



Obama's historic win energizes Canadian federal political landscape

But so far no Canadian leader comes anywhere near 'big hoopla' around Barack Obama.

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By Abbas Rana and Harris Macleod

U.S. president-elect Barack Obama's enormous popularity in Canada should give Prime Minister Stephen Harper a golden opportunity to build a strong relationship with the new U.S. administration and to work together on key domestic and foreign policy issues which was politically risky with George Bush because of his unpopularity in Canada, says a former Canadian minister of external affairs.

"Mr. Harper has an opportunity that he perhaps didn't have with Mr. Bush to build a much more personal relationship in that there's an enormous amount of goodwill that Canadians have for the president-elect and it makes sense to look at ways to work together that was harder with President Bush because his support within Canada was lower," said Perrin Beatty, president and CEO of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce who served as secretary of state for external affairs in the Kim Campbell Cabinet and held six Cabinet portfolios in the Brian Mulroney Cabinet between 1988 and 1993.

Mr. Beatty said Prime Minister Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) and his Cabinet ministers should try to seek a meeting with Mr. Obama and the president-elect's senior administration officials at the earliest possible opportunity to build a close personal relationship.

Mr. Beatty said Canada should come up with a pragmatic bilateral agenda that's helpful for both countries and offer Canadian solutions on issues such as security of North America, mobility of people from both countries on the Canada-U.S. border, transportation planning and environment.

"Starting point is actually to be face to face and to work on the chemistry. The other key element is for Canada to develop its agenda for our bilateral relationship very quickly. We need to have one that isn't simply a wish list, these are the things that Canada wants from you, but rather recognize the challenges facing the U.S. and they should go to the U.S. with solutions," said Mr. Beatty.

Tom D'Aquino, chief executive and president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, said in an interview that one of the key objectives of the Harper government should be to build a relationship of "trust" between the senior officials of the two governments.

"If you said to me, 'Tom, in all the years that you've been travelling, working in the U.S. dealing with the Americans, what's the single most important thing to the relationship?' It has to begin from the position of trust...If you establish a relationship of trust and friendship, true friendship with the Americans, then you can agree to disagree or, in some areas, you can agree but the name of the game obviously is to run an independent Canadian foreign policy and economic policy but one that recognizes the benefits of interdependence," said Mr. D'Aquino who would be leading a group of 100 Canadian CEOs on a two-day visit to Washington, D.C., in March to meet with the Obama administration officials.

Goldy Hyder, general manager of Hill & Knowlton, said the change in the White House does not necessarily mean that Canada has to change its policies in order to develop a good working relationship.

"It's an opportunity to form a new relationship and maybe new approaches, maybe not. The reality is at the level of the President and the Prime Minister, the personal relationship matters a lot. We have no reason to believe that these two individuals will not get along. On the contrary, the fact that they are both from the same generation, both of similar age, similar position in their lives, even having children that are young, suggests that there will be a lot in common between Stephen Harper and president-elect Obama," said Mr. Hyder.

Toronto Liberal Senator Jerry Grafstein, chair of the Canada-U.S. Inter-Parliamentary Group, said he intends to lead a group of Canadian Parliamentarians either late this month or early next month to meet with members of the U.S. Congress and members of the Obama administration to get some ideas about the policies of the upcoming U.S. administration to be sworn in on Jan. 20, 2009, and communicate to them the Canadian views on key domestic and foreign policies.

"I hope...we can start inputting our ideas when the new administration develops its new policies," said Sen. Grafstein in an interview.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Harper made a congratulatory call to president-elect Obama on Thursday and the Prime Minister's Office described the conversation as a "warm exchange." The statement further said that both leaders "touched on the G20 Leaders' Summit in Washington on Nov. 15, 2008 and its importance for addressing the global financial crisis." The same day in Toronto, Prime Minister Harper described Mr. Obama's victory as "truly inspiring" and added that Canada will work with the new administration as its "most reliable ally in the world."

The key issues between Canada and the U.S. are the economy, energy security, climate change and Afghanistan.

Liberal MP David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Ont.) said that Canada should play a leading role in addressing the climate change issue.

"Mr. Obama will move and, I believe quite quickly, in January by the spring of next year to price carbon. If we don't get out and get ahead of this, we're going to be price-takers and that's why I've been arguing for two-and-a-half years with the government that they were being very

irresponsible because now we risk the possibility of a carbon tariff being applied by the United States, an idea that's still in circulation. ... If that's the case, that will further change the economics of energy in this country very dramatically. It will have a bearing on our economy, our resource sector, the price of exports from Canada to the United states," said Mr. McGuinty in an interview.

"If we haven't adequately priced carbon, it's going to be hard to convince Canadians. You add to that that Obama has spoken out against the oil sands, raising concerns about the GHG intensity of oil exploitation, the federal government should stop purchasing and consuming petroleum products that come out of the Canadian oil sands. All of this is in play. Mr. Harper's talked about Canada becoming a clean energy super power. It's a very interesting concept. Nobody knows what it means and I suspect that will be [Environment Minister Jim] Prentice's first two or three files to deal with will be what does this mean? ... These factors, combined, have led to a serious shakeup."

Pollster Darrell Bricker of Ipsos-Reid in an interview with *The Hill Times* said that Mr. Obama's election is unlikely to influence the Canadian political landscape significantly.

"I don't know that it's going to really affect the Canadian political landscape very much. The race was going on at the same time that this race [Canadian federal election] was going on, the two races were going on coincidentally, and I think sometimes there are utterances that can come out on the policy front, like say for example on NAFTA, that might have some impact on Canada, but as far as all the big hoopla around Barack Obama and his victory, we haven't got any leaders that sort of fill that void, the charisma/hoopla void. I don't know that there is anybody who can actually do that. The Liberals have an opportunity maybe to do that in May, depending on who they pick, building on that type of desire for change and momentum and all the rest of it but there's not anybody on the stage who stands out as the obvious choice," said Mr. Bricker.

Mr. Bricker said that political players and issues obviously play a critical role in attracting the people's interest at election time.

"We've had it a couple of times in Canadian politics and when the issues are really substantial you can get more people to turn out for election campaigns, so the campaigns themselves and the players do matter. The public doesn't just blandly walk out and participate in voting, there is some effect from what is going on in the campaign on whether or not they decide to vote and we saw that in Canada and we saw it in the U.S. and there are no better examples."

Mr. Bricker said Mr. Obama's victory shows that the American people want change, and are going about getting it the old fashioned way: by voting.

"Absolutely. I think one of the messages out of the U.S. election for people who are observing it is politics matters, elections matter, they can be a real statement about where you want the country to go. So all these people who've been spending their time dealing with NGOs and blogs and all sorts of other things, it's not like people have become less political it's just that their politics has not been party oriented, or election oriented. Maybe this might point to the fact that

the electoral process itself and the traditional institutions of politics can really be vehicles for change."

Paul Frazer, a former Canadian diplomat who advises Canadian clients "to manoeuvre and position themselves in the labyrinth of American power," as *Politics* host Don Newman put it last week, told *Politics* that's "it's critical" for the Canadian government as to in the next 60 days develop a sense of what the U.S. administration's priorities are. Mr. Frazer said many of the people appointed to the Mr. Obama's transition team will likely be the same people to show up in positions of authority and executive leadership within the new administration.

"So a lot of the players who will be there for the next two to four years are people who need to be contacted. We need to learn about them and we need to begin to put forward the Canadian view on specific areas of priority for us. But Canada, in large, has to be a kind of master strategist at this time. To wait until the inauguration before getting started would certainly be an error, and it certainly would be placing Canada and Canadian interests well behind the curve, and I think we have seen signs out of Ottawa and Ottawa is aware of this and I just encourage it to move as expeditiously as possible and to do its homework, to be vigilant with what it's doing," Mr. Frazer told *Politics*.

"To give some thought not only to its own priorities but to give some thought as well to the basis of an American position or a new administration's position on a certain issue," said Mr. Frazer.

George Elliott Clarke, a playwright, poet and University of Toronto professor, who also once worked as a political staffer for then NDP MP Howard McCurdy, the only black MP in the House at the time, told CBC Newsworld that Mr. Obama's win reflects the fact that democracies are now multi-racial and will resonate in Canada.

"One of the reasons why he is president, or elect, right now, is because he organized a mass movement. He got people connected to politics again. That's extremely important for any democratic society. We just had an election in Canada where a good swath of the Canadian electorate was disconnected from the whole process. And so I think one of the most immediate impacts or effects of Barack Obama's success in becoming President Elect is to get Canadians reconnected to their political process. Who knows? If we were connected with our political process we might have a different government in Ottawa today," Mr. Clarke said.

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