



Wednesday » October
7 » 2009

Take advantage of Obama effect

Colin Robertson

Special to The Windsor Star

Monday, October 05, 2009

During last months' meeting with President Barack Obama, his seventh since they first met in February, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said that the United States is "far and away our best friend in the world."

There are times when leaders are out of sync with popular sentiment but, as the survey conducted this past weekend by the Innovative Research Group reveals, more than half of Canadians believe that Obama's election has been a good thing for Canada. Call it the "Obama effect."

A close relationship with the U.S. is no longer the liability for Canadian governments that it became under president George W. Bush. More to the point -- for those who want an adult relationship with our neighbour -- there is now negligible political advantage in slamming the Americans during an election campaign.

As critical as the sea-change in popular attitude is the survey's finding that, while Canadians are not seeking a closer relationship, we think it "just makes sense" to give our leadership leeway for closer co-operation on continental defence and border issues, particularly if the security and trade benefits are made clear.

The "Ottawa agenda" launched a clean energy dialogue as well as discussions on border management and international security.

It will be important to reap an early harvest of mutually beneficial gains and improvements to maintain momentum and public confidence in the process. Because in the coming months the drumbeat of protectionism on the American side is only going to get louder.

Even Obama acknowledges that American unemployment is going to reach into the double digits before the recovery begins to create new jobs.

Support for both the president and his party is dropping as white working-class voters worry about their jobs and personal debt and voice increasing doubt about Democratic policies on health care, energy and the environment, and the stimulus package.

With the 2010 mid-terms already very much on the minds of the 435 members of Congress and one-third of the Senate standing for re-election, fundraising is well underway.

Union support, both in money and organization, is vital to the Democratic majority. In return, union leadership expects support on policies, including "Buy America."

They find a receptive audience in members like Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who campaigned for the presidential nomination with slogans like "it's either Buy America or bye-bye America."

For many, it has an almost irresistible appeal.

Recently, for example, the president slapped a 35 per cent tariff on Chinese-made tires.

China has reacted with threats to impose retaliatory measures on chicken meat and American auto products.

Yet auto products, thanks to the Auto Pact and over half a century of integrated supply chains are less "American" than "North American" in origin, design and construction.

It is estimated that before final assembly, components that go into cars and trucks criss-cross the border seven times and, for car parts in particular, many of them are made in Canada or by Magna plants in the U.S.

With almost half of our GDP dependent on international trade and supply chain management, Canadian jobs are at stake.

To prevent being side-swiped, Canadian leadership needs smart initiatives and room to manoeuvre when they are negotiating with their American counterparts. This means active co-operation and collaboration with the prov-inces, business and labour to make it an all-of-Canada effort.

The provinces have endorsed reciprocity in procurement and Stockwell Day has put a national proposal before Ron Kirk, the U.S. trade representative.

The Canadian and American chambers of commerce have already put on the table a series of progressive and practical proposals including expanding trusted shipper and traveller programs and providing 24/7 access at border crossings.

Canadian labour unions need to be integrated into the all-Canada effort, especially given the privileged access they have with their American brethren.

Over a third of Canadian unions are affiliates of the American internationals, including the United Steelworkers, who are leading the Buy America campaign. Their leader, Leo Gerard, is a Canadian who previously directed the Canadian division of the USW.

We bring to the negotiating table two indispensable assets: jobs and geography.

For 35 American states we are their main market.

For more than seven million Americans, their jobs depend on trade with Canada. Parse that down by state and congressional district and include Canadian investment and we have a powerful argument on the economics and mutual benefits of continuing integration.

As for geography, as historian David Bercuson has pointed out, we are also America's "front porch." American national security depends on Canadian control of the sea and air approaches.

As the northern passages become more navigable, we need to demonstrate our capacity for Arctic sovereignty.

We also need to reinforce our coastal perimeter security against the new threat of terrorists and sea-borne drug traffickers and people smugglers.

Improved perimeter defence will also reinforce American confidence in Canadian capacity -- a necessary prerequisite if we are to achieve progress on border issues.

Creating a shield for our shared North American perimeter was the argument for air defence co-operation in the creation of NORAD in the late-1950s.

A half-century later the argument of joint co-operation for mutual protection remains. Today, with different threats and challenges, there is a compelling case for expanding NORAD to integrate the land and sea forces of Canada Command and U.S. Northern Command.

In the news conference at the end of their meeting, Obama observed that the prime minister has been "on the job" in raising Canadian interests at every encounter. So he must and so was again last week at Pittsburgh with his G-20 counterparts.

While the president has told us he loves Canada and surveys tell us that Americans like us, in the U.S. strategic calculation we are neither top-of-mind nor a problem.

But geography and the inexorably positive force of economic integration means that when disruptions occur to the natural flow of people, goods and investment, we suffer.

Canadian leadership must take the initiative to protect and advance our interests.

In this season of election fever, it certainly gives them greater confidence to do the right thing knowing that Canadians are behind them.

Colin Robertson is a senior research fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. A former Canadian diplomat, he was part of the teams that negotiated the FTA and NAFTA and he served in New York, Los Angeles and Washington. This column first appeared in the Ottawa Citizen.

© The Windsor Star 2009

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2009 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.