly clear about our objectives and what constitutes the conditions for the endgame, and this clarity of purpose should be shared with our American allies. From the outset, the campaign has been about ridding Afghanistan of al-Qaeda and standing up for collective security as sanctioned through both NATO and the UN. The Manley Commission clarified both the situation and our objectives, and through a series of parliamentary debates and votes we have declared that our major military contribution will stand down in 2011.

Meanwhile Canada's objectives are twofold. First, through continuing military action, to prevent Afghanistan from slipping back into failed state status. Second, to enhance development and diplomatic activities including training their troops and police, through development projects like

building wells and schools where the Afghan people can educate their young women and men. As Chief of Defence Staff General Walter Natynczyk told the February Conference of Defence Associations Institute, the objective is now less about killing the Taliban than about providing the security shield while the Afghans themselves initiate a "civilian surge" to win and hold the support of ordinary Afghans.

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**C**anadians will leave in 2011, having served a decade at the sharp end. Even with the enhancements to the regular army of 22,000, and a similar-sized force of reserves, the nearly 3,000 Canadian soldiers who are rotating through Afghanistan will require an operational pause. Lkening his job to juggling a chainsaw, Canadian army commander Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie recently observed that "we are at the limit...We are now send-

ing senior noncommissioned officers and officers back for their fourth tour...Our equipment is going to have to be reset, just like our soldiers have to be reset at a certain time." Leslie also observed that even with the additional 17,000 American troops, in the short term, "the levels of violence will probably increase" as the Taliban test the allied resolve.

American policy is converging with Canadian realism. President Obama has considerably narrowed the American objectives in Afghanistan, to one of "ensuring that it is not a launching pad for attacks against North America," the original purpose behind the Afghan intervention in 2001, and away from a "democracy agenda."

**T**his does not change the requirement for the rest of the alliance to share the burden. In January, during his first overseas visit as vice-president, Joe Biden told the Munich conference on security, "We'll engage. We'll listen. We'll consult. America needs the world, just as I believe the world needs America...America will do more; that's the good news." He added, "The bad news is America will ask more of our partners as well." Defence Minister Peter MacKay underlined Biden's plea at the Royal

Institute of International Affairs in London, England, observing, "Afghanistan tests the ability of the alliance to execute its most basic mission in the 21st century and in a global context. If NATO cannot deter or defeat the real physical threat facing alliance members, and indeed contribute to the building of security for the larger international community, then we have to ask ourselves, what is NATO for?"

**T**he Manley Report on Afghanistan in January 2008 ended with this statement: "Helping to build a more stable, better governed Afghanistan with a growing economy is, we



Jason Ransom

**Prime Minister Harper and President Obama leaving the Reading Room of the Centre Block after their news conference. Colin Robertson writes that it was an action-packed, perfectly staged six hours that gave Canada an opportunity to build on the momentum.**

believe, an achievable Canadian objective. But success is not a certainty. The war in Afghanistan is complicated. The future there is dangerous and can frustrate the most confident plan or prediction.” Again as Prime Minister Harper told Zakaria: “I think the idea we’re going to wipe out an insurgency is completely unrealistic. What we want is a central government that can maintain day-to-day responsibility for its own security. I think that’s what we should define victory as.”

**O**n the Canada-US border, the reference was brief and vague but the leaders “instructed senior officials to meet at an early date to develop

strategies to enhance our collective security in North America.”

The economics of shared space in the top half of North America that were creating increasingly integrated, borderless supply chains were interrupted by the politics of security. In the aftermath of 9/11 the security override has not just reimposed the border but beefed it up, and the border continues to thicken.

The solutions are there. Business and border communities have engaged and produced practical solutions. Both the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and the Canadian Council of Chief Executives have laid out complementary approaches, and in her paper for the Car-

leton Canada-US Project, chamber vice president Shirley Ann George advanced five immediate steps: expanding trusted shipper and traveller programs; providing 24/7 access at major border crossings; implementing whole-of-government electronic reporting requirements; establishing a robust and tested border contingency plan; and rapidly rolling out enhanced driver’s licences.

**P**rime Minister Harper used the opportunity of the Obama visit to address the American scaremongers like CNN’s Lou Dobbs, who daily rant about America’s “broken borders,” forgetting that there is a difference between America’s northern and

southern borders. As the PM told the joint press conference: "There is no such thing as a threat to the national security of the United States which does not represent a direct threat to this country. We as Canadians have every incentive to be as cooperative and alarmed about the threats that exist to the North American continent in the modern age as do the government and people of the United States."

Yet despite the exemplary and acknowledged cooperation between law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and the creation of the binational integrated border enforcement teams (IBETs), the US Department of Homeland Security appears intent on adapting its southern model to the northern border. The message that "we've got your back" has been illustrated time and again through our successful efforts to "push the border" beyond our shared perimeter through, for example, the inspections that now take place at the ports of Vancouver,

Montreal and Halifax as well as at overseas seaports and airports for cargo destined to North America.

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Crisis creates opportunity. The Obama administration has opened the door that Canadians can turn into a "smart partnership" that will move our relationship with the United States to a new and rewarding level. The federal government has an opportunity to lead. The stars are in alignment: Obama's popularity within Canada; the restoration to the Liberal Party leadership of pragmatic Pearsonianism, in place of kneejerk anti-Americanism; a consensus and determination for engagement among the provinces, individually and through the Council of the Federation. Changes are already in motion, be it in the financial sector

or the auto industry. Once again, Canadians can join the Americans as architects and engineers of a new, yet-to-be determined configuration of both bilateral and global institutions.

No other country can play the American game as well as Canadians, but then no other country has the American interests of Canadians. And when the game is played properly, we can realize for Canada a unique place and standing in a world where the rest want to know what America is thinking and where America wants to know more about the rest of the world.

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