

Obama's view on Canada not clear yet

John McCain has a clear portrait of our country while Barack Obama's views on Canada-U.S. issues are still being filled in. The concerns touch on commerce, tourism and security

July 01, 2008

TIM HARPER

WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON—He brings the promise of a new America on the world stage, the reason his bid for the White House is hailed from Munich to Minneapolis to Mississauga.

But would Democrat Barack Obama be able to improve the flow of commerce across the Canada-U.S. border?

Is his stance on NAFTA the product of a long-standing conviction, was it forged in the crucible of the Ohio primary, or is it still evolving?

Would he really turn his back on the Alberta oil sands?

Can he really change focus quickly from Iraq to Afghanistan, moving two U.S. combat brigades there and ultimately saving Canadian lives?

When the big picture of an Obama presidency is fine-tuned down to the day-to-day dealings between two often uneasy neighbours, it gets a little fuzzy.

Just as American voters in November will be asked to take a leap of faith on the Obama promise bearing fruit, Canadians are embracing a man whose views and positions on the pressing bilateral issues of the day have yet to be fully sketched.

On the other hand, presumptive Republican rival John McCain is a fully-painted portrait, his views on bilateral and international issues like a pair of well-worn slippers.

Perhaps most important for Canadians would be the election of a young African-American multilateralist, a man who will engage adversaries, not isolate them, a man who can change the way the Muslim world views Washington and its tactics and policies in the post- Sept. 11, 2001, world, a man who will bring America to the table again as a player, not a dictator.

"It would be in many ways welcoming back somebody who was missed," said Paul Frazer, a former Canadian diplomat, now a Washington-based consultant on bilateral issues.

"Every international organization is more effective when the U.S. is contributing constructively."

If he prevails in November, Obama will come to office with the burden of unprecedented expectations, and after eight rancorous years of Republican George W. Bush, lofty expectations north of the border will almost inevitably remain unmet.

The onus will also be on the Harper government to cut through this clatter of domestic and international demands and convince an Obama government that its concerns deserve priority.

If, as expected, Obama is ushered in with a Democratic congressional majority, there will be pent-up demand in Congress for quick, dramatic domestic action and the international priority will be Iraq.

There is scant information that Obama has spent much time thinking of his country's neighbour and closest trading partner.

When Canadians think back to 2000, they likely remember the CBC's Rick Mercer trapping Bush into thanking him for the endorsement of "Prime Minister Poutine," a good joke that was really a portent of coming bilateral relations.

Obama has revealed his own learning curve.

Last summer he spoke about the "president" of Canada.

His campaign recently sent out a magazine transcript in which the Canadian prime minister is referred to as the President of Hartford.

But his senior foreign policy adviser, Susan Rice, has Canadian links and knows the country well and his economic adviser, Austan Goolsbee, received a crash course on Canadian politics when comments he made in a meeting with the Canadian consul-general in Chicago were leaked and became a campaign issue.

Arizona Senator McCain, on the other hand, knows Canada and has travelled extensively throughout the country.

He has family there, he knows members of Parliament and the Canadian Senate, he is a strong backer of NAFTA and travelled to Ottawa last week

to make that point in a speech that stressed the value of the Canada-U.S. alliance.

As a senator from a border state, McCain is well-informed on trade and immigration issues and, although he is tacking back to the centre on border security – as Obama doubtlessly will – he alienated elements in the Republican base for backing comprehensive immigration reform on the southern flank, which critics called an amnesty for illegal immigrants.

This is important to Canada because those who follow bilateral issues in both countries agree the "thickening" international border and the inbred suspicion of Canada by the department of homeland security is the issue which requires the most urgent attention by a new administration.

The issues touch on commerce, tourism, security – even the failing infrastructure at the Detroit-Windsor crossing.

Border security and commerce will be driven by the new Congress, but Frazer says a president willing to spend some early political capital on the issue can make a huge difference.

He says the challenge is for Ottawa to see the value in this from the American perspective, to help a new president use some of his muscle on the file, and do it quickly while he still has that capital to spend.

This we know about Obama – he is dialling back his pledge to unilaterally force a renegotiation of NAFTA, his presidency could turn off the tap on Alberta oil sands imports if they are not cleaned up (which would spark another NAFTA dispute).

But he would deploy two combat brigades to Afghanistan, about 7,000 personnel, a move that would help embattled Canadian troops in that country.

"The first step must be getting off the wrong battlefield in Iraq and taking the fight to the terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan," he said last week.

Thomas d'Aquino, president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, says it is too easy to say a Republican president would be more understanding of Canadian issues and better for the country.

There is every reason to believe Obama would be able to grasp the intricacies and the importance of the Canada-U.S. relationship, whether it be military co-operation under NORAD or in Afghanistan, technological co-operation to combat global warming, or bilateral trade, d'Aquino says.

"He's a very smart guy, he's a senator from Illinois, the U.S. heartland economy does an enormous amount of trade with the heartland of Canada," d'Aquino said.

"That's why I'm very, very careful when people say he doesn't know Canada, or he hasn't travelled extensively in Canada.

"John McCain, on the other hand, has been to Canada, he is a great supporter of free trade, he has contact with Canadians over the years, he is an older man with a large amount of experience."

Let's wait on the NAFTA question, d'Aquino says.

"Let me remind you a man named Jean Chrétien was going to tear up NAFTA," he said.

"We've had a long history of people saying they were going to do something, who went in a different direction."

Robert Pastor, the director of the Center for North American Studies at Washington's American University, says revisiting NAFTA would open a Pandora's box, tie up the Congress at the expense of all other continental issues and "make the debate on immigration in this country look quite modest and calm by comparison.

"One would hope all three countries would step back and say if they want to improve labour and environmental standards over the next 10 years, they could do so without reopening NAFTA," Pastor said.

He agreed Obama's views on his continental neighbours are unformed, but he said the transformational nature of his leadership could transform that relationship as well.

"We know he is smart, we know he is well-educated and we know he has ignited feelings about what the U.S. could become if he is elected and that is important," Pastor said.