

Canada's Messiah?
Looking at Obama from the "Country Up There"

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*It's like sitting alone in a tiny attic apartment
listening to a wonderful party roaring below.*

- A Canadian broadcaster comparing the 2008 Canadian and U.S. elections¹

*It's one of those relatively rare moments when
we look south of the border at their politics
with something approaching envy.*

- Pollster Peter Donolo of Strategic Counsel²

For Canadians, the 2008 U.S. presidential race meant envy and yearning. “Why can’t we have our own Barack Obama?” was the mood that seized Canadians from all provinces.³ Roughly at the same time, a federal election took place in Canada. And, none of the Canadian party leaders—Stephen Harper of the Conservative Party, Stéphane Dion of the Liberal Party, Jack Layton of the New Democratic Party, Gilles Duceppe of the Bloc Québécois, and Elizabeth May of the Green Party—were able to inspire voters. A few days before both elections, Montreal Gazette columnist Josh Freed wrote: “Everyone in the United States is voting for their favourite choice [...] But everyone in Canada is voting against someone.”⁴ In a similar vein, Toronto Star columnist Bob Hepburn commented several weeks later: “[T]he recent Canadian election was an unmitigated bore, with major party leaders who failed to inspire voters or provide any real hope of a brighter future for the nation.”⁵ Many also complained that the election results were downright dull: Prime Minister Harper was still without a majority mandate and there was no substantial change in the partisan composition of Ottawa’s 308-member parliament.

¹ Quoted in David Frum, “Envious of the U.S. Election? Be Careful What you Wish For”, *The National Post*, September 13, 2008: <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/fullcomment/archive/2008/09/13/david-frum-envious-of-the-u-s-election-be-careful-what-you-wish-for.aspx>

² Quoted in “Canadians Prefer Obama to Their Own PM: Poll”, *Agence France-Presse*, July 1st, 2008: <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hRnQplyteghUW6DcCNWp2qnH59XQ>

³ Nadia Ross, “Le nouveau “barème Obama””, *Le Soleil*, October 18, 2008, p. 35.

⁴ Josh Freed, “In the U.S., they Vote for Someone; in Canada, we Vote Against”, *The Gazette*, October 11, 2008, p. A2.

⁵ Bob Hepburn, “A Canadian Prayer for Obama”, *Toronto Star*, October 30, 2008, p. AA8.

Consequently, roughly half of the Canadian population was annoyed with the election, arguing that it had cost taxpayers large sums of money for nothing.⁶

It was with this boredom and annoyance with their own politics that Canadians followed the U.S. election night on television—some of them on CNN, where they could get a glimpse of John King’s “Magic Map” or the channel’s much-touted 3D hologram technology as it “beamed in” reporters in Star Wars fashion.

Overall there are good reasons to think Canadians liked what they saw that night. As will be discussed further on, the “Obamania” craze witnessed in the U.S. spread to Canada, with Canadians sometimes comparing Obama to a “messiah”. Furthermore, the Senator from Illinois was Canada’s favorite candidate because he shares Canadians’ values and positions on issues such as abortion, education, health care, the war in Iraq, and gun control. As University of Toronto political science professor Nelson Wiseman explains: “Political culture in Canada is more liberal, more social-democratic [than U.S. political culture.]”⁷ There is even a widespread feeling in Canada that Obama will make America a little more like “us.”, and that the 2008 elections have ushered in a new era of Democratic (and liberal) dominance in American politics. As true as this may be, many Canadians aren’t aware of the fundamental role that the U.S. Congress plays in Washington and that it may be difficult for Obama to push his programs through the House and Senate—especially if the Republican party makes a 1994-like comeback in 2010. Canadians often forget that the U.S. political system is different from the Canadian

⁶ Angus Reid Strategies, “Half of Canadians Dissatisfied with Federal Election Outcome”, October 20, 2008: http://www.angus-reid.com/uppdf/2008.10.20_PostElection.pdf

⁷ “Canadians for Obama, but Republicans for Canada”, *Agence France Presse*, November 1, 2008: http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gocq7Ictf0I5O_GCAs0f0oIIXcEg

parliamentary system, i.e., that it is often harder for the White House to go forward with its legislative program than it is for our Prime Minister to do so in Ottawa. As a result, Canadians may well be puzzled should Obama have difficulties in fulfilling his campaign promises—a situation which could diminish Canadians’ affection for the first U.S. African-American president.

Canadians will also be disappointed to see that Canada will not become a top priority in Washington simply because Obama was elected. The new president will care more about U.S. allies than George W. Bush did; nevertheless, the word “Canada” has never been heard very often “inside the beltway” and that is unlikely to change in 2009. Canadians’ honeymoon with Obama might also come to an end if the White House and the Democratic majorities in Congress go forward with protectionist trade policies that jeopardize Canada’s access to U.S. markets. Obama’s willingness to ramp up the war in Afghanistan will also make it difficult for Prime Minister Stephen Harper to stick to the promise he made in the Canadian election: to remove Canada from Afghanistan by 2011. Will Canadians still love Obama when finding out that he is no “messiah” after all?

“I Got a Crush on Obama”

In sync with the “Obama Girl” viral video, first posted on YouTube in June 2007, Canadians “got a crush on Obama” pretty early in the presidential race. According to a May 2008 Canadian Press Harris-Decima poll, 56% of the Canadian population would have voted for Obama on November 4, while only 15% preferred McCain.⁸ The gap between Obama and McCain supporters increased as the campaign went on. For instance, an Innovative Research Group poll conducted two weeks

⁸ *The Canadian Press*, “Canadians Would Overwhelmingly Vote for Obama”, *ctv.ca*, May 21, 2008: http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20080521/canada_obama_080521?s_name=&no_ads=

before the election revealed that Obama “would have been able to claim victory with massive support (72%) from Canadians in every province. Only a small minority would have supported McCain (12%).”⁹

Even if the Democratic Party is usually more popular among Canadians than the Republican Party (e.g., the majority of Canadians preferred Kerry to Bush in 2004), at least two factors exacerbated this pattern in 2008. First, Obama’s positions matched those of the Canadian population on almost every issue. Most Canadians believe abortion should be legal and that the government should adopt strict gun control legislation. So Canada is not a right nation and as American comedian Jon Stewart said on his satirical news program “The Daily Show” right after the Canadian election, Stephen Harper’s party is called “Conservative” but would probably be the equivalent of the “Gay Nader Fans for Peace” if it was an American party! Unsurprisingly, Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s positions on moral issues did not go over well with Canadians, even if McCain had never been known as a virulent social conservative. With her pro-life, pro-gun, pro-god profile, Palin soon proved Canadians that all she had in common with them was her passion for hockey.

By contrast, Canadians could identify with most of Obama’s political platform: affordable, accessible health care for all; pulling out of Iraq; working on multilateral efforts to restore peace around the world; cutting taxes for the working and middle classes.¹⁰ This holds true even if some regions, such as Alberta and the Atlantic Provinces, are more conservative than others, such as

⁹ See numbers in Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, “Canada and the United States: What Does it Mean to be Good Neighbours”, 2008 Annual Ottawa Conference Poll, October 2008, p. 4.

¹⁰ Diane Francis, “Obama’s America Looks a Lot Like Canada”, *National Post*, February 23, 2008: <http://www.nationalpost.com/opinion/columnists/story.html?id=328029>

Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec—the only Canadian province with a predominantly French-speaking population.

The second factor explaining Obama's immense popularity in Canada was Canadians' frustration, if not contempt, for George W. Bush. It is well known that Bush was extremely unpopular in countries like France and Germany. However, Americans may be surprised to learn that their friends north of the border have also come to see Bush as a threat to the world.¹¹ Anti-Bush sentiment in Canada has been strong particularly in Quebec, where the French-speaking newspaper *La Presse* was bold enough to publish, in November 2006, a front-page article entitled "Bush est dangereux" (Bush is Dangerous).¹²

Results from a poll published by *La Presse* in 2004 show that anti-Americanism was strong in Quebec during the Bush presidency: 40% of Quebecers declared having a negative opinion of the United States.¹³ A similar study sponsored by Léger Marketing a year before showed that 60% of the Quebec population sees Bush's foreign policy as having had a negative impact on Canada.¹⁴

The Quebec malaise with the United States constitutes an important departure from the past, when Quebecers were often among the most pro-American people within Canada. Quebec's unique bond with the United States stems from major historical experiences, such as the emigration of roughly 900,000 French-Canadians to the nearby New England states between

¹¹ Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹² *La Presse*, "Bush est dangereux", November 3, 2006, p. A1.

¹³ See numbers in David Haglund, "Does Quebec Have an "Obsession Anti-Américaine"?", April 2005, 13 p. : <http://misc-icem.mcgill.ca/enpages/pdf/haglundseagramtext.pdf>

¹⁴ Cité dans Guy Lachapelle, "Pourquoi le gouvernement canadien a-t-il refusé de participer à la guerre en Irak ?", *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 53, no 6 (December 2003), p. 918.

1840 and 1930, when economic conditions were better south of the Canada-U.S. border than in Quebec.¹⁵ As historian Claude Bélanger explains:

The emigrant became one of the prime vessels of transmission for American culture within French Canada. They also helped project a very positive image of the United States in Quebec, in sharp contrast to the anti-Americanism that sometimes characterized English-speaking Canada.¹⁶

This positive image had remained strong in Quebec up until the Bush administration. But as David Haglund writes, since the war in Iraq, *La belle province* has had a greater “anti-American obsession” than the rest of Canada. In Montreal, for example, between 150,000 and 250,000 took to the streets to protest the start of the war, compared with 10,000 to 30,000 protesters in Toronto.¹⁷ Guy Lachapelle’s research on Canada’s refusal to participate in the Iraq war confirms that Quebec was the province most strongly opposed to Bush’s decision to remove Saddam Hussein.¹⁸ For instance, in January 2003, 49% of the population of Quebec said they were against the war, compared to 35% in Ontario, 34% in the Atlantic Provinces, 28% in British Columbia, 27% in Saskatchewan-Manitoba, and 27% in Alberta.

Why has Quebec had a greater opposition to the Bush administration? Some refer to Quebec’s ties to its former mother country, France.¹⁹ According to Louis Bélanger: “Because of the language barrier, Quebecers are less exposed to U.S. media, and much more exposed to French coverage and opinions on international issues.”²⁰ Indeed, French news journals critical of the war in Iraq, such as *Le Monde diplomatique* or *Courrier international*, have a greater circulation in

¹⁵ Yves Roby, *Histoire d’un rêve brisé ? Les Canadiens français aux États-Unis*, Sillery : Septentrion, 2007.

¹⁶ Claude Bélanger, “French Canadian Emigration to the United States, 1840-1930”, *Readings in Quebec History* (Marianopolis College), 2000: <http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/QuebecHistory/readings/leaving.htm>

¹⁷ David Haglund, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Guy Lachapelle, “Pourquoi le gouvernement canadien a-t-il refusé de participer à la guerre en Irak ?”, *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 53, no 6 (December 2003), p. 911-927.

¹⁹ On this point, read David Haglund, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*

Quebec than elsewhere in Canada. Paul C. Adams has a different explanation. He argues that “peak experiences of Quebec’s past are predominantly associated with the motif of humiliation or unjust treatment,” imposed by the British colonial empire after the French defeat in 1759.²¹ As a result, Quebec’s culture incorporates “a special sensitivity and antipathy toward superior force and imperial power.”²²

Though the rest of Canada was less inclined to oppose Bush than Quebec, skepticism about the United States eventually became the general tone in the country. An October 2008 poll shows that one-in-three Canadians (32%) have consistently negative views of the U.S.²³ While 29% of Canadians agree that “most of the time the U.S. can be trusted to treat Canadian concerns fairly,” 38% of Canadians agree with the opposite statement.²⁴

Thus, Canadians’ frustration with the Bush administration has certainly made it easier for the “Obamania” craze to cross the U.S.-Canada border and spread to every Canadian province. To use one of Senator Joe Biden’s favorite words, Canadians have “literally” become obsessed with Barack Obama. *Toronto Star* columnist Bob Hepburn perfectly encapsulated Canadians’ perception of the 44th president of the United States when he wrote the following in October 2008: “Many Canadians are fascinated by Obama’s rise from relative obscurity to being [...] the most powerful man in the world. In the poised and articulate Obama, they see a man to bring

²¹ Paul Adams, “The September 11 Attacks as Viewed from Quebec: the Small-Nation Code in Geopolitical Discourse”, *Political Geography* 23 (2004), p. 773.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 790.

²³ Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

about generational change in American political leadership, a change in U.S. attitudes toward blacks and minorities, a chance to buy into the dream of a better tomorrow.”²⁵

Those same Canadians often prove (by their behavior) that John McCain was right in comparing Obama to international superstars like Paris Hilton or Britney Spears. After all, it wasn't rare to come across a Quebecker wearing an Obama t-shirt during and after the presidential campaign. That's not to say that Bush t-shirts were never popular in Quebec—with the only difference that those were *anti* Bush, including ones declaring the 43rd president to be an “International Terrorist.”

For other Canadians, it is appropriate to go so far as to describe Obama as a “miracle,” a “gift from heaven,” or a “messiah.”²⁶ This applies in particular to members of Montreal's black community, who think Obama “has allowed African-Americans to dream and to reach new limits.”²⁷ But will Obama fulfill his promises? Aren't Canadians expecting too much from the new president?

A powerless messiah?

Obama's senior aides did not lose time to declare, right after the election, that nothing will stop Obama from expanding health care, overhauling education and energy policies, and passing a middle-class tax cut soon after he takes office.²⁸ And, experts are predicting that the pressure on the 44th president to deliver instantly will be enormous. However, Canadians might soon discover

²⁵ Bob Hepburn, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Pascal Ouandji, “Montréal n'échappe pas à l'Obamanie”, *La Presse*, July 27, 2008, p. A12.

²⁷ See *Ibid.*

²⁸ Andy Sullivan, “Economy Won't Stop Obama's Priorities, Aides Say”, *Reuters*, November 9, 2008: <http://www.reuters.com/article/vcCandidateFeed2/idUSN09399152>

how difficult it is for Obama to make the United States a little more like Canada. Two weeks after the U.S. election, CBC reporter Kenneth Walsh contended that the economic crisis and the federal deficit will limit the 44th president's ability to spend government money on new welfare and social programs.²⁹ Should this hold true, Canadians should be prepared to see Obama scale back his priorities during his first months in office. This would not mean that Obama was insincere about his intentions or that he is not the new-style politician he projects himself to be. It just means that he is forced to make compromises.

When following U.S. politics, Canadians are often unaware of the ways in which the U.S. political system differs from their own; and of the ways other political actors can tie the hands of the U.S. President. Canada's federal legislative branch is not as powerful and independent from the executive branch as the U.S. Congress. The prime minister of Canada has a seat in Ottawa's 308-member House of Commons, which is the "lower" (but more powerful) house of the Parliament of Canada—the "upper" house being the Canadian Senate. In addition, party discipline is strong in the House of Commons: members of a political party generally do what the leader of the party expects of them. Thus, when the party of the prime minister has more than half of the seats in the House of Commons (referred to as "majority government"), it is fairly easy for it to pass its legislative programs.

It is perhaps for this reason that Canadians tend to believe that the head of state of a nation (prime minister or president) is the most powerful elected official in the country. This leads them to overestimate the power of the U.S. president within the U.S. political system and to think the

²⁹ Kenneth Walsh, "Can Obama Truly Deliver? ", *CBC News*, November 14, 2008: <http://www.cbcnews.com/stories/2008/11/10/politics/main4589947.shtml>

president governs alone. Canadian news coverage often reinforces this misperception: Newspapers such as the *National Post*, the *Globe and Mail*, or *Le Devoir* focus heavily on the White House and the U.S. president in their coverage of U.S. politics, while articles on the U.S. Congress are relatively rare. As a result, Canadian political science students are often surprised to learn what most professors teach about Congress, and which James Q. Wilson and John Dilulio have put this way: “It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that he or she who really knows Congress knows more about American politics than he or she who knows virtually everything else about the system but not much about Congress.”³⁰

James Madison, one of the founding fathers of the United States, argued that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition,”³¹ and this is exactly what U.S. Congress may do during the first months of the Obama presidency. The fact that the Democratic Party was not able to reach the “magic number” of 60 senators in November is a worrisome situation for the White House, namely, because it means that Republican senators will be able to filibuster Obama’s programs. Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid cautioned everybody after the election that he may have a hard time passing the White House’s proposals in the Senate.³² In his concession speech, John McCain declared it is now time for Democrats and Republicans “to come together, to find the necessary compromises, to bridge our differences, and help restore our prosperity, defend our security in a dangerous world, and leave our children and grandchildren a stronger, better country.”³³ Indeed, there may well be some Senate Republicans who share McCain’s willingness to cooperate with Obama for the sake of the nation’s overall interests. However, if recent history

³⁰ James Q. Wilson and John Dilulio, Jr., *American Government*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, p. 282.

³¹ James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, New York : Penguin Books, 1987, p. 319.

³² Andy Sullivan, *op. cit.*

³³ John McCain, “Remarks from Senator John McCain”, November 4, 2008: <http://www.johnmccain.com/splash110408.htm>

is any guide, partisanship will continue to triumph over common interests and the public good in Congress—which is one of the reasons why congressional experts Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann refer to this institution as “the broken branch”.³⁴ House Minority leader John Boehner (Republican – Ohio) and John McCain did not lose time after Obama’s inauguration to oppose the President’s near 800 billion dollar economic stimulus plan, arguing that “there’s too much unnecessary spending and too few tax cuts in the Obama administration’s economic proposals to stimulate the economy”.³⁵ Republican senators such as Mel Martinez (Florida) also opposed Obama right after the election, saying Obama would make a “big mistake” if he were to immediately tackle an ambitious, politically divisive health care bill.³⁶ In sum, Canadians can expect their “messiah” to adopt a “little steps” approach to implementing the much heralded change. Obama, being a pragmatic leader, is well aware that the U.S. political system does not favor rapid and bold changes. For instance, instead of moving aggressively toward universal health care, he may settle for insuring everyone under 18 years old so that every child would be covered.³⁷ Not exactly Canada, but a start...

Love is blind

Canadians’ affection for Barack Obama can also make them blind to the fact that the next president does not propose policies on the basis of whether Canadians will like them. Thus, though Canadians think they’ve grown to know Obama well throughout the two-year presidential campaign, some have not entirely understood several aspects of his platform. For instance, for Canadians who viewed Obama’s election as change for the better, three items defined their

³⁴ Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing America and How to Get it Back on Track*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

³⁵ The Associated Press, “McCain: stimulus bill has too much spending”, *The Washington Post*, February 2, 2009: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/02/AR2009020200827.html>

³⁶ Andy Sullivan, *op. cit.*

³⁷ Kenneth Walsh, *op. cit.*

hopes: ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, improving the economy, and improving Canada-U.S. relations.³⁸ Canadians seemed pretty convinced that Obama was a better presidential candidate than John McCain when it comes to healing the U.S. economy—and exit polls in the U.S. show that Americans agree on this. However, do Canadians know what Obama really intends to do in Iraq and Afghanistan? Are they right in thinking that Obama will improve Canada-U.S. relations?

First, even though Obama has been opposed to the war in Iraq from the start, he adopted a rather moderate position on the issue during the presidential campaign, mainly because the situation in Iraq improved after the 2006 elections—some might say thanks to Bush’s “surge” policy. Obama pledged to withdraw combat troops from Iraq on a 16-month timetable, which is far too long a period for many Canadians, especially Quebeckers. What’s more, Obama might even decide to keep U.S. troops in Iraq for a few additional months (years?) if national security intellectuals in the Pentagon convince him that doing otherwise would jeopardize U.S. interests. A few days after the November election, CNN Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre was already reporting that Obama “gave himself some wiggle room” to respond to military demands with more flexibility.³⁹ Journalist Robert Dreyfuss believes Obama will face “enormous pressure to abandon his pledge to withdraw”:

That pressure will come from within his circle of advisers, some of whom saw Obama’s anti-war stance as good politics but bad policy. It will come from hawkish Democrats outside his circle and from those elbowing their way in, typified by Richard Holbrooke, who found himself shut out of Obamaland after he endorsed Hillary Clinton in the primaries. It may come from hawks close to Vice President-elect Joseph Biden, who voted for the Iraq War in 2002. It will certainly come from conservatives, neo-

³⁸ Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁹ Quoted in Gareth Porter, “Obama under the Gun on Iraq”, *Asia Times*, November 14, 2008: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/JK14Ak01.html

conservatives and the editorial pages of the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. It will come from think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the Center for a New American Security, which have close ties to Obama and the Democratic establishment⁴⁰

Second, Obama might also disappoint Canadians on the war in Afghanistan: The next president does not want to scale down the war effort against the Taliban—he wants to ramp it up and adopt his own “surge” policy there. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, by contrast, has promised to withdraw Canadian troops from Afghanistan in 2011. This will put Canada before a crucial dilemma: Should it withdraw its troops as planned or develop a common strategy with the United States (and maybe even increase our combat effort)?⁴¹ Given that Canadian polls suggest weak public support for the country’s involvement in Afghanistan, this will be a hot-button issue north of the 49th parallel in the coming months. In January 2008, some 47% of Canadians declared wanting their troops brought back from Afghanistan as soon as possible. In Quebec, 57% wanted the mission to end right away, a proportion that could grow if Harper decides to intensify the Canadian war effort.⁴² For Harper and his party, this presents a predicament because, in order to stay in power in Ottawa, they need more seats, and therefore backing, in Quebec.

Third, will Canadians still love Obama if he and his Democratic majorities in Congress adopt protectionist trade policies that could hurt Canada’s industry and Canadian jobs? The new president has mentioned that he wants to reopen NAFTA to include environmental and labor standards. U.S. Ambassador to Canada David Wilkins thinks Obama’s tough talk about NAFTA

⁴⁰ Robert Dreyfuss, “Obama’s Iraq Challenge”, *The Nation*, November 13, 2008.

⁴¹ Barbara Yaffe, “How do we Get Obama’s Attention?”, *The Vancouver Sun*, November 8, 2008: <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/news/story.html?id=f8deda24-d7ba-4463-bf98-6bf628f21525&p=1>

⁴² Bruce Campion-Smith, “Canada Eyes Leaner Role in Afghanistan”, *Toronto Star*, January 16, 2008: <http://www.thestar.com/News/Canada/article/294469>

was campaign rhetoric and is not necessarily the policy he will adopt as a leader.⁴³ Still others point out that Obama's words were aimed at Mexico, not Canada.⁴⁴ That said, given that an estimated 3 million Canadian jobs depend on trade with the United States, Obama's reputation in Canada will suffer a blow if his presidency leads to multiple Canada-U.S. trade conflicts. And this is likely to occur since the trend inside the Democratic Party and Democratic caucus in Congress is away from free trade. As Simon Fraser University Professor Alexander Moens already observed after the 2006 election:

The 2006 Congressional elections augmented the ranks of free-trade opponents in the Democratic Party. Sixteen of the newly elected Democrats in the House in 2006 and five of the new senators are known as "trade skeptics." While most of this protest is a reaction to outsourcing and primarily aimed at Asian and Latin American countries, Canada will find less support for free-trade solutions in the current Congress⁴⁵

The February 2009 controversy fueled by "Buy American" provisions attached to economic stimulus plans proposed by the House of Representatives and the Senate is a good example of protectionist decisions that could trigger Canada-U.S. trade conflicts.

Obama's environmental policy could also pose a problem for Canadians—even if most claim to want a "greener" U.S. president than George W. Bush. Obama wants to break America's addiction to "dirty, dwindling, and dangerously expensive" foreign oil.⁴⁶ This could prove bad news for Canada, which is the largest supplier of oil and gas to the United States. As a Canadian correspondent in Washington explains, Obama's energy plan could hurt Alberta's oil sands industry, which has come "under sustained attack from U.S. environmentalists over the past year

⁴³ L. Ian MacDonald, "A Conversation with the US Ambassador", *Policy Options*, vol. 29 no. 9 (October 2008), p. 6.

⁴⁴ See "Canadians for Obama, but Republicans for Canada".

⁴⁵ Alexander Moens (with Cassandra Florio and Sean McCarthy), "Canadian-American Relations in 2007: Recent Trouble, Current Hope, and Future Work", *The Fraser Institute*, Fraser Institute Digital Publication, May 2007, p. 13: http://www.fraserinstitute.org/commerce.web/product_files/CanadianAmericanRelations2007.pdf

⁴⁶ Quoted in Sheldon Alberts, "Obama's Fight Against "Dirty Oil" Could Hurt Oil Sands", *The National Post*, June 24, 2008: http://www.nationalpost.com/most_popular/story.html?id=610810

because the production of its heavy oil emits an estimated three times more greenhouse gases than conventional oil.”⁴⁷ But here again, some say Obama’s actual policy may well be different from the one promoted during the campaign trail. As well, a London Free Press columnist pointed out several days after the election: “Turning off the tap on Canadian dirty oil may have sounded like a good idea during the heat of a presidential campaign. But the resulting U.S. fuel shortages or heavier dependence on Middle East imports should give even American enviro-zealots pause.”⁴⁸

Aware of the possible challenges with regard to Canada-U.S. relations after 2009, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a few important moves right after the U.S. election in order to begin his relationship with Obama on a good note. He shared a “warm exchange” with the president-elect and declared the following at a press conference: “This is a tremendous, historic occasion for the United States in all kinds of ways.”⁴⁹ Historically, Conservative prime ministers have tended to get along better with Republican presidents. But some predict it may be different with Harper and Obama, because the two leaders share similar views on issues such as same-sex marriage (both oppose it), and because they both are in their late 40s, have young families, and are church-going Christians.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Greg Weston, “Canada Awaits Obama’s Word on Oilsands”, *The London Free Press*, November 16, 2008: http://lfpres.ca/newsstand/News/Columnists/Weston_Greg/2008/11/16/7426751-sun.html

⁴⁹ Joanna Smith, “Obama, Harper find “Common Ground””, *The Toronto Star*, November 7, 2008: <http://www.thestar.com/News/USElection/article/532457>

⁵⁰ “Harper won’t Push Obama to Visit Canada First”, *The Canadian Press*, November 5, 2008: http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20081105/harper_obama-081105/20081105?hub=Canada

The problem for Harper (and for Canadians) is that Obama's election does not mean we will hear the word "Canada" more often in the White House or in Congress than before. Liberal Canadian Senator Colin Kenny predicts Canada-U.S. relations will be "far down Obama's to-do-list," even if he is a multilateralist-minded leader.⁵¹ Indeed, the new president will be so preoccupied with domestic issues such as the financial and economic crisis that he won't devote much time to America's northern neighbour. The fact that Obama is believed to know very little about Canada and that he made no mention of Canada in his presidential campaign (whereas McCain visited Canada in June 2008) seem to confirm this view.⁵² Thus, to quote two experts on Canada-U.S. relations, Canada's fight against "invisibility" and "inaudibility" in Washington will not become any easier after 2009.⁵³

Despite these difficulties, Colin Robertson, former head of the Advocacy Secretariat of the Canadian Embassy in Washington, believes his country can still make itself heard "inside the beltway" if Canadian officials adopt the right strategy.⁵⁴ According to him, Obama and members of Congress will pay more attention to Canada if the Canadian Government expands its presence "to include every state of the union," hires "expatriates working from their homes with the mandate to market and promote Canada," targets "legislators to create a strong positive image of Canada as a friend, ally, and partner," "identifies like-minded groups or individuals," and develops "allies, regardless of party." Robertson also thinks that "inviting American legislators to visit Canada should be an ongoing project."⁵⁵ As U.S. Ambassador David Wilkins notes,

⁵¹ Barbara Yaffe, *op. cit.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Edelgard Mahant and Graeme S. Mount, *Invisible and Inaudible in Washington: American Policies Toward Canada*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000.

⁵⁴ Colin Robertson, "Dealing with Obama or McCain: Think Big and Keep it Simple", *Policy Options*, vol. 29, no. 9 (October 2008), p. 49-52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Americans often (wrongly) think they know enough about Canada.⁵⁶ Thus, informing U.S. leaders about Canada and Canada's interests surely is a good step, especially if it leads Canadian officials to successfully remind the president and U.S. legislators that some decisions made in Washington can have negative consequences on Canada's economy and well-being.

That said, Canadians should also admit that they don't know all there is to know about the United States. Canadians often falsely believe that U.S. decisions are made with the deliberate intention of hurting Canada. But, to quote Colin Robertson again, what we often forget is that Washington is a city where politicians "have interests, not friends."⁵⁷ And there are good reasons to think Obama won't be different. As University of Calgary Professor David Bercuson notes, Obama is undeniably "liberal and a Democrat. But he is also a patriotic and mainstream American who will, quite simply, pursue American national interests—as did George W. Bush—albeit in a different way."⁵⁸ Will Canadians still love this president who they like to compare to John F. Kennedy when he proves he is no "messiah" after all? Will they still praise him when they feel Canada doesn't really matter to him? No one can tell. However, one may soon miss the time when Canadians felt "like sitting alone in a tiny attic apartment listening to a wonderful party roaring below"—that glimpse of time when all Canadians wished they were American.

⁵⁶ L. Ian MacDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Colin Robertson, "Getting Noticed in Washington: The Hard Part of Canada's Job", *Policy Options* (November 2005), p. 46.

⁵⁸ David Bercuson, "How an Obama Presidency will Play in Canada", *The Globe and Mail*, June 16, 2008, p. A15.