



PM, Obama: So little new to say

But his unusual visit to Congress today will tell the real tale of his trip to Washington

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WASHINGTON—One was easily distracted by the charms of the Oval Office yesterday during the Great Northern Summit. Particularly when the two gentlemen who called us there, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and President Barack Obama, had so little new to say.

Two media scrums, one Canadian and one American, got a whopping one question each, and took the answers down dutifully.

But it was the same-old same-old – familiar refrains on Afghanistan (mission under review, no decisions yet, we grieve for Canada's sacrifice, said Obama); on Buy America procurement provisions (no trade war, we shall overcome protectionism); on Alberta oil sands versus climate change (actually nothing was said here, lending credence to those who contend this is the elephant in the room).

As we were led away from the West Wing,



ADRIAN WYLD/THE CANADIAN PRESS
A man wearing a bigfoot costume and wearing a Prime Minister Stephen Harper face mask protests outside the White House with a man wearing a United States President Barack Obama mask following the Canadian and US leaders meeting in Washington, D.C. Wednesday Sept. 16, 2009.

Sticking to a script? Obama's comments have a familiar ring

U.S. President Barack Obama on the subject of Buy America provisions following a meeting with Stephen Harper:

Aug. 10 in Guadalajara

- "I want to assure

scrounging for the "takeaway" headline, all that could be found was a deal, almost, on cross-border NHL charter flights. Which seemed very, very tiny in the grand scheme of things.

But lest you are ready to declare the Prime Minister's first journey to Obamaland a dud, be it known that Team Harper is not done with Washington. Yesterday's scene was requisite ceremony, but it is today's itinerary, when Harper takes his ministerial delegation on a rare journey to Congress, where the measure of this trip will be taken.

"The important business for Harper is going to be at Congress," said David Biette, director of the Canada Institute at Washington's Woodrow Wilson International Centre For Scholars.

"It's rather unusual for a head of state to do it. But in visiting the House and Senate leaders, Harper is showing he knows where the answers are on issues from Buy America to climate change.

"The president doesn't have a magic wand. He can cajole but that's about it. Congress is where the Buy American legislation was written. In taking the time to see them, the Prime Minister is acknowledging that fact."

So-called Buy America procurement policies are being invoked in the U.S. at the state and local levels. The provisions are keeping Canadian firms from bidding on contracts on water-treatment, school construction and other projects funded by Obama's \$787 billion (U.S.) economic stimulus package.

Yesterday's ceremonial portion of the trip was a patent lesson in how Canada is "everywhere and nowhere in Washington," as scholar Biette recently told his students.

The U.S. media fired a single volley to both leaders about Afghanistan, got next to nothing in return, and moved on.

you that your prime minister raises this with me every time we see each other."

- "I do think it's important to keep this in perspective. This in no way has endangered the billions of dollars of trade taking place between our two countries."

And yesterday in Washington

- "Prime Minister Harper, I want to emphasize, has brought this up every single time we've met, so he's been on the job on this issue"

- "I do want to keep things in perspective. U.S.-Canadian trade continues to be robust ... There is no prospect of any budding trade wars between our two countries."

The Buy America story barely registers here – a fact Obama addressed, somewhat tongue in cheek, when he told us, dryly: "I'm glad to hear that Canadians see ... the recovery package as being so significant. I've been trying to persuade the American public of precisely that fact, that we're actually creating jobs and putting people back to work."

Paul Frazer, a former Canadian diplomat and now a Washington consultant, said there are "two kinds of visits– the kind where you work hard on `deliverables,' or the kind where you work toward an exchange of views.

"If there is an `ask' it will be (today) when Harper visits Congress and it will be on economic, Buy American matters. ... But it remains to be seen if the Prime Minister can get any traction."

It all comes in the context of environmental protests targeting Canada's carbon-intensive oil sands, a flashpoint issue Ottawa has laboured furiously to defend as Washington ponders how to factor the vast Alberta resource into coming climate-change legislation.

Senior Canadian officials accompanying Harper had little to say on oil sands in a background briefing for reporters yesterday, instead pointing to a 20-point Climate Change Dialogue report that seeks to rapidly increase Canada-U.S. research collaboration on the issue.

But even those lobbying in favour of expanded oil sands production as part of America's energy future say the issue is certain to arise when the Canadians meet congressional leaders, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the California Democrat who is thought to favour low-carbon fuel standards of the sort that would threaten what environmentalists call "Canada's dirty oil."