

## **How an Obama presidency will play in Canada**

He will not be a convenient stick to beat the Harper Tories over the head with

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If Barack Obama is elected president of the United States in November, there will be a huge impact on Canadian politics.

A black, liberal Democrat in the White House, with or without a Democratic-controlled Congress behind him, may not change the fundamentals of American society and politics - or American foreign policy, for that matter - but he will appear as different from George W. Bush as Mars is from Venus. And that will shake up our political scene as well.

With the exception of the Clinton years (1993-2001), the White House has been a Republican possession since 1981 - and Canadians don't like Republicans. For example, even though Mr. Obama pandered to blue-collar voters in the U.S. by attacking NAFTA - definitely not in Canada's best interests - Canadians would put him in the White House tomorrow if they could. Canadians habitually favour the Democratic Party, even when a president such as Bill Clinton does absolutely nothing to stop genocide in Rwanda.

But it's not just Republicans who most Canadians don't like. We, along with much of the rest of the world, have an especial antipathy for George W. Bush. Over the past eight years, this disdain for the U.S. President - combined with that nasty streak of anti-Americanism that is an ever-present reality in left-of-centre Canadian politics - has made linking Mr. Bush to any Conservative government initiative an effective tactic for both Liberals and New Democrats.

Don't like Canada's involvement in Afghanistan? Call it another of George Bush's wars and let the Tories explain why it's not. Don't like Conservative environmental policies? Claim that Stephen Harper is taking his orders from the White House.

Jean Chrétien's government used Mr. Bush as a perpetual punching bag. Even Paul Martin, a successful businessman in politics who pledged that he would restore Canada-U.S. relations to a more even keel, couldn't resist taking potshots at the Bush administration in the last election campaign.

But that dynamic will change dramatically if Barack Obama is in the White House.

First, Mr. Obama is black. Those Canadians who deeply fear being labelled "politically incorrect" will simply not subject president Barack Obama to the type of personal invective that has become stock-in-trade for them when referring to the current President.

Second, Mr. Obama is a Democrat. And although the U.S. has had several less than sterling presidents who were Democrats - Jimmy Carter led one of the most disastrous administrations in recent American history - Liberals seem to identify almost completely with U.S. Democrats. An Obama administration will not receive the almost automatic criticism that any Republican president gets.

Third, Mr. Obama is an unabashed liberal seeking to expand the American welfare state, the role of government in American society, and the influence of the American trade union movement.

Why, he even seems to be

in favour of some sort of medicare! He may occasionally be wrong, but surely he isn't innately wicked.

Finally, he isn't George W. Bush, he didn't support the war in Iraq, and he seems willing to talk to almost any world leader who will talk to him in his search for a kinder and gentler American foreign policy. How quintessentially Canadian - Mr. Obama seems to sound much more like Lloyd Axworthy than George Bush.

He is, of course, undeniably black, 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. Most assuredly, for example, Mr. Obama will not stop work on the U.S. missile defence program. He will not dial back efforts to destroy al-Qaeda. He will play to U.S. working-class voters to get into office and to stay there, and that will probably not mean a warm and cozy relationship with Canada.

But no matter.

Whatever Barack Obama does, he will not be a convenient stick to beat the Harper Tories over the head with. In fact, with Barack Obama in the White House, Stephen Harper may want to get as close to the new American president as he can. He need not fear being labelled Mr. Obama's clone. In fact, he may embrace it. He may, because Mr. Obama is truly the closest thing to a revolution in American political expectations since John F. Kennedy.

Whatever the reality of Barack Obama turns out to be, there is now, and there will remain for some time after his election - if he is elected - a palpable excitement, a promise of truly generational change, in American politics. And whenever that has happened in the United States, Canadians have tried to get aboard the same bandwagon. Wasn't Pierre Trudeau supposed to be Canada's John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy put together?

Barack Obama in the White House will give Stephen Harper far more leeway than he has had since his election in January, 2006. The more the backroom boys in Canadian politics think about it, the more the Obama factor may play a role in the timing of the next Canadian election.

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